

How Can We Live Freer?

The Will to Accept Sacred Freedom to Choose

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WE, IN THE U.S., live in the relative warmth of freedom in our constitutional republic based on democratic principles. Yet in 2023, public education lies beneath (within) a heavy weight, characterized by a time in which teachers grapple for their own self-worth like never before, while proving to critics they are worthy of a salary and that teaching is a profession, rather than a technical, formulaic spot that anyone can achieve. In addition, there is constant governmental pressure to privatize what was once thought of as a public space. That space, now, seems anti-educational and undemocratic, and teachers who witness these disturbing developments are fearful. These times and occurrences can clearly be thought of as a shadowy, metaphorically dark time for teachers, at least for public educators. The existence of such difficult times requires responses that bring light to everyday practices of education. This paper serves to support our continued need to think and examine ourselves as we navigate living and teaching spaces and practice acting in conscious ways, informed by theory in lived experience

Because of his stark precedent, I begin with the words and theory of Viktor Frankl, a psychologist and who survived being a prisoner in a Holocaust concentration camp and use his words to demonstrate the possibility of living in the second shadow, even while facing the first. While a prisoner, he realized he had the power to refuse surrendering his humanity. He argues this is the only thing that cannot be taken from a person, when everything else has been stripped away (Frankl, 1946/2006, p. 66). Examples such as his are worthy of inspection as he offers us consideration for internal development and preservation of the existence of choice, not merely inevitability. Afterward, I explain the possibility of abiding better in the second shadow in the following sections: The Will to Meaning; The Will to Examine; and The Will To Tarry. These sections all start with the will because this relates to our will, our choice to engage with and to do or implement within our lives and practices. I weave together a place from which to encourage teachers and educators to see themselves as key to their own creative processes to remain relevant in our present realities, alive with possibility, and encouraged through nonviolent everyday practice. I think it is significant to first acknowledge that the first, negative shadow or situation exists. While chaotic and perspicuously horrible for anyone implementing teaching, it underscores the importance for each to find the nonviolent habitation of the second shadow.

I employ the metaphors of shadow and define and refer to two types: the first is a result of audit culture and blaming we are experiencing; however, the second refers to a Jungian type (Mayes, 2005, p.174), which refers to our subconscious and the creative possibility we don't yet

realize. I use the words, the second shadow, to illustrate the space referred to in the paper, but I do not discuss Jungian theory. The first type of shadow is described in the following statements: more and more states propose regulations and policies that seek to further blame, minimize their ability to implement learning, and thereby occupy and monopolize the knowing spaces of our children and ourselves (Taubman, 2009, p. 45). While this type of pressure is not new, the continued long shadow of that difficulty translates into increasingly trauma-inducing times for educators as testing replaces altogether the art of teaching. Trauma is manifest in the constant exposure to the harsh light of hyper-surveillance and bullying tactics, further splintering ourselves in “fear that perhaps our endeavors are meaningless” yet intense measures of surveillance and control continue to amplify our uncertainties (Taubman, 2009, p. 129). Surveillance and bullying are evidenced in regulatory measures introducing confining, minimizing definitions state leaders use as reasons for regulations that further make teachers the other—within their own profession—creating doubt and confusion. The current testing culture serves not necessarily as individual development, but is now the way to “responsibilise students and teachers for the outcomes of education with assessment and examinations providing the quintessential vehicle for individualizing and responsabilising success and failure in relation to achievement and social mobility” (Torrance, 2015, p. 83). These actions from outside or within the teaching profession make teachers strangers to themselves, disconnected from ourselves by changing the culture of care and development to that of punishment and a poor use of accountability.

In the state in which I live, the state superintendent of education has adopted a questionable curriculum. It is questionable because it prohibits certain science-based teaching (i.e., evolution) and proposes banning books, and he has called teachers indoctrinators and labeled us as a problem (Slanchik, 2023). Sadly, this is not an isolated incident, as there are other states that rally against the word *critical* and the ideas of social emotional learning as unnecessary or such to be outlawed (Matt Papaycik & Saunders, 2022). The ideas of neoliberalist thought have so permeated society and thinking that educators must actively think about or cancel our own metacognition in order to preserve employment and out of fear because even those who are titled within education may be actively anti-educational. By this, I mean to say within school administration there are players who are not necessarily educators, who seek to minimize education as the means to educational decisions and lean rather on administrative strategies claiming to know better than the teachers they are tasked to lead.

I suggest that there is a potential within the notions of contour and *shadow* within our lives and experience. I refer to the place of creative possibility as the second shadow. I use the description of shadow because our decision making is internal, perhaps subconscious. As we interact with what we may not completely understand and embrace what scholars have written concerning spirituality and love within education (Aoki, 2005; hooks, 2001; Huebner, 1999), we can also learn how to hold on in times of distress (Britzman, 1998; Fowler, 2006; Wang, 2014) through nonviolence to sustain our growth. Our cognizance grows and increases our actions in our conscious lives, influencing our teaching and our students.

