Engaging *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* as a "Great" Curriculum
A Curriculum Critique

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IN 2011, CURRICULUM SCHOLAR TOM POETTER released a book cowritten with a cohort of his students titled, *10 Great Curricula: Lived Conversations of Progressive, Democratic Curricula in School and Society*. In that text, the authors explore ten distinct curricular phenomena and critique them through a progressive lens. A stated goal of their project was to "think curricularly, that is to theorize, to generate new ideas, to critique, and to recognize possibilities as a result of [the authors'] interaction with curriculum and curriculum studies" (Poetter, 2011, p. xvi).[1] In what follows, I extend that original work; I offer a curricular critique (Eisner, 2002) of Fred Rogers's magnum opus, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, as an example of a "great" curriculum not explored in the original volume.

Part of the goal of such a project is to deploy curriculum critique as catalyst for renewed possibilities for sustaining democratic life. Such critiques of curricular events, phenomena, or movements recall a lived curriculum into public memory, recollections that can remind us how democracy has been made, contested, and remade. Ultimately, it is difficult to achieve what one cannot conceive. Curricular critiques such as the one I render here facilitate "the acquisition of new forms of anticipation. Educational criticism illuminates particulars, but it is through particulars that concepts and generalizations are formed and then applied to new situations" (Eisner, 2002, p. 243). In this way, then, the exploration of "great" curricula, or any curricular phenomenon like *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* for that matter, attunes us to not only what has come before, but what might be presently in our midst pointing to a future we can create together.

"Great" As a Curricular Heuristic

To begin, let me explain "great" as a heuristic and, in particular, how it facilitates curricular insight. Poetter (2011) argues that "a curriculum is great if it helps the inquirer to understand curriculum better and to develop deeper insights into curriculum work from his or her perspective" (p. xvii). Further, he contends that a great curriculum is one that has had a significant impact on

individuals and/or society writ large and, ultimately, changes peoples' lives for the better. In this way, Poetter articulates great curricula as having a progressive bent. That is, they

> do several very unique, educationally progressive things:
>
> - open us up to seeing ourselves as more fully human, both individually and in relation to others;
> - create a world of institutions, cultures, and communities that are more democratic; and
> - establish more clearly the criteria for fairness, justice, tolerance, diversity, and opportunity in the world for individuals and for societies. (p. xix)

I can think of no better exemplar of these very traits than *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. The invitation to see children, yes, but all of us as more fully human is central to Fred Rogers's lifework: the program modeled democratic community; and it cast a vision of a good society built on fairness, justice, diversity, and tolerance. As I shall elaborate, it is an exemplary progressive curriculum and one whose legacy endures.

Program Context

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood aired nearly 900 episodes over a 30-year run between 1968 and 2001. The show took a 3-year hiatus in the mid-70s as Fred Rogers, the program's affable and inimitable creator and host, briefly pursued other opportunities to communicate with families via the television medium. Fred Rogers died 2 decades ago (in 2003), scarcely 2 years after the final production of new episodes. Today, his legacy lives on via Fred Rogers Productions, which produces *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* among other educational programing specifically aimed at serving families with young children, and via the Fred Rogers Institute (formerly called the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media).

Though popular in his own day, the word "icon" is not too strong of a descriptor of his cultural import (though Fred would likely shirk such a moniker), interest in Fred Rogers and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* has experienced recent resurgence, most notably in Morgan Neville's 2018 documentary, *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, and the release of *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* (Heller, 2019), a feature film starring Tom Hanks as Fred Rogers. And after nearly every tragic event in the news, memes of Fred Rogers's famous invocation to "look for the helpers" circulate social media. At the height of its popularity, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* reportedly generated between 15 and 30 pieces of viewer mail each day. Accounting for the program's 31 seasons, that volume of correspondence could reach upwards of 200,000 people (Mann, 2020). Still, a generation beyond the final production of his show, much about his work is unknown to the wider U.S. population apart from the caricature that lives on in parodies like Eddie Murphy's *Saturday Night Live*, "Mister Robinson's Neighborhood" skit and an abundance of ever-circulating memes and YouTube clips. Indeed, Fred Rogers is often quoted, his words used to illustrate any number of positions and ideological stakes in contemporary culture wars. In his 2018 biography, Max King (2018) notes,

