Something Worth Giving

Reflections from Our Favorite Neighbor

By Fred Rogers


Preface

On a muggy fall day in Houston, Texas in 2002, Fred Rogers gave a small group of philanthropists and child advocates a treasure they will hold dear for the rest of their lives. Fred did not often accept invitations to give speeches. He would have much preferred spending his time with children. Ironically, the photographs taken of audience members during that magical talk reveal rapt faces—completely engrossed, eyes shining—faces not unlike those of our children or grandchildren when visiting "the Neighborhood." And when Fred softly and humbly finished sharing his thoughts with us, there was no doubt on anyone's mind that we should make his message available to a much larger audience.

Four months later, when we awoke one February morning to the heartbreaking news of Fred Rogers' passing, each one of us realized just how blessed we were to have heard him in, what we now know, was his last speech. And so the importance of sharing his message of caring, giving, loving took on even greater importance.

With the permission of Family Communications, Inc. and Mrs. Joanne Rogers, and support from The Heinz Endowments and the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, it is the very great honor of Grantmakers for Children, Youth and Families (GCYF) to pass on this treasure to you and your loved ones.

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Introduction

What is the value of a place that promises shelter and nurturing for children? Those of us who are parents or caretakers of children know how impossible it is to quantify something like this, especially in such strange and violent times.

We are parenting in a world where teenagers gladly turn themselves into weapons of mass destruction by blowing themselves up on crowded buses; where young men who come from good families fly planes into buildings; where students turn schools into war zones; where barefoot eight year olds are soldiers in warring African countries.

When we do find places of sanctuary, we cherish them and the people who make them happen—like precious jewels—because they are that rare.

And if there were a National Minister for the Shelter and Nurturing of Children, it would be Fred Rogers, the soft-voiced, be-sweatered Presbyterian minister from Pittsburgh who created Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood and profoundly influenced the lives of millions of children.

His television program is so powerful, it transcends the medium of television and has turned millions of homes into safe havens for children; places where even the most world-weary among them can find a few moments of knowing that they are loved.

His signature refrain—"I like you just the way you are"—is enough to sweep even cynical adults off their feet. His words continue to touch us, keep us safe, steady, centered. Through his powerful stories and songs, he has taught our children to respect and cherish human life, to value the importance of individual effort and hard work.

Since so much of Fred Rogers’ magic with children is conjured up through stories, I have my own to share with you—a personal account of how he touched my life and that of my daughter.

Nearly a decade ago, I adopted Julia, a scrawny, wide-eyed 5-year-old from an orphanage in St. Petersburg, Russia. Several weeks after we returned to Pittsburgh, some friends invited us to a brunch where Fred also was a guest. Julia, who understood only a few English words, spent most of the visit playing with two friendly English Spaniels, Lily and Rose. That is until Mister Rogers pulled himself away from the food and adult chatter and saw her sitting alone. He is always drawn to the ones who aren’t fitting in.

He lowered himself on his knees—so that she, all of 35 pounds, seemed taller. He began talking and singing to her. Julia yapped back in a flurry of Russian. Although he didn’t understand the language, he listened intently as he has always managed to do with children. In this simple interaction there was wonderful communication. Words didn’t matter. He then took her to the piano where they played together—another act of communication.

When I think back now about this interaction—it was classic Mister Rogers—I realized how important it was for Julia. He was helping her build a shelter she could call her own, a place where she could feel safe and accepted. In that exchange—he offered reassurance and security; he was working the same magic he has achieved through his show and his community outreach for more than two decades.

And the legacy from these years is that he has left this troubled world with children, now grown to adulthood, who are confident and secure and loving enough to change the world—to make it a place where all children know what it is to be loved and to reach their full potential.

So now it is my turn. Fred Rogers, there is only ONE person in the world like you. And we like you—no, we love you—just the way you are.

Marge Petruska
Director, Children, Youth & Families Program
The Heinz Endowments
Something Worth Giving

Reflections From Our Favorite Neighbor

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Robert Frost once said that his poems started "with a lump in the throat." Well, I believe that that's where philanthropy starts. The most important philanthropy arises from the deepest levels of our being. That's why every one of us—no matter how much money we have—needs to know that there's something about us that is worth giving. I think that the saddest person anywhere is the person who feels that he or she doesn't have anything of value (inside) to give.

Marge Petruska's daughter, Julia, once entered a Walk of Charity in Pittsburgh. Her friends and family members pledged a certain amount of money per mile, and Julia was about to start out to walk. But just before she left, she said to her mom, "Everybody on this list of mine is giving so much money, but I'm not giving anything." Well, Marge (who is one of the world's great appreciators) said, "Look whose name's at the top of the page, Julia. Honey, you're doing the walking." That's a moment—and a gift—that Julia will always have inside of her.