Choices that are positive are our nonviolent everyday actions, albeit these choices are not always easily made. In other words, while there is dark shadow, there exists, for teachers, the possibility of positive discoveries. We can learn to be within ourselves and with ourselves regardless of external pressure and pain, choosing to preserve ourselves and others, despite the imposed new mandates and realities of super surveillance that offend our humanity. Activism is predicated on thinking in nonviolent ways, because personal internal preservation and dealing with the self is necessary to effect external action.

Like the knowledge of the sun in Plato's (ca. 380 B.C.E./2009) "Allegory of the Cave," the second shadow is the dawning of possibility. There comes a questioning—much like the prisoners who are chained to the cave, unable to see the entrance. They only understand the projection on the back wall of the cave from a fire lit inside. It is only after one of the prisoners is able to turn around that he discovers the real source of light, the sun shining through an opening past the flame casting a reflection inside the cave. Likewise, not one visualized scene is solely reality. What was once thought of as the only possibility is enlightened. We may fearfully see the projection, when in truth, there are other parts of the entire scene. While faced with violence in behavior and rhetoric, we can have another existence. We begin to reposition ourselves by choosing to accept the nonviolent practice of keeping spaces open within our everyday lives; our awareness changes and shifts, transforming us. There are those who propose only one measured possibility; therefore, we who believe otherwise must hold open or occupy a space for the other possibilities, or only the dark shadow is recognized. We can do this work when we are more aware of what we think. The possibility of thinking differently grows inside of us, occupying more internal capacity to make additional choices that are nonviolent. The second space, the second shadow as I refer to it, is creative, aesthetic, internal to us as humans, and not possible to quantify, but we can know that it is growing as our thoughts, decisions, actions, and students begin to change. I will also deal further with nonviolence in other sections of this paper.

Viktor Frankl's Theory and Education

Similar to many European Jews, citizens for centuries, Viktor Frankl was made a foreigner by the Nazi government. He was diminished by governmental actions designed to make his human existence impossible. Born in Vienna, Austria, he did not escape to safety when allowed to emigrate because he was concerned about leaving his elderly parents, who would not be allowed to leave with him and, therefore, was subject to persecution and imprisonment in Auschwitz for three years. Already a medical doctor in psychology, he observed camp life and prisoners and formed the basis of his theories of Logotherapy. He endured great personal loss as well; while imprisoned, his wife, father, mother, and brother were murdered in concentration camps.

The Origins and Development of the Notion of Meaning Despite Suffering

Referencing the first part of his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 1946/2006), I focus on his process of uncovering meaning, but I do not reference the second portion of the book on Logotherapy. I base my initial statements upon Frankl's (1946/2006) original notions discovered within the most extreme of human existence. During Frankl's time as a prisoner, he took great note of the daily human examples and developed his ideas on meaning, love as human spirituality, independence, and actualization. He observed power and identity in people dependent upon those with power, as weakened by those choices. "The prisoners saw themselves completely dependent on the moods of the Guards—playthings of fate—and this made them even less human than the circumstances warranted" (Frankl, 1946/2006, p. 53).

Frankl (1946/2006) recognized that external power structures within the concentration camp system forced prisoners to succumb not only physically, but mentally and emotionally to destructive power systems. In the worst of human experiences, Frankl (1946/2006) posits that

human choice is viable, when only spiritual choice is left. Prisoners were like lambs to the slaughterhouse, guarded and imprisoned until their usefulness expired through extermination. The old and very young were of no use as laborers and, in many instances, upon their arrival were immediately burned in gas chambers. The others who were at least 14 years old and appeared able-bodied were kept within the camp system, slowly being killed through starvation and disease, used and labeled like chattel. Yet, Frankl (1946/2006) states, “In Auschwitz, I had laid down a rule for myself which proved to be a good one” (Frankl, 1946/2006, p. 53). That rule included the desire to be alone with himself and his thoughts because camp life was crowded. He recognized that the “degraded majority (prisoners) and the promoted (prisoners who acted as guards) minority came into conflict ... the results were explosive” (p. 63), and it took self-control to do otherwise and not be involved in violent recourse and hatred. If not, Frankl posits under violence, man is no more than a product. He questions, “Does man have no choice of action in the face of such circumstances? (p. 65); he believes differently. Believing the opposite to be true, Frankl (1946/2006) makes the case for personal agency and choice in situations where choice seems illusive. He emphasized hope rather than futility, choice in spite of despair. Frankl’s discoveries are in no way justification for the violence that occurred in Nazi Germany, but showcase his discipline in thinking even when suffering, disease, and starvation were normal everyday occurrences.