> On one level, Fred is a gentle, reserved old man in a fading cardigan sweater whose principal contribution has been in the field of childcare. But on another level—and this is

> the level on which he is so often appreciated today—he is a powerful cultural avatar in an age that seems sick with rage and conflict. (p. 358)

Indeed, if one were to rest in mere nostalgia for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, they would miss much of its deep and abiding curricular power as a cultural artifact.

Fred Rogers repeatedly called on American society to "make goodness attractive," and he rigorously modeled goodness himself. In the contemporary moment, the goodness of Fred Rogers, *Mister* Rogers to those of us who grew up with him, is a stark juxtaposition against the grifting boorishness embodied in Trumpism. "Why now? Why this nostalgia moment?" asks Carvell Wallace (2019) in his *Finding Fred* podcast. Certainly, there's a need in this polarized moment to cling to goodness wherever we see it. Yet, the goodness Mister Rogers embodied endures, linking his own age and our own.

Clichés of the "need" for a Mister Rogers figure in our contemporary moment aside (Ma, 2018), there is much in Fred Rogers's life and work, especially in the *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* program, that provokes deeper study. To the casual observer, Fred's interactions with children, indeed his entire program, are saccharine and shallow. To the studied eye, however, the show is intentionally simple yet still deep.

Indeed, one of the key principles in Fred Rogers's own work was that of edifying the "helpful appreciator" (Behr & Rydzewski, 2021; Li, 2023; Long, 2015). In Rogers's understanding, to appreciate others, especially those who help others, shapes our understanding of goodness in the world and is a sacred act, one that mirrors God's love for his creation (Long, 2015. In a sense, there are strong parallels between Fred's conception of the helpful appreciator and curriculum critique as Eisner (2002) conceived it, especially in critique's evaluative aspect. For Eisner (2002), the evaluative aspect of critique suggests that "education implies some personal and social good" (p. 31) and thus requires discernment about what those personal and social goods are. In rendering a critique, the educational critic will necessarily choose some social goods as valid and reject others and provide grounds for those choices (p. 232). Criticism, ultimately, seeks to see an educational phenomenon in all of its complexity and thus requires that one appreciate, that is, recognize what is good or what needs redemption, in any given educational phenomenon. Critique is thus always oriented toward an image of what is possible, even as it may not yet be. Herein are strong connections to Fred Rogers's guiding ideal of the helpful appreciator: that "what is essential is invisible to the eye" (quoting Antoine de St. Exupery, 2000, p. 63). For Fred Rogers, the helpful appreciator helps render that which is essential in people visible, and for Eisner, the educational critique renders what is essential in an educational phenomenon visible to the reader. What follows is my effort to show what is deep yet simple, and enduring, in Fred Rogers's work.

A Childhood Advocate

Fred Rogers was a stubborn advocate for children or, more aptly, for childhood itself.[2] While he was careful never to be overtly political, at least in a partisan sense, he "never downplayed his role as a social advocate" (Jackson, 2016, p. 13). He saw the relationship between media creator and viewer as "holy ground" (Hutchison, 2021, p. 66), language that both exemplifies his own specific call to ministry and highlights television's cultural import. The Presbyterian Church USA affirmed Fred Rogers's ordination to ministry with a specific charge to use television as his ministry field. The "Reverend" Fred Rogers's pastoral reach extended to

millions of homes throughout the United States (and beyond) across multiple generations. Rogers chose television as a career because he was disgusted by the demeaning nature of television when he first encountered it. That demeaning behavior was catalytic. It awakened his call to love others in response, rather than to demean, through the vehicle of television.

