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Fred Rogers and children's spirituality: valuing the uniqueness of others and caring for others

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ABSTRACT

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood was a safe haven advocating kindness, empathy, and caring for all children. Making everyone feel loved, Fred Rogers captured the attention and curiosity of young children across America with his compassionate manner, intentional listening skills, and respect for all individuals by encouraging children to feel good about themselves. This article explores the ministry of Fred Rogers and how his approach to children's spirituality focused on valuing the uniqueness of each individual, human connections through play, and caring for others by recognizing spiritual moments and teaching the whole child while appreciating the uniqueness of others. His genuine and patient presence had a healing quality, creating a world for children in which real learning and unconditional love could flourish. The messages of tolerance and acceptance by recognizing and respecting other's beliefs, and unconditional love and care, were beacons of hope for all.

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Sitting with a favorite teddy bear and enjoying an afternoon snack, my daughter engaged in what had become a daily ritual for her: watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. After a busy morning playing with Mom, attending nursery school, and eating lunch, late afternoons at home were a time of wonder and new discoveries for my preschool daughter. Thanks to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, the world of make believe and pretend play came alive with stories, puppets, and songs. Mister Rogers' messages of respect, acceptance, persistence, peace, confidence, and resilience came over the airwaves into our home, enriching our family life by encouraging us to see the world outside through a lens of joy and awe, giving us sacred moments during which we could slow down and appreciate our blessings.

In the fast-paced contemporary world *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was a safe haven of advocating kindness, empathy, and warm care for all children.

Fred Rogers taught his viewers how to be good people. Making everyone feel loved, he captured the attention and curiosity of young children across America with his compassionate and gentle manner, intentional listening skills, and respect for all individuals by encouraging children to feel good about themselves (Johnson and Howard 2013). Indeed, Mister Rogers, a neighbor and special childhood friend too many, was loved by several generations (Johnson and Howard 2013).

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood debuted as a live television show in February 1968 and ran for 900 episodes (Whitmer 2003). Throughout the three decades Rogers appeared on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the US, he nurtured respect, self-esteem, self-worth, and persistence, recognizing the legitimacy of these feelings by letting all children know they were accepted for who they are (Hollingsworth 2005). With his calming and soft-spoken voice, Rogers communicated tolerance, love, and creativity. Mister Rogers introduced television neighbors to real-world topics, (for example: going to school, moving to a new home, visiting the doctor's office, divorce, and death) performed skits on those topics using fantasy and imagination in the land of make-believe, and then transitioned back to the real world for spiritual inspiration and discussion (Whitmer 2003). *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* investigated the beginnings of life, as well as its end, and with many of the feelings children would experience in between (Rogers 1983). He knew how to use the television screen to nurture children's healthy growth in all developmental domains, especially the social-emotional and the spiritual (Sharapan 2015).

Rogers was aware that television programs could certainly contribute into children's inner dramas (i.e., unexpected traumatic experiences exhibiting feelings of anxiety and stress for children) and spark anxious feelings (Rogers 1983). Research has shown that television viewing is directly related to behavior relationships, including attitudes, imagination, and creativity (Christopher, Fabes, and Wilson 1989). During *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, however, Mister Rogers would monitor to keep anxiety within a child's manageable limits by talking about feelings and role modeling. For example in one episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* actress, Margaret Hamilton, stopped by the neighborhood to visit. Margaret Hamilton played the wicked witch of the West in the film, *The Wizard of Oz*. During her visit, the actress took time to dress up in her original witch costume from the film and also discussed with Mister Rogers about her adventures and feelings from the Wicked Witch's perspective while playing this character. As she dressed up on camera, she made it clear to the audience that the Wicked Witch of the West was not real and only a character (Rogers 1983). An inspiring leader in the education of children, Rogers encouraged pretend and make believe play to ignite the creative spirit (Gibson, 2016). Mister Rogers believed childhood, work, and play came together as motivating and engaging learning experiences for young children.