Suffering Does Not Define Our Entire Existence

Frankl (1946/2006) teaches that suffering is not the enemy of an actualized person, but a tool of development. In no way does this justify murder and genocide. He posits that the aversion to the lessons of suffering and the desire for a life of ease works against us in unsuspecting ways, making us suspicious of difficulty because our thoughts do not encompass the idea of suffering as essentially incorporated to our lived existence. Therefore, it may be possible to accept that our suffering is part of a galvanizing process, never a justification for suffering, lest we become hardened to others’ misery.

Frankl (1946/2006) posits, “Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress” (p. 66). He observed, “some walked through huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread” (p. 66). He states that these acts of humanity were a result of making difficult choices to choose dignity rather than being molded into the form of the typical inmate (p. 66). “The type of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision and not the result of camp influences alone” (p. 66).

Realizing Choice is Important to Being

At first, I found myself struggling to accept that in the midst of one’s darkest experiences, one can still make choices. I would rather sink into self-pity. However, Frankl’s notion of choice is applicable to educators who are participants in the space of education within a democratic society, yet full of powerful systems that strip us of our will to make choices. His ideas are metaphysical and spiritual and applicable to humans as we grapple in the same spaces. I suggest that part of surviving our current age of hyper-testing, labeling, and narrowed thinking is

recognizing our ability to remain separate. To see oneself as a part of a system, and yet without it, is significant.

Part of our personal journey as educators and humans is to remember our sacred freedom to choose (Frankl, 1946/2006). Within each of us is an expansive capacity to exist if we do not minimize ourselves and most importantly what we do (teach). We (teachers) are and exist beyond our jobs inside or outside a classroom with positions and titles. This way of being exists outside the bureaucracy of operations and is not reliant upon it. This is to say, we have a path of being that is outside the system of what I have referred to as the first shadow, characterized by over-surveillance that minimizes our work as educators. Frankl (1946/2006) expresses that we can own freedom as agency, locate this within the self, maintained by humans, unfettered to forces outside the self. It is recommended and desirable to occupy more of or exist further in the positive second shadow where possibility thrives.

During his captivity, Frankl observed that survival was the most important concept and that it seemed to him as episodic: the period after admission to camp, when camp life becomes routine, and then following release. Returning home to loved ones and preserving friendships surpassed the fear of the brutal Capos (the prison guards who were themselves prisoners). Sometimes, in the everyday mundaneness of starvation and overwork, he was subject to continual grief and fear, even while practicing the daily choice to be more present in the second shadow. The second shadow can be a place of quiet and rest, away from the searing heat; it does not deny that the negative exists, rather, we must acknowledge it.

How can our practice and existence as teachers and educators be “freer”? I acknowledge that our present lives and times as teachers in the U.S. are surrounded by difficulty. Many teachers succumb under the pressures of the first shadow, sickened by continual bullying. They leave the profession or stall in their own development, becoming discouraged and feeling further isolated and adrift. So, there is always that choice of remaining hidden in the first shadow. Alternatively, Maxine Greene (1995) posits that we can inspect the interstices to investigate how “beginnings have to do with freedom, how much disruption has to do with consciousness and the awareness of possibility that has so much to do with teaching other human beings” (p. 109). We must stir ourselves to begin again, having the courage to look within, utilizing the complexity of thinking and being to see ourselves as separate from the system while still teaching within it. From this point, I will focus on the second shadow as a place of the yet unknown, full of possibility and encouragement.

Similar to Frankl’s dealing with spirituality, Dwayne Huebner (1999) states, “To speak of the ‘spirit’ and the ‘spiritual’ is not to speak of something ‘other’ than humankind merely ‘more’ than humankind as it is lived and known” (p. 343). He goes on to say that the language of the spiritual should be “‘mined for the educator’ because they (the language) contain centuries of experience and the possibility of experiencing of the supra-sensory, the qualitative, the transcendent-experiences that are stored in histories, stories, myths, and poems” (p. 344).

In the following sections, I bring awareness to the consequences of the second shadow as a place of interconnection that confronts the fracturing effect of the first shadow, for example, the blaming and dehumanizing language used to define teachers and teaching. Because knowing and learning are first and foremost spiritual, it is constantly under attack by those who seek to monopolize what it means to know, and it is significant for teachers and educators to revisit, reacquaint themselves with, and realize their own right to choose, which allows for room for growth and change, and that spiritual partnership engages our mental and physical selves. This choice requires risk because it does not provide complete safety. We are still feeling humans, yet

our individual actions are our own. We can choose to regain strength to continue to build ourselves apart from labels. We are enriched, and our existence expands in understanding, even while the first shadow exists. We can invest in our imagination to create a new space for ourselves so that we move back from trauma and expand our capabilities: personally, historically, and professionally.