Alexandra Klarén, scholar of cultural communication studies, demonstrates how Fred Rogers was progressive in his use of media, especially on behalf of children. He was an expert at blending medium and message. Klarén (2019) notes Rogers's mastery of the new (in the 1950s and '60s) medium of television and, especially, how he used it counterculturally to the way he saw it used even by other children's programs. For instance, he refused to use his program to sell things to children (or adults, for that matter). Further, "Rogers ties his program and its pedagogical framework to the civic realm, detailing how his program assists in the healthy emotional development of American children" (Klarén, 2019, p. 118).

Indeed, Fred Rogers treated childhood as its own curriculum, an aspect of his pedagogy that I find particularly transgressive. He engrossed himself in the study of childhood, and he was a consummate pedagogue, translating his understanding of childhood into an experiential curriculum for children and their families.

> Rogers's cultural intervention follows his recognition that entertainment is, in fact, a pedagogy. In this conflated space of entertainment and pedagogy Rogers's radically new understanding of child subjectivity as a developmental process that engages both cognitive and affective dynamics abides. (Klarén, 2019, p. 84)

Consequently, perhaps his greatest legacy is that he recognized emotions as central to human experience and formative to democracy and thus essential to cultivate in children and adults alike.[3] He studied child development at the Arsenal Center for Early Literacy at the University of Pittsburgh, founded by noted psychologists Erik Erikson, Benjamin Spock, and Margaret McFarland. His collaborations with McFarland lasted more than two decades, until her death in 1988. One could credibly argue, in fact, that the messages of the show are as much McFarland's as they are Fred's. It is important to note, too, that Fred's emphasis on the social and emotional growth of children intentionally distinguished *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* from the other most well-known children's program of its time, *Sesame Street*, the primary emphasis of which was on children's cognitive development.

Each episode of the Neighborhood program was intentionally designed with the child viewer in mind. The easy (some might say slow) pace, the rituals of entry and exit like the "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" song and the switch from sport coat to sweater, the intentionality of Fred's language, which his collaborators lovingly came to call "Freddish" (King, 2018), all serve children's developmental needs for continuity and stability. (The slow pace of the show was another way Fred's approach was distinct from that of *Sesame Street*). Nothing that happened on the show was an accident; it was all carefully designed in ways that would cultivate children's socioemotional growth. Fred's long-time confidant and educational consultant Hedda Sharapan (as quoted in (Williams, 1996) recalled that, "Fred has said the best use of television is what happens when the program is over and children use what's been discovered" p. 8).[4] Fred Rogers was acutely attuned to the importance of children's relationships to and within the family. And he believed in children as whole human beings and expertly crafted his entire show around that ethos.

To make it easy for young children to follow, each episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* followed a very similar, simple structure. The show's structure is intentionally predictable with consistent, repeated cues to scaffold children's comprehension. As one of my students who was studying episodes with me noted, the episode structure mirrors a lesson plan in many ways, and the weekly themes serve as a sort of "unit plan" that binds the individual episodes within each week. The program's topics were all rooted in the concerns and developmental needs of children, everything from "Creativity" and "Curiosity" to "Mad Feelings" and "Divorce."

Mister Rogers's honesty with children throughout the episodes is legendary, even transgressive, and the impact of his collaborations with Dr. Margaret McFarland and other child development experts (and Fred's own expertise) is clearly evident (for deeper insight into Dr. McFarland's influence on Fred Rogers, see King, 2018). For example, in one early episode of the show (Episode 1101, originally airing March, 1970) when Mister Rogers feeds the fish in the tank in his kitchen, he notices one fish has floated to the top and appears dead. Notably, Fred intentionally avoids using euphemisms to describe the fish's condition. He simply says it "died," rather than "passed on," or, the scarier phrase to children, "went to sleep." He then proceeds to dig a hole and bury the fish in his (on-set) backyard, all while discussing the important role his pet dog Mitzy played in his life when he was young and how he cried when Mitzy died. Throughout the scene, Mister Rogers looks directly to camera and speaks calmly, almost matter-of-factly. In another well-known episode [1695], Mister Rogers shows how he makes each of the puppets who appear in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe talk. He is intentional to note that they cannot talk themselves, that he is making them talk, that it is only for pretend, but that his child viewers can pretend too as a good way to cope with their feelings or develop their curiosity. Fred sought never to mislead or, worse yet, deceive children.

