

Mr. Rogers: Responsible for the Entitlement Culture?

The documentary [*Won't You Be My Neighbor?*](#) deservedly made many lists of [10 best movies of 2018](#). It is a riveting film on the power of love. Years after his death, interest in the work of Fred Rogers grows. Tom Hanks plays Mr. Rogers in the movie [A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood](#), which is slated for a 2019 release.

Yet, the late Fred Rogers and his long-running, half-hour educational children's show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* had fierce critics.

Finance professor Don Chance, [fed up with students](#) begging for extra points, observed, "They felt so entitled and it just hit me. We can blame Mr. Rogers." Chance hopes students will come to class having learned, "The world owes you nothing. You have to work and compete. If you want to be special, you'll have to prove it."

One millennial, Jen Kim, writing in *Psychology Today* complained that [Mr. Rogers lied to her](#). Ms. Kim blamed Rogers for her failure to commit in the workplace: "Thinking of myself as *special* has lead me to ten different jobs over two years, because I have been and still am searching for that dream job—the one that pays me what I want and lets me do what I want—the one that makes me feel really special."

The absurdity of blaming a television show you watched as a child for your adult decisions to not understand the realities of [building a meaningful career](#) seemed to be lost on Ms. Kim. Failing to take responsibility is not something Ms. Kim would have learned from Mr. Rogers.

On the *Neighborhood*, there were field trips [to a bakery](#) and other stores. Adults were shown at work, not complaining the

world owed them something.

In his book [*The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers*](#), Maxwell Kind observes Fred Rogers “never” strayed from living by and demonstrating “basic human values: integrity, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion, and of course his signature value, kindness.”

Despite his high standards for the show, he asked his production staff to leave some mistakes unedited: “I want children to know it’s hard to learn something new, and that grown-ups make mistakes.” Modeling his own willingness to be a learner, he taught children to develop their talents instead of adopting the false belief that talent was all they needed for success.

When the show began to broadcast in the late 1960s, black Americans were still being barred from whites-only swimming pools. Mr. Rogers didn’t merely preach equality, [he modeled equality](#) by sharing a wading pool foot bath with a black resident of the *Neighborhood*, police officer Clemmons.

Mr. Rogers’ Message

Ms. Kim and Professor Chance are confused. Mr. Rogers taught children that their specialness stems from their “inherent value.” Since inherent value is in all of us, no one at their core is especially different. From that place of inestimable value springs our potential, but not an entitlement. There were no people or groups designated as better than others in Mr. Rogers’ *Neighborhood*.

Does having inherent value undermine our ability to take responsibility, or does it enhance our freedom to live from our highest purpose and values?

Fred Rogers railed against those who thought they had to put on a “funny hat or jump through the hoop to have a

relationship with a child.” How could a child develop their gifts in a loud, brash environment? Mr. Rogers saw himself as an adult protector against “the ever-ready molders of [a child’s] world.”

Mr. Rogers would likely have shared the perspective expressed by F. A. Hayek in his essay [“Individualism: True and False”](#): There is an “unlimited variety of human gifts and skills,” and “everybody [should be] allowed to try and see what he can do.” The idea that all are endowed with an entitlement would have been anathema to Mr. Rogers.

Important but Not Self-Important

Born a slave, Epictetus became a Stoic philosopher. Nearly 2,000 years ago in [The Art of Living](#), he advised that being important is not the same as self-importance:

Humanity has no inherent pecking order, despite outward appearances. Everyone in this world is important. If you really want peace of mind and success in your endeavors, forego self-importance.

Epictetus warned, “Arrogance is...the most potent impediment to the flourishing life. Clear thinking and self-importance cannot logically coexist.”

“The legitimate glow of satisfaction at accomplishing a hard-won worthy goal” is not arrogance. Arrogance is “self-preoccupation and lack of interest in the feelings or affairs of others.”

Mr. Rogers did not teach arrogant preoccupation with our sense of self; he taught of loving others. In the documentary, Mr. Rogers says, “Love is at the root of everything. All learning, all parenting, all relationships. Love or the lack of it.” Love in Mr. Rogers’ world was not the special love that so often passes for love—I love you because you meet my needs and

complete me. Love in Mr. Rogers' *Neighborhood* is nurtured not by a sense of self-importance but by an understanding of the importance of those we love.

Mr. Rogers' Struggles

Mr. Rogers was not just a performer; he was the head writer of his show. Like most engaged in a creative process, at times he struggled. Perhaps his inner-voice of self-doubt is familiar to you:

Am I kidding myself that I'm able to write a script again? Am I really just whistling Dixie? I wonder. If I don't get down to it, I'll never really know. Why don't I trust myself? After all these years, it's just as bad as ever. The hour cometh, and now is when I've got to do it. Get to it, Fred. Get to it. But don't let anyone tell anyone else it was easy. It wasn't.

To Mr. Rogers, having inherent value did not mean one would have an easy journey on the road to success.

There were no superficial Band-Aids applied in the *Neighborhood*. When [Lady Aberlin sings](#) to a doubting Daniel Tiger, "You're not a fake. You're no mistake. You are my friend," Daniel's doubts, like Mr. Rogers' own doubts, are not easily quieted. Emotional life played out in the *Neighborhood* may be messy, but there is the constant assurance you are still loved.

Give Up Conceit

Not long before his death in 2003, [Fred Rogers delivered the 2002 commencement address](#) at Dartmouth University.

He encouraged the graduates to give the "gift of a silent minute to think about those who have helped you become who you

are today”:

Well, what is essential about you? And who are those who have helped you become the person you are? Anyone who has ever graduated from a college, anyone who has ever been able to sustain a good work, has had at least one person, and often many, who have believed in him or her. We just don't get to be competent human beings without a lot of different investments from others.

Mr. Rogers offered, “You don't ever have to do anything sensational for people to love you.” Yet, at the same time, he believed we have a responsibility to pivot towards “the strength and the grace to make those choices which will allow you and your neighbor to become the best of whoever you are.”

How often do we [remember with gratitude](#) the way life supports us?

Ingratitude is born of conceit that exaggerates our own importance. Epictetus warned:

Conceit is an iron gate that admits no new knowledge, no expansive possibilities, nor constructive ideas. Indulging in excessive pride in your own knowledge, abilities, or experiences and attempting to take on more power or authority than is your due is fatal.

Ms. Kim wrote, “I have been and still am searching for that dream job.” Since she aired her grievances against Mr. Rogers, she [has found success](#) as a writer. Mr. Rogers would cheer for Ms. Kim. More importantly, believing “kindness always makes life better,” he would say to Ms. Kim, “Thank you for whatever you do, wherever you are, to bring joy and light and hope and faith and pardon and love to your neighbor and yourself.”

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