Connection in Scholarship

Preserving our teacher selves is our personal responsibility (hooks, 2001) by committing to owning our internal work. Internal ownership is foundational and precedes activism, which is an outward display of an internal belief. Understanding that and exploring different ways of living in the world with ourselves can add to our love of teaching and learning. Preserving teaching as an art begins within the soul of every person (hooks, 2001) and is a buffer against powers that mobilize to make us invisible, presenting our work as unnecessary. Understanding the aesthetics of teaching is an internal process that begins with accepting that some of our processes are hidden or remain unknown, yet essential to keep us awake and alive. This is to say that our development is perhaps in unmeasurable increments, without clear pathways or buildouts. Cultivating that understanding is a nonviolent practice made in the moment of the everyday.

Greene (1995) states that accepting aesthetic parts of human development, of which teaching is part, is risky because aesthetics open our thinking to possibilities that do not have clearly defined roadmaps and that sometimes feel shaky and uncertain. We can see the multiplicity of human lives and experiences, making our understanding more intense or at least more complicated. Seeking definite answers is not simple, and finding the one right answer evades us. Dewey (as quoted in Greene, 1995) posits, “It is this kind of realization that renders experience conscious and aware of itself” (p. 21). Consciousness has an imaginative phase; it breaks through the “inertia of habit” (Dewey, as cited in Greene, 1995, p. 21). We have been fed the lie repeatedly that teaching is technical and can be scripted. We may shrink back from moving forward with fully occupying our teaching roles because the aesthetic process is the antithesis of the definite and knowledge as finite measurement. Teaching is not solely or always scripted, and each of us must develop our own understanding of becoming more alive and freer.

Additionally, teachers are made to think their development pales in comparison to the manufactured bottom line of student test scores, while teachers also grapple with many things far beyond our control. Greene (1995) cautions against the simple fantasy of the one right answer to intractable situations. For example:

the disappearance of joblessness, homelessness, fatherlessness, and disease are the obvious solutions to community difficulties that influence our students and therefore our schools. That futile type of dreaming leads to the inability to conceive a better order of things (and can give) rises to a resignation that paralyzes and prevents people from acting to bring about change.(p. 18)

The issues discussed here are complex and difficult ungovernable societal issues, and therefore, we must heed what Greene (1995) reminds—that as educators we can expand our imaginative capacity as it relates to our spiritual call to teach, to “look at things as if they could be otherwise” (p. 19). “That same person may become freed to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what

should be and what is not yet “ (p. 19). This is to say that it is possible to hold in tension the “fixed” sense of (the teacher) self while in process of “creating a self, an identity” (Greene, 1995, p. 19). Seeing our present individual realities and engaging the possibility of change and positive transformation is meaningful work and creates added dimension to our inner lives as teachers and humans. Greene (1995) challenges us to “keep the pain awake” (p. 113). To live in a place of not yet (Greene, 1995), perhaps described as the in-between places, requires the courage to do so. Uncertainty, feeling isolated, and all the negative emotions is not negated even as we attempt to abide in the second shadow. We can expect this as it is the price of pathos required by all who engage with learning; the teacher is one who can willingly search for meaning, practice love, and grow through nonviolence. Possibly, the teacher feels a sense of the not yet as constantly searching and never finding; however, we can also accept that this understanding is the point of creating new meanings within our lives. The new ways of being and creating meaning within our world are self-created and unusual.

We experience violence when accepting being told there is only one outcome or one right answer. Nonviolence practitioners use their internal discipline to know what one thinks and feels rather than accepting the told or dictated answer. It is the personal practice of rejecting what is damaging and hate-filled and instead delving into oneself through reflective practice. Nonviolent personal practice is sometimes a quiet, internally intense, and thought filled discipline. Nonviolent practice says of oneself that I will not hate, but rather act with compassion toward myself and others in the everyday practice to remain open, flexible within oneself even though I (myself) may be pulled to want to hide from hurt and disappointment. Acknowledging the hurt places is not to live in denial, rather it is to remain alive, in spite of the violence felt in the moment.

The Will to Meaning

I have alluded to the important notion Frankl (1946/2006) refers to as “the will to meaning” (p. 99). I suppose one can think of this phrase as the will or the purpose to find meaning that is deeply valuable to human experience. Frankl (1946/2006) posits that a rich inner life full of aesthetic understanding facilitates survival and provides us with momentary relief from suffering. He acknowledges that not everyone can or will embrace this type of “inner triumph” (p. 72). The will to meaning is his concept situated within a human endeavor or a personal journey of mental health. He cites a statistical survey of 7,948 students at 48 colleges, conducted by social scientists at Johns Hopkins University and sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health. When asked, 76 percent of those surveyed selected to “find purpose and meaning” as their primary life goal (p. 99); making money and finding a good job was a distant second. Each of us, he states, can undertake the responsibility of the will to meaning.