Fred Rogers was a consummate songwriter, and many of the songs that he wrote and performed in the episodes are also pedagogically aimed to foster children's socioemotional growth. "What Do You Do with the Mad that You Feel?" and "It's a Good Feeling" are among his most well-known, but songs like "Did you Know?" and "Good People Do Bad Things Sometimes," though less well known, are every bit as potent in their attunement to children's worries and their need for reassurance that, as Fred says repeating Margaret McFarland, "anything human is mentionable, and anything mentionable is manageable" (Tuttle, 2019, p. 148). The emotional rigor of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* is, arguably, unlike anything else that has appeared on television.

In fact, it was Fred Rogers's attention to the emotional curriculum of childhood that so often makes him and his show an object of mockery. Some people have argued, for example, that today's "damn millennials" and their sense of being special has yielded unreasonably high expectations for "the perfect job" even while having no persistence in the face of obstacles that challenge that sense of specialness (Foundation for Economic Education, 2019; Kim, 2010). Most notably, Fred Rogers was derided on *Fox and Friends* "as an 'evil' man who 'ruined a generation of children' because his message to young children - that they are special just for being who they are -- leads to narcissism and attitudes of entitlement" (Barish, 2013, para. 1). Obviously reductive mis-reading of Fred Rogers's lifework aside, Fox News recreated Mister Rogers (or, his viewers, at least), as the embodiment of liberal values that conservatives consider so antithetical to American prosperity. More recently, conservatives' invocation of the evils of social-emotional learning (Anderson, 2022) continues this thread that emphasizing concern for others' feelings, much less one's own, is a sign of weakness and potential national decline. Yet, even in the face of such scrutiny, Fred Rogers unapologetically argued for the centrality of the emotional curriculum

as a central concern for children's development and consistently advocated for us all to "make goodness attractive," one of his favorite and most often-used aphorisms.

Making Goodness Attractive

At first, "making goodness attractive" might seem like a quaint invocation to conscribe one's personal behavior to a moralistic code of conduct or, perhaps, more cynically, to marketize one's adherence to the values of the upper-middle-class for personal advancement. Yet, as with so much of Fred's lifework, what seems simple is actually much deeper. Jennifer Shaw Fischer and Bob Fischer (2020) claim that "his advice wasn't—and isn't—just about how to be better individuals. Fred's wisdom applies to national and global problems too" (p. 178). They speculate on "what Mister Rogers might say" in response to contemporary social phenomena, such as separation of families at the border as they try to enter the United States. They ground their analysis in an understanding of "Fred the Philosopher" (pp. 180–182). Taking cues from Aristotelian virtue ethics, they argue that Fred "appreciated that being a good person isn't just about doing the right thing. It's also about doing the right thing in a way that reveals what's beautiful about acting well" (p. 181). Thus, Fred's efforts were not just about teaching children how to be nice, how to share, how to follow rules and please others. Rather, they were about linking those virtues to an image of the good life, one in which each person's humanity is preserved. Thus, Fred Rogers models for the rest of us an image of the "good" that takes childhood seriously and compels us to struggle to realize a world that is more good for not just our own, but all children.