Ministry of Fred Rogers

Rogers' education began at home, where he learned that hard work, personal responsibility, and self-reliance were the means to personal success (Palmer and Carr 1991). His formal education included an undergraduate degree in musical composition and postbaccalaureate study in the cognitive and emotional development of young children at the Graduate School of Child Development at the University of Pittsburgh under the guidance of Dr. Margaret McFarland. Rogers' passionate appreciation of young children and the programming available to them along with his own religious background led him to enroll at Pittsburgh's Theological Seminary; he was later ordained an evangelist in the United Presbyterian Church (Hollingsworth 2005). Rogers made television his ministry, and his mission was to work with families, especially young children, through mass media (Townley 1985), in particular to provide constructive media in which children are placed first (Kleeman and Wilder 2015). As his television ministry commenced, Rogers found that his true vocation was to communicate life lessons to children through television (Johnson and Howard 2013).

Rogers' connection with young children extending far beyond his kindness and gentleness, he could see with the mind's eye of children and feel with their hearts (Hollingsworth 2005); he viewed the space between the television set and the viewer "very holy ground" and was mindful of the trust young children placed in the stories and characters they viewed on the television screen (Kleeman and Wilder 2015). *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* encouraged young children to talk about their feelings, fears, and concerns as well as what made them feel good, proud of themselves, and more accepting of others (Sharapan 2015).

Rogers used media to convey a traditional story in a new and unique way that allowed him to develop a personal relationship with the audience (Johnson and Howard 2013). Although the messages he conveyed through his storytelling were geared to young children, they also spoke to many others, including children with disabilities and those of varied races, ages, and social classes (Johnson and Howard 2013). Rogers showed the significance of children's thoughtful, creative, and cooperative actions through storytelling in a gentle, playful context (Tower et al. 1979). Children's love for the imaginary worlds represented by popular characters offers insight into how children learn to embrace the images of a spiritual world (Yust 2004). When stories connect people with what lies beyond themselves, they engage in a process in which they are encouraged to ask questions about the meaning of their lives (Kimes-Myers, 1997). A philosopher, psychologist, and spiritual teacher promoting peace, purpose, and presence – this was the authentic Mister Rogers.

Recognizing a child's natural spirituality

Considered a requirement for the development of the whole child (Kimes-Myers, 1997; Schein 2018), spirituality serves as a growing source of wisdom (Cavoukian

and Olfman 2006) for the mystic child, the magical child. Children experience themselves as spiritual beings (Houskamp, Fisher, and Stuber 2004). Spirituality is a significant component in the quality of life of both children and adults (Wolman 2001) that affects people's worldview and purpose in life (Dunn and Dawes 1999). An inborn and very personal support for children's increased understanding of themselves and their presence in the universe (Cole 2011), spirituality reflects the development of the self that includes a search for meaning, wholeness, and purpose (Love 2001). Some of its essential elements include the quest to find meaning in life, relationships with self, connections with others, the feeling of hope, and care for others (Young and Koopsen 2011). Spiritual development is relational, interconnected, and directive with regard to both the self and others in a constantly transforming community (Harris 2007). Young children demonstrate a strong connection through relationships associated with feelings, an important part of spirituality (Bartlett 2004). Children are young pilgrims, spiritual beings capable of embracing spiritual experiences (Coles 1990).

Children's spirituality involves relationships with other people and actions in the larger world (Yust 2004). In fact, several spiritual orientations, such as ethnicity, race, culture, and social class, share fundamental beliefs rooted in spirituality, reminding all of us that our essence is whole, creative, and dynamic (Miller 2018). Although spirituality can be considered a personal experience, it should not be considered totally private because at its essence it is relational and requires a responsibility to self, others, and the community (Fernandes 2003). In order for children to act on this responsibility, they require the support of loving teachers and parents as they explore their spiritual identity through daily activities and relationships, in which they can discover meaning for themselves and share their understanding of the world with peers. With this support children can develop as holistic beings in relation to people who love, listen and respond to, and guide them (Kimes-Myers 1997).