Yes, every one of us on this planet longs to know that there's something about us that's worth giving.

In 1998, we celebrated the Neighborhood's 30th anniversary on PBS. It is the longest-running series on the network, and there were many suggestions for fancy celebrations. However, what we decided to do was to ask PBS stations all over the country to collect sweaters and donate them to local agencies for distribution. My only concern about that "Neighborhood Sweater Drive" was that it might be advertised in a way that separated the "Haves" from the "Have-nots;" so, on all the printed material and broadcast announcements we tried to make the message very clear that everyone has something to give and needs something to receive.

Incidentally, through that Neighborhood Sweater Drive, PBS stations have collected and distributed more than a million sweaters of every shape, color, and size. Something tells me my mother would be very pleased about that. When she was alive, she would make a sweater every month of the year, and at Christmas she'd give those twelve sweaters to everyone in our family—and extended family—and she'd say, "Now what kind of sweaters do you all want next year? Here is the pattern book. Of course, I know the kind Fred wants — the one with the zipper up the front." Well, Mother made and gave those sweaters with such pleasure, it's obvious to me that each one was a lesson in philanthropy. She may not have thought of it that way, but she lived it that way.
I remember during the Second World War, she and a group of people met several times a week, not only to knit socks and sweaters, but to make surgical dressings for the troops. Mother was in charge of that volunteer unit. In fact, she taught me how to make those bandages and, in the process, often told me stories about my grandparents who in 1918 during the terrible flu epidemic took over an auxiliary hospital for those who could not fit in the main hospital of our town. I remember those stories so clearly. Mother would quote my grandparents as saying, "You can't let sick people just sit on the street." Who knows, my grandparents may have even felt a lump in their throats—but no matter what, they saw a need and did all they could to meet it.

Two weeks ago, I was in Scotland and was fascinated by some of the things I read in the newspaper there... things like, "One in six teenagers are joining vigilante gangs." They say they break the law (by carrying guns) only because they fear for their own safety. They are convinced that the police and schools can't protect them. Also, in Britain there are three private prisons for 12 to 15 year olds already in operation, and another four are in the planning stage.

I saw only one television program while I was there. It was called "Hardtalk." A child advocate was being interviewed. She ran a home—an alternative to prison—for young teenagers. The interviewer asked her very hard questions. But this woman obviously knew the young people in her charge. She talked about them with such compassion and said how convinced she was that underneath their hard exteriors were frightened kids who longed to be loved. Now that really gave me a lump in my throat, and it reminded me of reading a story in the New York Times last January about a Ms. Zhang in China.

A former doctor of traditional medicine, a journalist and policewoman, Ms. Zhang has, for the last seven years, dedicated herself to children whose parents are in Chinese prisons. Early in the 1990s, she saw these children living in the streets—children who had traveled hundreds of miles to see their parents in jail thinking that, if they just found them, they would have a home again. You see, many of those children didn't understand what had happened to their parents, and they just sat crying in front of the prison refusing to leave—and the most that the prison staff could do was give them some food and try to send them away.

In these seven years, Ms. Zhang has established, in the Shaanxi area, three homes where 150 formerly uncared for children are now living. And most recently, she started her newest home 25 miles north of Beijing.

Besides caring for prisoners' children, she's pushing at another Chinese frontier. The idea of private philanthropy (which we Americans take for granted)! This idea is just starting to take root in China after 50 years in which the socialist state theoretically took care of everyone's needs.

One other important thing that Ms. Zhang does: she arranges visits for the children with their incarcerated parents. She says, "Just because a father or mother is sentenced to years in prison for robbery or drug addiction doesn't mean that those parents don't
have love for their children." So she's doing what she can to keep those streams of love open... those streams of giving and receiving!!

For me, Ms. Zhang epitomizes the most important aspect of philanthropy: the desire to develop grateful, compassionate, loving hearts. What greater mission could anybody have? My fantasy is that some of those young children whom Ms. Zhang has worked so hard to care for will grow up to lead the China of their day on a more compassionate road to a bright future.

In the mid '90s, we at Family Communications produced a program called "Heroes: Who's Helping America's Children?" One of the people we featured was Dr. Sam Ross. In fact, the woman I saw on Scottish television reminded me a lot of Sam Ross. Years ago, Dr. Ross, who is a clinical psychologist, saw how healing the relationships between human beings and animals can be. He bought a farm and started taking care of sick and injured animals. Little by little he created places for young people who had bumped up against the law. Most of them came from New York City, and they came to help care for the animals and eventually to allow the animals and Dr. Ross's professional team to care for them. This farm is called "Green Chimneys," and I'd like you get to know some of the people and animals that I met the day I visited there.