> The show's purpose is to teach children to be good people by having them spend time with good people. Goodness here is defined as the willingness to pay attention to the things that capitalism tells us are unworthy of our time and attention. Things you cannot buy or sell. Found objects. Friends. Time. Connection. (Wallace, 2021, para. 8)

Certainly, one could critique Fred Rogers as a milquetoast progressive because of his emphasis on developing empathy for others, an orientation toward democracy rooted in dialogue among assumed equals. A social democrat he was not (on the contrary, he was a registered Republican his entire adult life, Maxwell King [2018] notes in his biography of Fred). But Fred understood that representation matters. He was intentional about casting non-white actors in prominent roles, most notably Officer Clemmons and Mayor Maggie. His visits with neighbors in his "real world" segments of the program and the video visits he made via "picture-picture" regularly included people of various colors and ethnicities, women and men, young and old alike. Certainly, much of his construction of the beautiful neighborhood was that of diverse others coming together despite their differences to embrace their shared humanity. After all, Fred Rogers so often reminded us, "it's what's inside of us that matters."

Yet, simply being "nice" to one another is not sufficient in itself to build a just community. In *The Price of Nice: How Good Intentions Maintain Educational Inequity*, Angelina Castagno (2019) rightly warns of the limitations of Niceness and links Niceness discourses to the reproduction of injustice.

> Diversity and Niceness have been so intertwined that any engagement with diversity is necessarily, almost by definition, *nice* … . Diversity in schools has been framed in such a

> way as to require a stance of inclusion, optimism, and assimilation … . Despite their good intentions and the general Niceness among educators, most schools in the United States contribute to inequity every day (p. x),

educators' very Niceness serving as a barrier to structural transformation because they understand anti-racism as merely a personal attribute, namely, being "nice" to people of different races. Fred's appeals to kindness, empathy, and understanding are not on their own sufficient to foster multiracial democracy. Still, I contend that Fred's work belies the limitations of Niceness.

Despite a persona of Mister Rogers and his ethos as "soft," "wimpy," etc. (gendered constructions of anti-masculinity, all), in his own day, and in his own way, he was much more countercultural than at first glance. Yes, he did devote a great deal of the show's energies to teaching kids that all it takes for neighborhood harmony is for us to listen to (assumed well-meaning) others and to talk about our feelings together. But, transcending mere Niceness, there were also moments of mutinous solidarity. For example, perhaps most notably, during the Conflict-themed week aired in November 1983, in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, King Friday has his subjects prepared for war because of his suspicion that the things people are building in Someplace Else are bomb parts. The residents of Make-Believe, especially the puppet Daniel Tiger and the human Lady Aberlin, conspire together to send peace balloons with messages of love and non-violence into the King's castle in a sort of direct-action campaign that mimicked antiwar protests in the "real" world. Michael G. Long (2015) argues that Fred Rogers was

> a quiet but strong American prophet who, with roots in progressive spirituality, invited us to make the world into a countercultural neighborhood of love—a place where there would be no wars, no racial discrimination, no hunger, no gender-based discrimination, no killing of animals for food, and no pillaging of earth's precious resources. (p. xiv)

In large part, Fred Rogers's Presbyterian Christian faith that taught him that all people are worthy of love and that all relationships can be redeemed, no matter how fractured, both grounded and inspired his countercultural ethos. His was a faith not only of the head or the heart, but of the hands (Hollingsworth, 2005); he applied his theology in the world both in his own actions and, especially, through the medium of television. "Fred believed God's action in the world was constant and purposeful, with a bias toward the marginalized and hurting; God acted—sometimes through him—to comfort the broken-hearted or accompany the outcast" (Tuttle, 2019, p. 162). Fred Rogers's pedagogical and theological formation were fused as inseparable and indispensable parts of each other even though he never directly invoked his religious beliefs on the program.[5] In a real sense, the Neighborhood constitutes a potent model of a lived curriculum of the beloved community—in Fred's religious idiom, the kingdom of God—a hopeful ideal full of possibility in which we all live out a vocation of peace, love, and justice.