Relationships embedded in honesty and compassion honor the children's spirituality. Children may have opportunities to connect with the spiritual domain when they engage in relationships in which their inherent talents, gifts, and strengths are respected. Children who are nurtured and loved are curious, playful, receptive, and relational (Cavoukian and Olfman 2006). Fred Rogers validated self-discovery and self-worth, and tolerance by accepting young children for who they are and created an environment on the television screen to imagine, create, and dream. As children develop an understanding of themselves, connect with others, and ask questions about their world, they present their spiritual selves (Cole 2011). 'Children bring all of themselves, their feelings, and their experiences to the learning' (Rogers 1994, 7).

Applying Fred Rogers' approach to children's spirituality

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood offered a fabric of learning experiences for young children (Sharapan 2012). Introducing the arts and sciences, Rogers captured

children's imagination, curiosity, minds, hearts, and souls. His goal was to enable children to realize his or her full potential and to appreciate at the core of human personality that all human beings are positive, caring, and loved (Palmer and Carr 1991). Rogers knew that everyone desires to be loved, and he advocated telling a person that she or he is loved and cared for (Whitmer 2003), a belief he articulated in his make-believe neighborhood when he encouraged children to feel good about themselves, optimistically progressing toward what they could become.

Early childhood teachers and parents may have the opportunity to watch videos of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* episodes and read on the screen or tablet the picture books he wrote. After doing so, a teacher or parent may wonder how to apply in their classrooms and homes the messages and intentional approaches Rogers presented to children on television. The next section includes strategies modeled on his approaches that teachers and parents can apply in class and at home to nurture spiritual development, cognitive, and social-emotional skills. Several essential life skills correlating with executive functioning for all young children are explored to facilitate their embrace of community and spirituality. They include perspective taking, persistence and critical thinking, and holistic learning, and acceptance of others. By celebrating and recognizing everyday moments with wonder and awe, initiating conversation using high-order questions, recognizing self-acceptance and uniqueness, and teaching holistically, children have opportunities to aspire to be the best they can be and yet be accepted for who they truly are.

Executive functioning and essential life skills for young children

Executive functioning, which controls planning, foresight, problem solving, and goal setting (Medina 2014), allows children to operate with intent, beginning the steps of a master plan in a timely manner and reacting appropriately to changes and challenges, all while keeping the goal in mind (Kaufman 2010). Executive functions and life skills are important for young children to accomplish everyday activities. Essential life skills draw on executive functions of the brain, and a network of abilities allows children to manage their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors when pursuing goals (Galinsky 2010).

Although executive functioning develops across the lifespan, several critical developments occur during the early childhood developmental stage (Carpenter, Nagell, and Tomasello 1998). For example by age 3, children can demonstrate working memory, attentional flexibility, and inhibitory control (Hughes 1998). Examples of these skills include the capacity to hold and manipulate information, to pause and think before acting on impulse, and to switch gears to adjust and be flexible if plans are suddenly changed. Because executive functioning includes opportunities to practice task initiation, time

management, and goal-directed persistence, it may be an even stronger predictor of academic success than IQ (Medina 2014). During episodes of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Rogers focused on the unique contributions of children's interests and spiritual moments to build these life skills. For example, during one neighborhood visit, Rogers' son and grandson stopped by. During the visit, his little grandson was very curious about the trolley and how it worked. Throughout the neighborhood visit, Fred was patient, taking time to talk and play peek-a-boo with his grandson at his eye level. After the visit, Rogers stated how good it was to watch and help someone grow. 'Growing on the inside' by helping children to never give up and feeling comfortable to express feelings in appropriate ways (Rogers 1983).