* * *

(Video Begins)

We watched as Guy offered a handful of dry grass to the llama on the other side of the fence. His blond head ducked under the fence rail to get closer to the animal's mouth. At his side, Ricky watched as the llama slowly chewed, and then his dark head joined Guy's as he pushed more hay toward the front of the trough. As the llama continued to eat, Guy climbed on the lower fence rail and leaned in to gently stroke its throat.

"Our children come from some of the most difficult and disturbing places that we know of," Dr. Ross explained. "And they've fallen apart. And the one thing they can rely on, that is not going to tell any secrets on them, that they can tell anything to and it's going to be private, is the animals."

"Ricky and Guy make excellent hosts," Dr. Ross continued. "I'm not ashamed to take them anywhere. They can go out. They can talk about the animals. They're friendly and they are outgoing. Children don't come here that way."

Later, Ricky sat down and talked with me about his experience at the farm. "The reason I came here was that at school I wasn't really getting along. I was acting up and bothering people."

"How do you feel that the adults have helped you here?" I asked him.

"At first I would never talk out my problems. After awhile, I realized that I was not getting nowhere keeping all this stuff inside, and I had to get it out somehow. I figured I'd talk to someone I trust. And then I talked to them. After awhile you feel better that you got all of that out of you."

"Like poison, isn't it?" I observed.

"Uh huh," he agreed.
“Just got the poison out.” I paused. “And you are able to do so many constructive things.”

Ricky went on, “Like if you have a favorite animal. You can try talking to that animal.”

“So you talk to the animal about your problems?” I asked.

He nodded. “Like the pigeons. Sometimes I talk to them, tell them that I’m mad.”

“And how do you think they respond to you? Do you think they understand what you are saying?” I wondered.

“Some of them I think understand,” he replied.

Ricky then took me to visit the pigeons in their coop.

“Different breeds have their babies come out in different sizes,” Ricky explained as we looked at the small baby pigeons.

“What kind of breeds are there?” I asked.

“We got flights, we got homers, we got turbits,” he replied. “These are ice pigeons,” he pointed at a white bird with soft gray wings. “They’re called ice pigeons because of their color. They look like that so they can survive in the ice.”

Ricky continued to explain to me his connection to the birds. “When I was younger, when I was home, all we had around were pigeons, and I liked the colors and the ways that they fly.”

“Ricky,” I asked, “do you think that pigeons have feelings like people have feelings?”

“Uh huh, I think they do. You may think that they don’t, but I think they do feel sometimes. I think when they crash into something when they’re not looking, when other birds pick on them.”

“So you see a lot in the birds that are like behavior of people, don’t you?” I observed.

“Uh huh, but they never hurt each other when they pick on them.”

“They don’t?”

“No, they may lose a couple of feathers but they always go back. They always go back.”

A short time later, I visited with Guy as he gently and carefully stroked a small ferret.
"Sometimes he'll get scared, and he'll run to me," Guy explained.
"You take care of him?"
"Uh huh."
I reached out and touched the small furry bundle. "You know Guy will take care of you, don't you? And what's your ferret's name?"
"Riki Tiki Tavi," Guy responded very slowly and carefully, smiling at me.
"And you can tell that Riki cares about you?"
"Uh huh. Like times when I take him out to play. Like when I'm happy and let him out, he runs around. But times when I'm sad and I let him out, he stays near me and plays with me and stuff like that."

Dr. Ross later explained his simple but wonderfully effective program. "Children first learn to care for an animal. Remember this is a reversal for them. Many of them have been poorly nurtured because of very difficult circumstances. So now they become the nurturer. And they learn to care for an animal and be concerned about the animal. Then they begin to work with a peer. Maybe around the same animal; maybe around a different animal. And then they begin to need the adult. And they being to work with the adult. And they feel that now the adult plays an important role in their life. The animal has served its initial purpose of bringing you together."