Neighborhood Democracy: Growing into Good Neighbors

When Fred Rogers called for us to make goodness attractive, he was not just inviting us as individuals to cultivate personally virtuous character; he was also, perhaps especially, calling us to build a good—that is, a more just, peaceful, and loving—society. During each television "visit," as he called his episodes, Mister Rogers invited people to be neighbors from the very first

moments. It is no coincidence that he opened each episode singing "Won't you be my neighbor?" Rogers could have used a variety of different words to describe the relationship he sought to cultivate with and model for the viewer. However,

> as the song suggests, he aimed to form a specific kind of relationship with the children who watched his program—not to be their friend, exactly, and certainly not to be their parent, but to be a kind, caring, trusted member of their *community*. (Vogt, 2021, p. 47)

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood reminds us that one cannot, in fact, be a neighbor, let alone a *good* neighbor, without other people. Being a neighbor is inherently relational and thus requires mechanisms to navigate the desires, wants, and needs of everyone in the neighborhood. Mister Rogers treats the neighborhood as a curricular space where we learn how to live together in humanizing ways.

> Perhaps the neighborhood, and the idea of neighboring, was Mister Rogers's most persistent parable—if also his most covert … . The *neighbor* language is so omnipresent, it's easy to miss how theological it is. Mister Rogers, who carefully considered every word he spoke on screen, didn't call his viewers *acquaintances*, or *friends*, he didn't call us *boys and girls* or *ladies and gentlemen*, he called us *neighbors*. (Tuttle, 2019, p. 109)

Again, Rogers here brings a religious idiom into secular context. His use of the word neighbor—evocative of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in the New Testament—clearly establishes Mister Rogers's Protestant-inspired theology as the grounding ethos of democratic community, namely, that to be a good neighbor requires loving-kindness (also known as compassion) even for one's enemies.

As I note previously, in her work, *On Becoming Neighbors*, Alexandra Klarén (2019) notes Fred Rogers's mastery of television as a way to form a relationship with his viewers, his own *television neighborhood*. He expertly mobilized television rhetorically as a master pedagogue (Hutchison, 2021). Mister Rogers intentionally "divided the program into three spaces: the primary home set, the outside world (i.e., educational trips to real-world locations), and the Neighborhood of Make-Believe" (Hutchison, 2021, p. 70). Across these three spaces, Mister Rogers taught lessons about life as neighbors. Klarén, for example, further emphasizes how *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* fuses the private realm of the home with the public sphere: "He celebrates the home as a space of bonding and security, and the neighborhood as a place where people interact and work in fellowship for the common goal of living together peacefully" (Klarén, 2019, p. 135). Thus, while in the home space of the show, Mister Rogers introduced or underscored many of the program's key themes and moral lessons, those themes were most heavily nuanced and contested in/through the Make-Believe segments. Rogers used the home space as a place of "safety" for children and, by extension, their caregivers, to work to make sense together of the particular theme for the episode, a theme rooted in child development. Make-Believe, on the other hand, was where any conflict on the show happened, and that conflict demonstrated the residents of Make-Believe working through that conflict together toward peaceful, democratic resolution.

Even while the home space of the show evinced safety and security of the family bond, the Neighborhood embodied a space of conflict among neighbors. The Neighborhood is provided as a space where real social conflict can be articulated, deliberated, and confronted. Rawson (2019) elaborates:

> The fact that the Neighborhood looks familiar doesn't mean it's always easy and comfortable. Conflicts and difficulties arise. The difference is that in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* everything can be talked about, and anything that can be talked about can be dealt with—even divorce, even alienation, even death. The haven of the Neighborhood is not a false world, but it is a safe world, where "dangerous" feelings can be confronted. Violence and war, hatred and intolerance are not painted out of the picture, but neither are they allowed to destroy the canvas. (p. 179)

Importantly, as Rawson notes, peoples' difficult feelings, their compulsions toward hatred and violence, are not disregarded. On the contrary, they are treated seriously, but they are at the same time given an outlet to be safely confronted and resolved in ways that are non-violent and that do not allow society to fracture.

Matthew Ussia (2020) notes the way Fred synthesized the distinct public and private spaces of the show in ways that both mirror and model democracy.