Focusing on children's interests and recognizing spiritual moments

Focusing on and encouraging children's interests promotes opportunities for engaged learning and making new connections with self, others, and community. Rogers developed the ability to perceive children's interests (Sharapan 2012). Take a moment right now to close your eyes and think about a favorite board game, toy, learning activity as a young child, or favorite sport, hobby, or dream. What was your favorite interest as a young child? How does the object or event make you feel? Does thinking about it bring inspiration and trigger sparks of energy and Aha! moments? Engaging children's activities helped Rogers build *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Believing that children's curiosity required encouragement and support (Rogers 2006), he created opportunities for children to experience new learning connections and take ideas into new dimensions of the theme during episodes of his show (Sharapan 2012). Teachers and parents can support children's interests by observing children during play, talking with and listening to them. When teachers and parents focus on children's interests, they provide opportunities for children to explore their own ideas and feel successful.

Young children learn best through active participation and experience (Seitz 2006). They are truly attentive when they are interested in and care deeply about a topic. When supported and motivated to pursue an interest, children are empowered, engaged, and intrinsically motivated (Jones and Nimmo 1994). Caring and nurturing teachers can easily center the curriculum and play around children's interests, which they can identify with family questionnaires, observations, photographs, home visits, and discussions with family members. They can observe how children play and pay close attention to what they talk about and then set up activities and read stories to them that build on and extend those interests. Throughout his career, Rogers used story telling purposefully using the word *you* instead of *I* (Collins and Kimmel 1996) to make the stories with their lessons and messages more personal for the child (Johnson and Howard 2013).

Rogers (1994) believed that the relationship between a teacher and child is very important, and that such a relationship must be human and mutual. Young children often transfer their feelings about their closest caregiver onto their teachers (Rogers 1983, 201). When a teacher takes the time to follow a child's interest with authentic and meaningful learning opportunities to practice, curiosity and creativity unfold. The greatest power of teachers comes from knowing their learners (Martin 2018). They must encourage the child to lead with curiosity to innovations in learning and ignite the passion hidden in the child's heart and soul. Thus, meaningful spiritual moments may emerge, allowing young children to see, negotiate, and participate in the real world.

Occurring when something external touches a child internally in a way that connects to his or her disposition and providing feelings of joy, awe, wonder, and inner peace (Schein 2018), spiritual moments can take place for young children in and with nature, in relationships with others, and in time and space. Rogers orchestrated spiritual moments by building on ordinary moments during *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Throughout the program, he helped children make new discoveries in the world around them. Featuring a specific theme in each episode, he sat beside a trolley that 'traveled' along with puppets into the land of make-believe. Whether introducing children to a new musical instrument, interviewing a bass player, examining dump trucks at a construction site, visiting a crayon factory, meeting a new community helper in the neighborhood, or discussing divorce, Rogers always included children in his thoughts, questions, and observations, thus encouraging them to become curious explorers in their own environment and reflect upon the wonderful world around them. Each aspect of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* had its own message (Johnson and Howard 2013). By inviting television neighbors into his thoughts, questions, and observations, he supported their increasing awareness of their environment (Sharapan 2012). Teachers can also act as co-spiritual explorers with children, guiding them with wonder and fostering an attitude of fun as they make new discoveries together, establishing connections and talking about what they notice together. A personal understanding of children empowers teachers to design learning experiences that connect children with their passions and strengths and help them find their place in the world (Martin 2018).

Perspective taking and awareness of feelings

Rogers (1983) believed that acknowledging and accepting their own feelings, both negative and positive, were vital for young children. Thus, feelings formed the foundation of his approach (Palmer and Carr 1991), one that provided an atmosphere where children were encouraged simply and purely to be themselves (Collins and Kimmel 1996). Feelings were nothing to be ashamed of; instead they should be shared. By sharing with others, children would have the potential to

learn more about controlling and applying feelings as a positive strength (Johnson and Howard 2013). This included working on self-regulation, developing empathy, and using words to express feelings. Rogers challenged his viewers to cease looking outward for sources of power but instead to feel comfortable with who they are as individuals (Johnson and Howard 2013). Fred Rogers enhanced a healthy curiosity about their world (Rogers 1983).