Later in the day, Ricky and Guy approached staff member Paul Konchak, carrying one of the pigeons.
Ricky called out, "Mr. Konchak, we've got a bird that looks like it's dead."
Paul gently took the bird, laid it on a table, and begin to gently open and probe its wings. "Feel that?" He showed the boys where to touch the bird.
Ricky touched the bird's wing and said, "It feels out of place."
"I think it is dislocated in there," Paul answered.
"How do you fix that?" asked Ricky.
"I don't know," Paul paused. "I'm going to take an x-ray."
Paul sat down with me a short time later and explained his role at Green Chimneys.
"I'm sort of the overseer of the farm center and the wildlife center. When Ricky and I get a chance to talk, some of the things that he asks me, I can remember myself asking someone older than I was and someone who knew a little bit more that me about pigeons, those very same questions. And it's a thrill for me to be able to answer them for him."
"Paul, you have taught the children so much yourself. Are there things the children have taught you?" I asked.
"Well, I'll tell you," he replied. "The children have reinforced for me that happiness is not going out and making a million dollars. But happiness is giving. The kids have given me a tremendous feeling of self-worth in this lifetime."

Later in the day, Guy took me to meet one of the horses. Even though the horse was so tall that he could barely get the bridle over his ears, Guy patiently worked the leather straps into place. "Your head is so big, Big Ben," he softly remarked as he worked.
Guy went on to talk about his feelings for Big Ben.
"He's a real nice horse. I like the color of his hair and stuff. He's really big. He's fun. He's not real aggressive. He's nice and calm. I tell him he's doing real good and that I am proud of him. Stuff like that, that he's doing a good job."

"When you say he's doing well," I asked, "do some of the adults tell you that you're doing well?"

"Uh huh, they've given me a lot to learn—what I've done wrong and how to work on my problems and to solve them in a good way. If it weren't for them, I'd probably be having a lot of trouble."

Dr. Ross later repeated Guy's feelings in a slightly different way. "Animals bring out a lot in us, and they do know what we are thinking about and they respond. When we are feeling sad, they tend to make us feel better. It's not kooky. It's real stuff."

One of the most magical moments in the day came when Paul took a group of the children and me out to the pasture to release a small owl back into the wild. He handed the bird to Guy who, with a huge smile on his face, opened his hands and watched the bird's glorious wings unfold and take him back into the forest.

Paul beautifully described the importance of that event. "When they see a wild animal that was injured get better and be turned out into the wild, they also realize that they are being cared for and, while they are at Green Chimneys, they're doing well and they, too, are going to go home at some point."

Dr. Ross's final words in the video reflect exactly why we chose him as a hero.

"Just like a rebirth, we have to give them the chance to be reeducated, to grow again, and then hopefully to return and to be strong enough to sustain whatever things that are happening and not to fall backwards again. Children have plenty of deficits, but we need to build on their strengths so there will be a war between the strengths and the deficits, and the strengths will win!"

"Children are my life. They keep me young," Sam Ross smiled and then said, "It's not so terrible to devote your life to one thing, and to make one thing good. And I think I am making one thing good.

(Video Ends)

* * *

Well, you can imagine why I wanted to share that with you. It's because every one of you is doing your best to make something good, and you're doing it for the children.

Have you heard the story that came from the Special Olympics? For the 100-yard dash there were nine contestants, all of them so-called physically or mentally disabled. All nine of them assembled at the starting line and, at the sound of the gun, they took off. But one little boy didn't get very far. He stumbled and fell and hurt his knee and began to cry. The other eight children heard the boy crying. They slowed down, turned around and ran back to him — every one of them ran back to him. One little girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed the boy and said, "This will make it better." The little boy got up, and he and the rest of the runners linked their arms together and joyfully walked to the finish line. They all finished the race at the same time. And when they did, everyone in
the stadium stood up and clapped and whistled and cheered for a long, long time. People who were there are still telling the story with obvious delight. And you know why? Because deep down we know that what matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves. What really matters is helping others win, too, even if it means slowing down and changing our course now and then.

Who are the people in your life who have helped you to win? Who are the people who have helped you become who you are today? There isn’t anybody who doesn’t have some kind of need. Nobody gets to be human adult without the investment of others all along the way. I’d like to give you a minute in the middle of this meeting to think of those who have trusted you and guided you and loved you into being . . . a minute of grateful silence.

(The audience observes a silent moment)

Whomsoever you’ve been thinking about, whether they’re here today, or far away, or even in heaven, imagine how grateful they would be to know how you feel about them here and now.

Jeff Erlanger is someone I often think about. Jeff and I met in a restaurant years ago when he was about five years old. He and his family are from Madison, Wisconsin, and we’ve kept in touch all through the years.