> We might have thoughts and feelings that are less than kind towards others. We might want to run away from difficult circumstances and choices. Fred Rogers gives us a model for working through all this. His show about a space where conflicts are resolved [peacefully and mutually] is a vital lesson for anyone living in a democracy. (Ussia, 2020, p. 193)

Thus, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* again functions pedagogically. Fred Rogers taught us that it is okay to be angry but also gave us tools to help us think through, "What do we do with the mad that we feel?" as the lyrics to one of his songs asks us.

One of Fred Rogers's greatest achievements was making the political personal and pedagogical.

> When Fred Rogers made programs about war … , or when he addressed issues of difference … , he wasn't addressing only these grown-up needs like armed conflict or integration. He was connecting the dots, as he was remarkably good at doing, between the grown-up versions of these social realities and their analog issues in childhood. (Tuttle, 2019, p. 92)

Thus, Fred Rogers's orientation toward democracy was rooted in his advocacy for children. Those issues that made life more difficult for children were his primary concern, and his great pedagogical mission was to help children and their caregivers successfully and humanely navigate those issues from larger society that threatened children's safety and humanity.

Mister Rogers's work reminds us, too, that we all have roles to play in cultivating healthy neighborhoods and a healthy, humanizing democracy. He cultivated healthy humanity in children as a pathway toward a better world for adults. His ultimate faith was that healthy, well-adjusted kids would grow into healthy well-adjusted adults, adults who work together to protect the world from their own destructive impulses. While Fred Rogers was ultimately concerned with the healthy development and growth of children, he also consequently had much to contribute to the healthy growth of the good society. His was an edifying message for adults as much as it was for children. Shea Tuttle (2019) elaborates:

> When Mister Rogers called his viewers *neighbors*, when he hosted us in his neighborhood for over thirty years, he was playing out his own greatest parable: calling us, gently but

> firmly, into loves of mercy and care for one another … . Maybe, in calling us neighbors, he knew he was calling us something better than we actually were. But maybe he believed that if he got us while we were young, if he told us again, that we are good, that we are lovable, and that we can build bridges of mercy, maybe we could grow into real neighbors to one another. (p. 110)

Ultimately, this fulfills Poetter's (2011) vision of progressive curriculum in that it "opens us up to seeing ourselves as more fully human, both individually and in relation to others" (p. xix).

Educators' Neighborhood and the Ongoing Legacy

Finally, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* constitutes a great curriculum at least in part because of its impact: its legacy endures more than two decades after it ceased to produce new episodes and, I contend, "those experiencing the curriculum on multiple levels have been changed for the 'better'" (Poetter, 2011, p. xix). Certainly, as I have noted previously, the recent resurgence in popularity of works on Fred Rogers, as well as his continued presence in the zeitgeist every time the United States experiences a national tragedy, indicate his impact on individuals and society alike. But Fred Rogers's legacy is not merely an artifact of the past. Rather, it continues in the present through Fred Rogers Productions, which produces spin-off shows *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* and *Donkey Hodie*, and the Fred Rogers Institute (https://www.fredrogersinstitute.org/) and, especially, the Institute's work to grow a network of caregivers and educators who study Fred's work and carry it forward via the Educators' Neighborhood[6] group. The Educators' Neighborhood includes educators from a variety of capacities: pre-school to college-level teachers; school administrators; children's librarians; museum professionals; social service workers; and so forth.

This Educators' Neighborhood group acts as a form of public sphere for its participants. Through its multiple cohorts and its symposium series, participants study Fred Rogers's work, view and discuss *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* episodes together, and help each other translate Rogers's pedagogy into/across their divergent contexts. I have participated for three years in three different small-group cohorts and have found each a refreshing space that cultivates deep listening and deliberation while sharing a commitment to critical inquiry, community solidarity, and growth. In particular, through my participation in the various cohorts, I have found the experience to be rich for the questions it evokes about what it means to live well in the world, to live as neighbors, to take seriously the proposition that childhood is worthy of cultivation, that children are worthy of care, and that adults can be people who build a sustainable world for the children who are our present. We regularly explore foundational curricular questions about what it means to be educated. The facilitators from the Fred Rogers Institute induce us to ask "big" questions and "small" questions alike and collaborate on answers to those questions.