Perspective taking, which entails considering what others think and feel, extends beyond empathy and forms the basis for children's understanding of the intentions of their parents' teachers, and friends (Galinsky 2010); therefore, teachers and parents must take time to talk to young children about emotions. For example, they can create a 'How I Feel' book together with drawings and digital pictures, introducing a variety of emotions the child can share with a teacher and parent. Children can label perceptions of their feelings during various situations. Caring adults can give young children opportunities to express and increase emotional language with specific examples as well as encourage them to use their words by asking them to describe how they feel. When children are capable of understanding that their own actions are connected to thoughts and emotions, they are closer to understanding what it means to take another person's perspective (Galinsky 2010). Adults can help children to nurture an increased understanding and use of emotional language at school and home.

In addition to talking to children about expressing their feelings, caring adults should share their own feelings with children, showing that they understand how it feels to be sad, frightened, or upset. They can share with children their feelings about what they see, hear, feel, taste, and touch. Rogers believed that talking about feelings was healthy (Whitmer 2003) and that confronting feelings requires courage and strength (Rogers 2004). One way to encourage perspective taking and feelings awareness is to read a variety of picture books with children. Reading children's literature provides opportunities for children to talk about feelings and engage in perspective taking (Appl and Pratt 2007). Puppets and soft toys can be useful props to help convey the story. After reading a book, conversations about the characters' feelings can take place, providing an opportunity to talk about a situation that could be important to the child. Using books or other forms of media can promote spiritual moments in relationships with others in which children can take another person's perspective by asking questions and creating dialogue about a variety of feelings: Parents and teachers can ask, 'How would you feel?' and 'What would you do differently?'

Recognizing sensitivity and empathy as essential values for each child to have (Johnson and Howard 2013), Rogers (2004) believed in the significance of individuals intentionally listening to and recognizing the needs, hopes, and goals of children. He stated that one of the most essential ways of saying 'I love you' is by careful listening, which he called listening with the ear of the heart (Rogers 2006). Thus, for teachers and parents to intentionally listen to

children's conversations is critical. Caring adults must find time to be present in the moment with children, affirm and welcome their questions, and observe the world from their perspective, which is often filled with joy and wonder. An excellent resource for teachers and families from the Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland, is a guide for parents called *Let's Talk*. Its objectives are to help parents introduce and expand emotional language with their children at home, support them as they express and increase emotional language, help them form an understanding of other people's emotions, and have fun reading together.

Persistence and critical thinking

A life skill that entails making decisions, analyzing, and reflecting, critical thinking is a continuing journey for valid and reliable knowledge that guides beliefs, decisions, and actions (Galinsky 2010). For example, whenever a child participates in making a decision, he or she draws on critical thinking skills, which involve devising with new solutions to conflicts and problems. Critical thinking also encompasses cognitive flexibility for brainstorming ideas and working toward accomplishing a goal. Reflective thinking takes place when children are encouraged to consider, for example, why a plan did not work out, and to take time to think and consider a different solution. Teachers and parents should motivate children to keep trying and not give up easily on a task. An important step in development is letting children know that mistakes are part of learning.

During episodes of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Rogers often modeled curiosity. For example, in one episode Mr. Rogers wondered what happened when he used an eraser to erase letters on the chalkboard. What happened to the chalk dust? Rogers enjoyed learning new things that were a part of a child's world. He took field trips with his television neighbors and shared with children the difficulties sometimes involved in learning new things at school or work, even for adults (Sharapan 2015). For example, in one episode Mister Rogers greets television neighbors by showing them a bag of pretzels that are different sizes. After singing a song, he takes the audience to a pretzel factory to see how they are made. Many times, he would also take neighbors to visit different types of factories to see where things were made. With gentle prompting, he would make sure children knew that it takes people to make the machines work and that people take pride in their work.