Jeff had some very difficult surgery that made him need to use a wheelchair. When I learned that he had gotten a new electric wheelchair, I asked if he would show it to the people who watch the Neighborhood. He and his parents agreed to fly from Madison to Pittsburgh so we could tape the program together. When they arrived, their plane was late, so we had no time for rehearsal. So just before we taped, I said to Jeff, "I think you know how much I like you, Jeff. Well, I want my television neighbors to know you, and you can show them your new fancy chair and talk about anything you want, and if we have time, let’s sing "It’s You I Like" together. So, in his usual positive way Jeff said, "Sure." And we started to tape. I’d like you to share with you some of that visit.

* * *

(Video Begins)

My television friends and I had just left the Neighborhood of Make Believe, and I was sitting on the window seat when I heard Jeff call my name from outside. I walked out on the porch and there was Jeff sitting in his wheelchair by the steps. I walked over to him and sat down on the top step.

"Hi, Jeff! How are you? I’m glad to see you. Thank you for coming by."

I turned to my television friends and
explained, "This is my friend, Jeff Erlanger. He's one of my neighbors here, and I asked him if he would come by today because I wanted you to meet him, and I wanted you to see his electric wheelchair."

And then to Jeff I said, "We've been talking about electric cars and all kinds of electric things this week. Would you show me how you make your chair go?"

"O.K. Sure!" Jeff's small hand reached to the control box on the left arm of the chair. His fingers, wrapped in a metal brace, touched a lever as he matter-of-factly explained, "Well, first, this is the on-and-off switch, and I move this to turn it on. And..." His tiny hand moved the switch to the right and the chair slowly backed up, turned around, and moved down the sidewalk. He rounded the corner and announced, "And then..." moving the chair around and guiding it back to the steps.

As he neared the porch steps again, I commented, "You're really good at that."
"Thanks."
"That's a very fancy machine."
"Thank you."
"But you're the one who makes it go!"
"Right," he confirmed.
"Did it take a long time to learn how?"
"No, not really. I have had other wheelchairs. My first electric wheelchair only took me about a day to learn to use."
"Gee, that's wonderful. Jeff, your mother and dad must be really proud of you."
He nodded and smiled, "I'm sure they are."
"Well, I know I am. Can you tell my friends what it is that made you need this wheelchair?"
"Sure. Well, when I was about seven months old, I had a tumor, and it broke the nerve that tells my hands and legs what to do. And they tried to cut the tumor, but they couldn't get it and I became handicapped." Jeff nodded thoughtfully and then he added, "And I got a wheelchair when I was four years old."
"That was your first one?"
"Uh huh." Jeff grinned.
"When you were four?"
"Yeah."
"Do you remember that?"
"Yeah, sort of."
"You must have some mighty good doctors who've been taking care of you."
"Uh huh."
"Can you tell me any of your doctors' names?"
"Yeah. I have a pediatrician, Dr. Hanson, who works in St. Mary's Hospital. Then at U.W. the bone doctor is Dr. Reed who takes care of," Jeff hesitated and then laughingly continued, "the bones I guess. Cause he's a bone doctor! Anyway, I had surgery earlier this summer. I had a pain in my stomach called autonomic dysreflexia and..."
* * *

(Video Begins)

I was so pleased that the camera caught the look of utter surprise and delight on my face as I heard the announcer say, "Please welcome Mr. Jeffrey Erlanger." As soon as I saw Jeff's wheelchair roll out of the wings, I left my seat and I jumped up to join him on stage.

As I knelt next to his chair, I said, "I am so glad to see you."

"It's good to see you, too." Jeff smiled his wonderful smile.

"Thank you for coming."

"My pleasure," he nodded.

"What a surprise."

And then Jeff spoke the words he had come on stage to say. "It's an honor to be here tonight to be part of your proud moment. You know that when you tell people that "It's You I Like," we know that you really mean it. And I want to let you know tonight, on behalf of millions of children and grown-ups, that it's you that I like."

And it was obvious that every one of the hundreds of people in the audience felt the same way about Jeff as they stood and applauded.

(Video Ends)

* * *

The generous human spirit is exceedingly powerful.

Deep and simple and powerful.

Almost forty years ago, John Kennedy was in Dallas. He was going to speak there. If he had lived, these are some of the words that he had written to say: "We ask that we be worthy of our power and responsibility — that we may exercise our strength with wisdom."

It's hard to work to exercise our strength with wisdom, to be responsible stewards of what we've been given. You know how hard it is. You can't satisfy all the desires of those who ask, but you can translate some of the care you have inside of yourselves to action on the outside... and that's what really matters.

As you go about your various ministries, I hope you can realize what a difference you make. You represent those things without which humankind cannot live: generous giving and gracious receiving.

On behalf of the children of our world who are the ultimate beneficiaries of your vision, I give you thanks.

Thank you very much.

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