

## **A NEIGHBORING SOUL**

**A sermon given for the 'Touchstone of Vocation' Service by**

**The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on**

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**Earlier this month, Google released on its search-engine homepage a delightful animated video celebrating Mr. Rogers and the neighborhood he created for children on his beloved television show. Even if you do not belong to the generations of Americans raised on his show, you will find this video a touching tribute to this pioneer of public broadcasting. It's set to that sweet theme song for his show, in which he croons: "Please won't you be my neighbor?"**

**A lot of Americans want to keep the memory of Mr. Roger's close these days. In March 2018, the U.S. Post Office released a stamp commemorating the 50th anniversary of his show; it depicts the television host wearing his trademark zip-up cardigan in red and holding one of his royal puppets from the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. This spring, the Public Broadcasting Service aired a television special called *Mr Rogers: It's You I Like* that garnered an Emmy nomination. Later this year, the feature-length documentary of his life called *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* broke box office records for the genre, with good reason.**

**Over the summer, my husband and I went to see it with close friends. The film was such a moving exploration of Mr. Roger's work with young viewers that I used up the entire bunch of tissues I had packed in my bag for the screening and had to borrow some extra from them.**

**At the end, my friend looked me in my puffy eyes and said: “Wow. You really took all this to heart.”**

**“That man raised me!” I protested, blowing my nose. “Mr. Rogers is a great soul.”**

**Indeed, he is a great soul. We seldom forget those who showed us kindness at tender ages, and as a youngster who made some of her earliest friends on PBS, I will always remember what Mr. Rogers meant to me: a soothing presence, a reassuring tone, an understanding adult. In my upbringing, understanding adults were sometimes in short supply.**

**Mr. Rogers understood children so well. If you saw the special or documentary, you may already be familiar with his background. As a school boy, Fred Rogers was bed-ridden by serious illness. A devout Presbyterian, he attended seminary in hopes of entering professional ministry. By the time he graduated in 1963, he knew his vocation lay in children’s television, so the Presbyterian Church ordained him with a special charge to continue his family ministries in the media.**

**Although he had been a fixture of my youth, it was not until Mr. Rogers died in 2003 that I learned he was a minister. I was still in seminary and my Presbyterian classmates there soon educated me on that point. What I recognized then was that not only was Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood my favorite show on PBS, it was my at-home version of Children’s Chapel, a place that refined and recalled my budding sense of the highest good.**

**“You rarely have time for everything you want in this life, so you have to make choices,” Mr. Rogers said. “And hopefully your choices come from a deep sense of who you are.” While he gained national celebrity as a television personality and won broadcasting award after award, Mr. Roger’s work never ceased being a community ministry, a service he offered to a country where people had serious questions about who their neighbors were. The year before his death, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for producing, the President said, that helped to “soothe the soul and nurture the spirit and teach the very young”.**

**Mr. Rogers taped nearly 900 episodes in all for PBS and never stopped breaking ground. He addressed racial discrimination and prejudice through the character of Officer Clemmons, the first recurring African-American role on PBS. He had young guests on his show with severe disabilities. He considered tough topics such as divorce. His last set of episodes was filmed in response to the attacks of 9/11, as an attempt to address children’s worries about terrorism and violence. He confronted the challenges of his time with a softness that belied his uncompromising mission. He was trying to raise children who would make good neighbors.**

**“When we create a space where the soul feels safe,” author Parker J. Palmer writes, “it will help us deal with our most divisive issues”. In his book, A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life, Parker notes that there is a certain skill involved in creating “a setting that welcomes the soul.” Mr. Rogers created this kind of setting on the small screen, and children everywhere leaned in and peered closely, looking to see if the space could be trusted, wondering**

if it held any room for them. There was never a season on his show when Mr. Rogers was not ministering to the young.

Religious professionals can sound suspiciously florid in using the language of vocation to describe our work, while most people, much more reasonably, approach it with a measure of circumspection. They interrogate the terminology, as some of you did in September as we explored our Touchstones topic of vocation. What are we really talking about when we discuss vocation? Not all of us will become famous television personalities; not all will have celebrated careers.