Frankl discovered through his own survival journey that a person’s greatest task is finding meaning, which may be found in three sources: one can find it through work, through love, and “in courage during difficult times” (Kushner, 2006, p. 10). He speaks of those sources as the fount of purpose-building everyone must have, and he cautions against finding meaning in work as that can easily be replaced by unemployment, which, for some, results in the loss of purpose. Teachers have all three sources from which to draw meaning. Frankl (1946/2006) speaks of love as a connection to the inner world, an aesthetic space, as the place to begin to find meaning, he first understood as a concentration camp prisoner. We can understand that nonviolent practice is love as courage, evidenced by standing alone even when unpopular with internal commitment to one’s

core beliefs about love in action. This commitment to purpose is discovery that happens over time. Nonviolence preserves us while we wait, and in some cases, waiting with an open heart is the practice. Having an open heart, from a nonviolence lens is not carelessness or codependency; it is a purposed and focused decision.

Thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life, I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers: The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love ... in the position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement consists in enduring his sufferings in the right way—an honorable way—in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfilment. For the first time in my life, I was able to understand the meaning of the words, “the angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.” (Frankl, 1946/2006, p. 38)

Frankl (1946/2006) highlights several areas of consideration: the ideas of love, tension, and suffering. I discuss first the notion of love, explained through examples from Fowler (2006) and hooks (2001).

The Will to Examine and Redefine Love in Our Human Experiences

Fowler (2006) uses what she calls the *internarrative* (p. 23) as a type of writing schema. The internarrative brings to view our human experience in a way that allows us to observe in addition to what we already know and think. She claims in her book, *A Curriculum of Difficulty* (Fowler 2006), that we have additional interpretive spaces within ourselves—we demonstrate these metaphoric spaces by strategically writing additional stories between the chapters. She includes additional stories to communicate specific understandings within the general ideas of each chapter. I use Fowler’s writing style to underscore that there are in-between spaces even within well-crafted stories.

Some of what is within us is what Wang (2019, citing Jung) refers to as our shadow—the second type of shadow addressed in this paper (p. 382). For Wang (2019), shadow is described as knowing and experiences not yet fully understood. It is part of our own selves that exists along with what we know, yet remains unknown; therefore, we are always partly in shadow. Not everything we experience is fully illuminated immediately. Practicing the passage of time, contemplation, and sitting with what we do not yet understand is a type of nonviolent action as we resist the urge to dismiss what is difficult in lieu of an easy answer. The easy answer may be apparent but not how we might fully understand something. Waiting and tarrying with the uncomfortableness of any situation requires discipline.

We may accept that there are unknown parts of ourselves coming into view while remaining open to that possibility. Why? Because we are learning daily. Additionally, our capacity to cogitate and embrace what is yet to be discovered, explored, unveiled, and known is expanding continually. That such a shadow holds additional power allows the possibility of opening ourselves more fully to incorporate the parts we are beginning to see as they are coming into view. hooks (2001) posits that reflection and a willingness to think about one’s experience is significant to

transformative change. If we can listen less to the negative voices within that devalue us, we can commit to the difficult work of love necessary to sustain internal change. Notice that love is not just a feeling or a motivation; it is action and will. It requires us to take a stern position with regard to what we truly believe about others, ourselves, and education.

hooks (2001) explains that commitment to love begins with self-love, not selfishness. This type of love is an understanding that it is impossible to love another without loving oneself. She posits it is choice and action, not eros (physical) or even phileo (friendship). Humans are socialized to not engage with love for oneself because we are taught to trust the judgment of others over our own. We, as educators and teachers, are also susceptible to this kind of outside judgement, something that Taubman (2009) titles audit culture (see also hooks, 2001). “If we succeed without confronting and changing our shaky foundations of low self-esteem rooted in contempt and hatred, we will falter along the way” (hooks, 2001, p. 61). Living with purpose becomes more authentic and sustainable because we have dealt with our internal issues that prevent us from truly loving (i.e., ourselves, our neighbor, our students, our teachers, strangers, and life in general).