Often, Rogers spoke with children about the challenges of accepting mistakes and developing persistence, encouraging them to avoid giving up when a task seems too difficult. He always assured children that we all make mistakes. And even though we may make mistakes, those who love us will still stay by us and love us. In a way, Fred Rogers guided children to process through life. Furthermore, be believed that for adults as well as children, life is

characterized by striving more so than attaining (Rogers 2006). For young children, critical thinking can be one of the greatest problem-solving experiences (Sharapan 2015).

Rogers also connected to the spiritual development of young children through a variety of spiritual sensings: awareness sensing, mystery sensing, and value sensing (Mata, 2011). These can occur when children experience interactions between the self and the external world. Through spiritual sensings children build their understanding of what the world is and develop feelings of self-awareness, wonder, joy, and inner peace as well as overcome fear of the unknown. Rogers helped children do so by inspiring their curiosity and asking, 'What do you wonder?' *Wonder* refers to the way in which children sense the world and involves a display of feelings like awe, connections, and a deep sense of joy (Hyde 2008). Often, he asked guests visiting the *Neighborhood* open-ended questions that required more than yes or no answers. He also asked guests what they did when they felt frustrated and wanted to quit and give up on a task or project. Thus, Fred Rogers shared real-life experiences with television neighbors and also modeled elements of persistence and problem solving. Another strategy teachers and parents can use to encourage persistence is growth mindset, an attitude that permits possibilities and promotes progress and problem solving.

A growth mindset can support children by improving their skills for effectively solving everyday problems as well as more challenging ones (Jamsek 2017). The principle behind the growth mindset is that failure does not preclude success. Research has shown that teaching children to develop a growth mindset and to focus more on effort may help them become high achievers in school and life (Dweck 2006). With a growth mindset in place, children can recognize mistakes as positives, part of maturation and growing up, not as negatives. Supporting children's realization that mistakes can be opportunities to perform differently and to learn, the growth mindset may also foster the child's practice of a particular skill (e.g., learning to play a musical instrument, riding a bike without training wheels, trying out a new sport) and thereby grow stronger. Before it was even conceptualized, Rogers promoted the growth mindset regularly during *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* by embracing mistakes as a way to grow stronger and smarter. He offered feedback and praise to children by suggesting ways to solve difficult problems, letting them know that learning is exciting and making mistakes can build resilience. Rogers said, 'I want children to know that adults can make mistakes, too. Adults don't have to be perfect to be acceptable' (2006, 157). Teachers and parents can praise a child for trying something new, working outside their comfort zone, and going above and beyond. For example, a teacher may say, 'You are almost there. What other strategies can you try?' or 'Thank you for your hard work and determination. It has made a difference in your work.' Rogers also supported interaction with children in which effort was acknowledged by asking questions and modeling resilience and problem-solving strategies, assuring children they should be unafraid to try again. For example, teachers and

parents can ask questions to promote reflection, such as 'What could you do to make this better?' 'How could you try harder next time?' or 'Why do you think this was so difficult for you?' The practice of the growth mindset can promote resilience, self-esteem, endurance, and determination in all young children.

Teaching the whole child and appreciating the uniqueness of others

One of the spiritual dispositions Fred Rogers was that he recognized all children for their full complete selves. Believing in accepting others without requiring them to change anything about themselves (Long 2015), he emphasized to children that being different is acceptable because no two people are the same and that difference is what makes the world so interesting (Collins and Kimmel 1996). He encouraged children to appreciate and respect others (Johnson and Howard 2013). For example, during *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, he spoke to children respectfully, never talking down to them. Rogers believed in the personal dynamics of the individual and nurtured children's development into socially and emotionally aware adults (Whitmer 2003). Episodes of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* included reassuring spiritual messages like 'Be comfortable,' 'Be my friend,' and 'You're cared about and are special.' Fred Rogers promoted unconditional positive regard – 'I love you as you are' – recommending that teachers and parents accept the uniqueness of each child so that she or he could develop the confidence needed to succeed in any social situation (Rogers 1994). Rogers could turn a disability into a possibility and urged teachers and parents to promote acceptance of others and individual differences in their classrooms and homes by incorporating holistic and universal design learning into the curriculum and classroom ecology. Every time teachers and parents affirm how special children are to them for being themselves, they help them develop into adults who celebrate the diversity of the world's people (Rogers 2006).