Is it possible, some of you wondered, to claim a vocation outside the context of particular occupation? Is it possible to live out a vocation in a fairly private way, some asked, in the context of a family role or home life? In his work, Palmer suggests that the soul knows the answer to these questions, and the soul says yes. The soul can also take us into the wider world in unexpected ways, issuing us job descriptions we might never have written for ourselves.

“The soul is creative,” Palmer contends in A Hidden Wholeness, and “it finds its way between realities that might defeat us and fantasies that are mere escapes.” According to Palmer, “The soul is generous: it takes in the needs of the world.... The soul is hopeful: it engages the world in ways that keep opening our hearts.” When we listen for the prompts of our souls, for what makes each of us, individually, more creative, generous, or hopeful, what beckons us onward is our vocation, the very thing that calls out to us to answer in the affirmative.

When it's used wisely and well, the language of vocation can invite us all into clearer reflection upon what fills our hours, days, and years. As Mr. Rogers observed, the greatest ambition may be for us to make decisions, large and small, that honor our deepest sense of who we are. "Live as if you like yourself," the poet Marge Piercy writes in *Connections Are Made Slowly*, "and it may happen. Reach out, keep reaching out..."

Just such reaching out helps us catch hold of others. At some fundamental level, I believe every single one of us is called, as our Unitarian Universalist sources say, to heed those "teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves." As people of faith, we are asked to answer the call of love, whether we are on or off duty. We are asked to consider substantive questions of how we might best be of service. "Love is at the root of everything," Mr. Rogers once stated in an interview, "love or the lack of it."

When he entered television, Mr. Rogers was disgusted with the medium. He went into broadcasting because he thought television could and should be better. In 1969, he testified in Washington, D.C. in order to secure funding for PBS, telling the U.S. Senators, "We've got to have more of this neighborhood expression of care." He complained about what he called the media "bombardment" of our senses and the costs of that in our collective psyches.

This week, as I - along with millions of Americans - was watching footage of another set of hearings in the Senate, I thought of how much worse that bombardment has gotten, how much harder it has

**become to hear such authentic public expressions of care, and how quickly people who are gentle can be underestimated by others.**

**Underneath his colorful zip-up cardigan, behind his quirky puppets, Mr. Rogers embodied a steely determination. His namesake show premiered in 1968 and in the fractious decades that followed, he remained unflappable on screen, affirming the young, upholding their dignity through any number of large-scale crises that seemed to undo their elders.**

**Like you, I do not want to live in a country where kindness and decency are considered cartoonish. I want to live in one that bears some resemblance of Mr. Roger's neighborhood, where where soul infuses our civic life, where it's understood that we are never not one another's neighbors, whatever other roles we might occupy, whatever titles we either claim or reject.**

**In the aftermath of 9/11, Mr. Rogers taught his viewer the lesson his mother taught him: "Look for the helpers". Helpers are not only to be found in the so-called professions, by the way - helpers reside within each one of us, and when times get tough, as they invariably do, we can even look within to find them.**

**Whether Mr. Rogers helped to raise you and your siblings or whether he helped to raise your now-adult children, he rendered all America a service with his hundreds upon hundreds broadcasts. Even if you still don't know what you want to be when you're finally done growing up - and some of us don't - you can have a simple and stubborn sense of how you want to be in the world and how you would like to be in**

**relation to others. Mr. Rogers gave us a sense of the magic that lies playing a part in something larger, of having a role in building something special. Soul says that's a yearning we all have.**

**Next fall, a major motion picture studio plans on releasing a biopic of Mr. Rogers called *You Are My Friend*, and on opening night, I plan to be there, my tissues in hand, with maybe a back-up stash too. I'll come ready to remember profound and time-honored truths about how the world ought to be and who it calls me to continuously be - namely, a neighbor. Mr. Rogers is not for me merely a nostalgic figure; he's a great soul modeling unsung possibilities. "So won't you please, won't you please - please won't you be my neighbor?"**