Then, as we revisit the site of the narratives we tell ourselves and examine them honestly, we encounter the additional understanding and can choose to integrate it through listening to what is coming into view from a once blind side, much like Fowler’s (2006) internarratives. One may interpret the work of integration as one of interconnection, incorporation of what is not understood, so that our human experience becomes full of deeper understanding, less fragmented, with integrated capacity to share, care, and communicate. We shift into different spaces and become more relatable to those situations and persons with whom we appear to share no common ground. This work is not without sacrifice, pain, and disappointment. We may at first be surprised by new understandings and revelations because they may show us which parts are ready to be transformed. Those areas appear ugly or disappointing. Our own transformative experience may not be supported by traditionally pro-teacher agency, and we find ourselves feeling alone. hooks (2001) shares an example of love in action.

But, we can all enhance our capacity to live purposely by learning how to experience satisfaction in whatever work we do. We find that satisfaction by giving any job total commitment. When I had a teaching job, I hated (the kind of job where you long to be sick so you have an excuse for not going to work), the only way I could ease the severity of the pain was to give my absolute best. This strategy enabled me to live purposely. (p. 62)

Using her experience as an example, love is action, alive, involving strength and sacrifice. It is not weak or emotive; it is affirming, sustaining within and throughout human existence.

This type of love can be illustrated through a story of pain and transformation. Smythe (2015) writes of his experience as a college adviser to international students presenting to faculty on the subject of working with international students. After delivering a lecture that he thinks is well thought through, another faculty member reveals that an international professor thinks Smythe’s presentation is a racist one. Smythe is stunned, upset, and defensive.

But once I moved past those feelings, I was even more stunned that I thought I could explain what American culture and all other cultures were in highly simplistic, stereotypical categories that pitted the U.S. against the rest of the world. (Smythe, 2015, p. 225)

He pivots his thoughts to change his actions and constructively questions his technique, and delivery. “How could I possibly be responsible for telling the faculty and students what other cultures were like or how to predict student/faculty behavior based on cultural labels without knowing the people themselves?” (Smythe, 2015, p. 226). Pondering without dismissing is an important step to learn, to tarry with what is in the moment surprising, uncomfortable, and hurtful to our egos. To begin to dwell with nonviolence is being empowered to linger until the possibility of enlightenment and then to care and love ourselves while keeping self- condemnation at bay.

The Will to Tarry and Adopt Nonviolence Within

Our nonviolent practice in everyday living leads us to the tolerance to withstand the urge to quit or shortcut important healing processes because of pain and negative beliefs. Nagler (2004) states that the term, *Ahimsa*, can be interpreted as the negative or opposite of *to harm*. Because English does not adequately define this Sanskrit word, he teaches that *Ahimsa* as a “kind of double negative actually stands for something so original that we cannot quite capture it with our weak words” (p. 45). Wang (2014) states that “nonviolence is a positive force that holds the solution to most of our major personal, social, and global problems” (p. 45).

Aoki (2005) encourages his readers to linger. “Indeed, a sublime moment tarrying with nothing at the center, tarrying with the negative” (p. 404). He relates the story of Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian thinker observing political upheaval in Romania. Žižek (as cited in Aoki, 2005) recalls that rebels were waving the national flag, but due to destruction, there was no longer any symbol on it, so they were celebrating the absence of what was once upon it. Žižek wondered about observing and understanding the negative space before it was quickly filled by other symbols, meaning: That which is in the unoccupied space is something of importance. Aoki (2005) likens this story to his concept of “tarrying with ‘nothing’ at the center, (tarrying with the negative)” (p. 404). In his example, the emphasis is not that there is negative, rather there is something important to be learned from the place that one cannot clearly define. When the viewer is not tempted to fill it immediately, but to sit alongside it, organic understanding flows forth. That process takes patience as meaning making must be waited upon and observed, lived with, if you will. He states that two things occupy that space—what is not and what is “growing in the ambiguity” (p. 407) for this is important to the human condition. Wang (2014) posits that a “zero-space of nonviolence” is essential to initially understand what we are capable of. Our present western facilitated thought privileges experience as a false sense of what we can depend on as unmovable. That is to say we rely on numbers, test scores, and believe validity in a scientific way confirms our personhood. We lack the integration of a deeper intention to remain open, since the numbers say what must be. Within her own life experience, Wang (2004) began to sense a churning, an unsettling, which led her to the possibility of something different, her notion of nonviolence.

Nonviolence

An Example of Nonviolent Reflection Emerging from Broken Relationship

I returned in 2018 to the state in which I was born, after being away many years. I was flooded with the excitement of visiting familiar places and experiencing the places of my youth.

The visual scene was so different; it seemed almost foreign and could not have been further from my childhood experiences and memories. We used our global positioning system to find landmarks that were so reconfigured I could not recognize them. It was bewildering, and I was disappointed. The places where I had expected to revisit only now existed in my memory. Additionally, people traveling with me on the trip had ongoing personal conflicts. We were not experiencing a community building activity, rather, the opposite. One family member told me how much she hated going and by extension how much she hated me. I was viscerally responsive to the verbal violence. I was shocked; I apologized several times, and this worked to further alienate me.