Classroom ecology includes the physical and social characteristics of the classroom environment (Odom & Bailey, 2001), including the activities, routines, and schedules. Social characteristics include interactions involving teachers, children, and peers. With holistic learning teachers nurture the development of the whole child (Miller 2005, in the cognitive, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual development domains. In inquiry-based holistic learning seven types of intelligences, dynamic curriculum, and communities of learning are recognized. A framework that meets these criteria as well as the needs of all learners is known as universal design for learning (UDL), an outgrowth of the architectural model (Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) 2006). In an early childhood classroom a healthy and enriching environment that supports the growth and development of all young children can be created and sustained and also guarantees inclusion (Horn and Banerjee 2009). When teachers apply the principles of UDL in their curriculum and

classroom environment, both those children with disabilities and those without are winners. UDL focuses on the goals, methods, materials, and assessments of instruction making them accessible to all children (Dolan and Hall 2001). UDL includes three core principles, which include the following: (a) providing multiple means of representation by ensuring objectives, activities, instruction, and expectations exist in various forms and at various levels of complexity; (b) multiple means of expression addressing individual strengths, preferences, interests, and abilities, including a variety of layouts for expressing ideas, feelings, and preferences; and (c) multiple means of engagement, addressing the curiosity, attention, and motivation of children with a wide range of interests, preferences, and learning styles, such as auditory, kinesthetic, or visual learners (Stockall, Dennis, and Miller 2012).

Embracing tolerance, uniqueness, and love

Three words that come to mind to describe Fred Rogers' influence on children's spirituality are *tolerance*, *uniqueness*, and *love*. As a compassionate human being, Fred Rogers opposed the attitudes, policies, and practices of those who created barriers that made individual and social peace impossible (Long 2015). A compassionate prophet and Christian peacemaker, he encouraged all individuals to become prophets and peacemakers, committed to children's social, emotional, and spiritual developments by creating neighborhoods filled with wonder, make believe play, and joy (Long 2015). In his ministry Roger shared his love of music, engaged in the vocation of teaching, modeled wonderment in everyday experiences, and promoted the beauty of peacemaking, all through make-believe in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. By introducing topics of interest in the real world to children of all ages and providing opportunities for children to encounter new experiences, he inspired curiosity, peace, resilience, and self-esteem. Throughout Rogers' lifetime, his sensitivity to acceptance, the feelings of others, and empathy and compassion were wholly dedicated to children. Rogers' strengths and leadership dispositions were transferred to young television neighbors through storytelling. *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* endured the test of challenging and changing generations (Baumgartner and Buchanan 2010). His genuine and patient presence had a healing quality, creating a world for young children in which real learning and unconditional love could flourish. In Fred Rogers' neighborhood fundamental elements that children will need in the future were considered and nurtured: creative innovations, collaboration with peers, and critical thinking. The messages of love and acceptance for each child were echoed in each song Rogers wrote for the neighborhood.

Presence is a mysterious quality, encountered in a person who listens with her or his whole being (Miller 2018). Fred Rogers demonstrated this type of presence each time he came into children's hearts and homes with *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Consider taking a moment to reflect upon a teacher who truly

made a genuine difference in your development. Many times it is the teacher's presence, not the pedagogy or environment (Miller 2018), that makes a lasting impression. As an educator or parent, how will you intentionally listen, spark curiosity, inspire fantasy, and create spiritual moments for children? What will your neighborhood look like for young spiritual explorers? Will it be caring and compassionate, filled with conversations, creative innovations of learning, and love? Who will be your neighbors?

Children need adults who are convinced of the value of childhood. They need adults who can help them to develop their own healthy controls, who can encourage them to explore their own unique endowments. Children need adults in every walk of life who care as much for children as they care for themselves. (Rogers 2006, 156)

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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