Annually, Educators' Neighborhood participants convene multiple whole-group meetings as well as monthly small-group cohort meetings. In addition, the Fred Rogers Institute sponsors multiple public events (online) featuring Educators' Neighborhood members as well as other experts. Topics range from "back to school," to "silence and solitude, to "talking with children about difficult topics," and "creativity." Each is designed to engage and extend Fred Rogers's work into the contemporary world through focusing on topics relevant to children and those who are charged with their care.

While on one hand curatorial of Rogers's legacy, on the other, Educators' Neighborhood infuses Fred's work with fresh possibilities for extending it into new spaces, contexts, and applications. Educators' Neighborhood expands the scope of scholarly work on Rogers's life and work beyond the interests of a few academics or occasional biographies into the everyday practice of people working to make sense of his work, yes, but especially to apply what they learn from his work in their own lived contexts. In this, Fred Rogers's lifework is an embodied, lived curriculum that continues to have real and positive impact in the world.

Curricular Takeaways

Interpreting *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* curricularly compels questions about our obligations to build a world that takes childhood seriously in a moment in which violent conflict has displaced more than 43 million children around the world (UNICEF, 2023) and one in six children under the age of five in the United States lives in poverty, including nearly 1.1 million unhoused children (Children's Defense Fund, 2023). Surely,

> if we are to grasp the full significance of Rogers's legacy, we have to place his compassion in its historical context … . As a compassionate human being, Fred Rogers countered the attitudes, policies, and practices of a political society poised to kill. (Long, 2015, p. 179)

As a society still poised to kill and very effective at doing so, curricula that show other ways of being in the world, other ways of ordering society according to peaceful, mutual cooperation, are vital to human survival.

Ian Bogost (2018), writing in *The Atlantic*, demands that we stop "fetishizing" Rogers's invocation to "look for the helpers," because it abrogates our responsibility to *be* the helpers, which was Fred's ultimate message for adults (para. 4). Democracy is not a spectator sport; a healed, healthy democracy will only emerge as we struggle to make it so, but it cannot emerge if we all passively look to others to do the work of building a good society for us. As Hannah Arendt (2006) reminds us,

> education … is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. (p. 193)

Do we have it in us to make goodness attractive, to work together to make beautiful neighborhoods? "Fred Rogers was the gentlest of men—but he was also a fighter. His chosen weapons were puppets and scripts and songs, but he battled every day to improve the world he lived in" (Edwards, 2019, p. 9) and he invites us to do the same.

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood continues to provide an enduring example of persistent curricular questions about how to live with each other in society, which values are most important, and who decides. It is, indeed, a great curriculum.

Notes

1. I was a contributing author in that book.
2. In an Oct. 1983 interview in *American Way* magazine, Rogers said "I consider myself a children's advocate" (Skalka, 1983, p. 95). Accessed at Fred Rogers Archives, Fred Rogers Institute at St. Vincent College, Latrobe, PA.
3. Interestingly, during the mid-1970s hiatus from producing *MRN*, Fred Rogers returned to television as creator and host of *Old Friends, New Friends*, a show whose stated purpose was "to give emotional support and to convey helpful knowledge to people living through life's later years." From Fred Rogers' outline for the program, accessed at Fred Rogers Archives, Fred Rogers Institute at St. Vincent College, Latrobe, PA.
4. Accessed at Fred Rogers Archives, Fred Rogers Institute at St. Vincent College, Latrobe, PA.
5. The only exception is from "Conflict" week, which originally aired in November 1983 during US military engagement in Grenada. At the conclusion of the episode, the camera fades to an image of text from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah that reads *"And they shall beat their swords into plowshares,/ And their spears into pruning forks;/ Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,/ Neither shall they learn war any more"* (Long, 2015, p. 8).
6. See https://www.fredrogersinstitute.org/educators-neighborhood

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