After returning home from the trip, my own friends heard about the situation over and over. They knew I was struggling but could do little to mend it. After two years of struggling and attempting to rebuild my thoughts and mend the relationship with the family member, the relationship seemed to deteriorate further. I felt like I was continually being bruised and that my relationship with the family member was lost forever. I realized I needed to fully release the relationship.

After some years, we began talking again. Very gently, a new relationship emerged—one that did not enslave me to being the procurable self. During that time, other relationships and opportunities caused me less angst and those began to flourish. I felt less shame, and soon I could accept that the way I acted before was without appropriate boundaries. I learned that my overreactions were violent or at least allowed violence to myself. Accepting this part of me was painful because I did not want to see that I felt weak and that I allowed other's realities to supersede my own. I wanted to be seen as the one with good intention, yet I had never learned to speak my own truth without constantly apologizing or self-deprecating.

After adjusting my damaging behavior and no longer feeling wounded, I did not hold the other person responsible for my pain. Letting go was easier and less anxiety ridden. I was freer, different, not happier at first, but as I occupied a different place, I realized I did not have to return to old habits. I was able to be different, think more independently, and this learned navigation became a place of hope and personal freedom, growth and new understanding. I also realized that if I did not have that family member's approval or reconnection, I would survive. If I lost the personal connection again, I would be able to weather it because I had gained a better approval within myself. Out of options and forced to sit with the pain, I chose to hold a new sense, one of hope and new discoveries including repositioning my thoughts to encompass what was a newer discovery and being willing for a short time to accept my strangeness to self. Discovering a more open stance was surprising to me and allowed me to process a new sense of joy and increased my willingness to interact differently and gain perspective. Forgiveness came as I fully released myself from my family member, even though they did not forgive me. The change seemed little, because it is internal, measured by myself; however, it affected all my thoughts and actions going forward, affecting how I saw myself as a teacher and as a person. I am different because of that nonviolent interaction engaged within the everyday, that took some time to fully understand.

Wang (2014) relays similar understanding:

For several months, I was re-experiencing the past in places I used to know but no longer recognized, in a journey of letting go my previous attachments while integrating the cross-cultural fragments inside of me, a journey of listening to the whisper of that little girl who longed for nonviolence and peace as she grew up and moved from place to place, finally landing in the American South for her doctoral studies. The whisper was subsumed under the noise of the relentless pursuit of "progress" in China (or worldwide) I worked,

listening to my participants' voices, reflecting on my own disillusionment first with the Chinese socialist idea. And then the American ideal of democracy, the voice of nonviolence finally broke through the surface and rang like a bell in my ear. (p. 3)

I interpret the struggle to locate a different place to be as metaphor. It is painful because the path to discovery is not sure, creating an insecure, uncomfortable process. Wang relates this process to relationality—the interplay between human beings and their experience.

A Classroom Example of Pausing in Nonviolent Reflection

Once in my Pre-AP Language Arts classroom, I was drilling my students on poetry analysis. I was set on making sure they could analyze the acrostic to analyze poetry quickly for a test. Students were coming up with different theme statements, and they were off the topic, so I thought. One student finally said, “Why do we have to come up with the exact statement if I can defend my answer?” There was silence as I tried to process the surprise I felt at the realization of her statement. The truth is that, in my effort to make sure students landed on the right answer, I eliminated their ability to think and defend their own thoughts. This was never my intention, and thankfully, I stopped long enough to heed my own discomfort and sit with the stillness, which allowed me to choose a different path, one that was more invitational and generative, open to students' possibilities. That example is only offered as a way to think, rather than to develop a formulaic answer to the how to remain open as a solution to our present problems of and within American schooling. What other ways do we as educators act in violent manners toward our students? Without a change, we do a great deal of damage. How can I really listen to students without superimposing my reality over theirs? Without a change, we do not. I told myself I did not intend to hurt and push the lesson in such a way, as a way to excuse myself. The deeper meaning came through practicing nonviolent tarrying. I understood that my method and implementation were damaging and that course correction meant I would have to change and treat students differently. I would treat students with respect and learn to listen differently. This was a type of professional development significant to my teacher self and my teaching practice changed to one of reflective practice based on what those students needed.

“Stillness speaks its own language (Tolle, as quoted in Wang, 2014, p. 3), and we can learn to listen to it through openness to possibilities. What has dawned for me is my own realization that this uncomfortable “working through intensity” (p. 3) is the work with which we must constantly engage. It is then that “generative stillness” comes forth; it is the ongoing process of birth, life, death, and rebirth” (p. 3). This tension of remaining open and holding at bay every onslaught to our spirits is also important. Just because one is open does not mean one should be abused. The practice of keeping ourselves open protects our minds and spirits from being decimated.

Nonviolence as Apparatus of Teacher Reflection

Nonviolence is one of “transformation of relationships,” beginning with the relationship held with ourselves (Wang, 2014, p.163), one focused on “personal cultivation and growth” (p. 164). This cultivation affects our well-being, our mental health, and our way of moving and operating within our individual settings (Wang, 2014, p. 164).

Teaching the whole person involves integrating intellect and promoting students' physical, intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual growth. In other words, teaching is for "deep learning" (Grauerholz, as quoted in Wang, 2014, p. 165). Additionally, we can learn that "engagement without attachment to pre-determined goal(s) is difficult to imagine in today's accountability age, but I think it is important for educators" (Wang, 2014, p. 170). Learning is letting go of the controls and releasing to find another way of living and learning in a greater way. This does not mean that teachers and educators should not start with goals and objectives when planning taught curriculum. Rather, our teaching must be considerate of the possibilities that we will find other ways of relating, not originally planned. We must choose to be freer in ways that do not further fetter us.

Conclusion: Fighting the Urge to Console Ourselves

How can we live freer? That question was posed at the beginning of this paper. And it is a large, all-encompassing, never-ending dialogue to which we commit when calling ourselves educators. Britzman (1998) posits, "Education is always lived as an argument, precisely because the repressed must return" (p. 55) She reminds us that we do "render the uncertainties of the lived" and cautions us by asking: "What actually is occurring when education represses uncertainty and trauma if the very project of reading and of love requires risking the self?" (Britzman, 1998, p. 55). Therefore, uncertainty and living in the interconnected space of the inner self and the outer world is one we negotiate to remain more alive, without a sense of closure.

You must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won't happen. (Baldwin, 1963/2008, p. 1)

Although James Baldwin (1963/2008) addressed educators and specifically the education of "the Negro child" (p. 1), his words ring true for all of us within education. We must understand that we will face opposition as we contemplate our own sense of education and live in such a way that we are those who examine "society and try to change it and to fight it" (Baldwin, 1963/2008, p. 1). I am simply reminding us that our difficult examinations emanate from within.

I encourage my co-teachers and co-laborers in the field of education to recall what scholars have taught us and place an emphasis upon their discoveries, for we journey through uncertainties. As we renew our commitment to philosophy and theory, we embrace the integration of practice, bridging thought, agency, and action. While teaching in public school for more than 36 years, I experienced various educational movements and requirements during those years, changing almost as fast as they arrived. Therefore, our ability to exercise nonviolence in an environment of constant change will likely aid in preserving the spiritual, intellectual, and love for our chosen profession. I suggest that scholars recognize the exquisite and intricate and often painful conditions that make keeping awake possible. Teachers are told that we must be flexible and of service to our students; however, very little focus is aimed on various types of teacher development. Our preservation is an act of our will, a part of our own purpose and nonviolent practice.

The planting of our teacher- and student-selves into the sacred space of the second shadow affords us firmer positioning, which integrates ourselves. Standing firmer through nonviolence

transcends the present turmoil and transcends the norm, connecting rather than dissolving, creating a healthier whole, more aware of what is actually thought about and what one actually thinks regardless of other oppressive thoughts. Integrating ourselves with scholarship is firmer ground upon which to claim our own inner freedom, enabling us to form different relationships within ourselves and with others. A great many teachers and adept students know what we value, what we think, and what are possible connections despite the loud drum beat of the anti-educational. Teaching and, therefore, classroom-based education is more than following a script and scoring well on an evaluation. Our shared human experiences continue to be intense as we grapple with difficult situations such as the war in the middle east, the recent COVID-19 pandemic, and the return to in-person learning to name a few. In education most recently, some states have demonized Critical Race Theory and banned any reference to race as wrong and to be outlawed. The drumbeat to confine education and redefine and minimize teaching continues. Now more than ever teachers must practice the caring for ourselves through nonviolence, as we set new courses to learn how to love. One of my friends, a professor, meets with another professor weekly to discuss ideas of scholarship, teaching, and becoming. This action is not a part of the institution, rather, these commitments are his personal choice to keep himself alive, preserve his practice as his own, and they are his acts of nonviolence. Basing one's own personal daily practice on scholarship enforces Frankl's mandate that, despite the worst of human experiences, we remain thinking beings in order to remain free. Applying this during this time deeply connects the practitioner to philosophy, bridging the space between what is thought of as out of reach and unapplicable—to the daily life of teaching and learning and becoming. It is such a time as this when we are most in need of this relevant bond.

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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 programming 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' Neighborhood⁶ 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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