

Why there is no quest for the historical Mr. Rogers

Knowing the real Fred means seeing the unseen.

by [Mark Schwehn](#) in the [July 29, 2020](#) issue



Fred Rogers's high school yearbook photo, 1946. (Public domain)

One of the most complicated questions in biblical studies in recent decades is how important historical accuracy is in understanding the life and the meaning of Jesus. To what extent should Christian faith depend upon direct and complete access to the historical Jesus? What kind of documents are the Gospels?

These questions are important and not easily resolved. But as odd as it might seem, we can understand their nuances better by considering the case of Mr. Rogers.

As with Jesus, accounts of Fred Rogers's life and work vary widely. Very few among us had access to the real Rogers. We mostly have texts—both visual and verbal. And although the variations among these are worth pondering, not one writer to date has said something like this: *Well, we really cannot be moved by Fred Rogers's life or seek to emulate what he stood for until we can have sure access to the real Fred Rogers behind all of the verbal and visual representations of him.*

In other words, neither critics nor the public seem to have any difficulty celebrating and giving thanks for Rogers based only on dramatic representations of him and on the many texts that have been generated in order to come to terms with the meaning of his life and work. Granted, there would seem to be an immense number of witnesses to Rogers today compared to the number of testimonies about Jesus of Nazareth that were written down in the century after his death. These differences should not be overdrawn, however. Many early accounts of Jesus' life were written down but were not included in the canon, such as the Gospel of Thomas. Eventually a Fred Rogers canon will emerge, through a process perhaps not all that different from the one that yielded the New Testament.

Obviously, we have in the case of Jesus nothing remotely like the video archive of the 912 half-hour episodes of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* that were broadcast between 1968 and 2001. But suppose we did. We would perhaps enjoy watching a TV series in which Jesus delivers parables with puppets in ways that appeal to young children and their parents. But would we then have a much better sense of Jesus of Nazareth than we do today? How could we be sure that we were seeing the real Jesus instead of a persona he projected just for television?

Many of the representations of Rogers seek to explore the latter question. Three of them form something of a triptych. The first was written while Rogers was still alive and is perhaps the most widely known: Tom Junod's biographical profile, which he wrote for *Esquire* in 1998, entitled "Can You Say . . . Hero?" Over 20 years later, that essay became the basis for the film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, starring Tom Hanks as Rogers. Then, shortly after the film was released, Junod wrote another essay, this time for the *Atlantic*, about Rogers, the film, and Rogers's lasting and salutary influence upon his life. The title says it all: "My Friend Mr. Rogers."

This triptych represents as complicated an account of anyone's life as we are ever likely to get. Nevertheless, the character of Rogers emerges with unmistakable and unforgettable clarity. Strangely enough, the more distant and artistically contrived the treatment of the subject, the more intimate and real the subject becomes.

This miracle of transparency takes place largely because of Rogers himself. When Junod invites him to reflect upon what it is like to be Mr. Rogers the TV persona as distinct from Fred Rogers himself, Rogers finds the question incomprehensible. For him, there is no disjunction: what you see on television, Rogers tells Junod, is who I am.

Junod's problem and ours, we begin to realize, is the reverse of the problem of Milton's good angels in *Paradise Lost*. They simply cannot recognize pretense, disguise, or any other form of disjunction between appearance and reality. Their goodness involves a form of innocence that is impervious to evil. Satan eludes the great guardian of Paradise, the archangel Uriel, because he pretends to be something other than he is. Uriel fails to notice the deception because he is incapable of comprehending it.

Not so with us. Corrupted creatures that we are, we often cannot, without an enormous amount of training and discipline, recognize genuine goodness when we see it. We believe that our relationships with others must always involve unmasking and debunking, not only because we do not want ever to allow someone to get the better of us but also because we believe that other human beings, like ourselves, must be to some degree deceiving or self-deceiving or both.

This pervasive disability can occasionally be overcome, however, when at the same time that we manage to recognize and accept goodness in another, we come to understand ourselves as we truly are. Understanding and self-understanding are mutually dependent in such a way that the appreciation of true goodness in others actually makes us better people. This is one of the major lessons of Junod's articles and of the film. Fred Rogers was not too good to be true.

A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood, the centerpiece of the triptych, offers as compelling a portrait of Rogers as we are likely to get, yet its point of view is complex. Tom Hanks plays Rogers in relationship to a character named Lloyd Vogel, played by Matthew Rhys, who is based upon Tom Junod but is in several respects very unlike him. Refracted through so many lenses, how can anyone imagine that the image of Rogers that emerges bears any relationship to the Rogers of real life?

In his *Atlantic* essay about his friendship with Rogers, Junod tells about what it was like finally to see the film. He viewed a rough cut of the movie during the summer of 2019, all alone in a screening room in New York. Much to his surprise, he found the experience emotionally wrenching—because it represented to him truths about himself and his relationship to Rogers that he had not known before. “I had counted on the plot's many departures from my life to insulate me from the emotional effect of seeing some version of myself *up there*,” he writes, “but in the screening room I had no such protection, because the director, Marielle Heller, had been so faithful to the essence of the story.”

Junod's self-recognition scene in his essay takes place as he is watching a scene in the film that never actually happened:

A long time ago, a man had seen something in me I hadn't seen in myself, and now I was watching him see something in me and couldn't help but ask, all over again: *Who was he? Who was I? And what did he see?* "You love people like me," Matthew Rhys tells Tom Hanks. And when Hanks asks, "What are people like you?" Rhys answers, "Broken people." And that broke me, though I had never uttered those words to Fred in my life.

We too see Rogers and ourselves through many prisms, just as we see Jesus of Nazareth through Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul.

Moreover, we will probably find ourselves moved and instructed and inspired by Mr. Rogers's example even if the darker angels of our natures may lead us, as they once led Junod, to be initially repelled by him. Many of us will eventually come to believe in Rogers, in the love he embodied, and perhaps as well in the One he pointed to as the fount and source of his inspiring life. We will do all of this in the same way and out of the same process that may have led us to be Christian believers in the first place. We heard our parents read stories, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that were designed to stir belief, not to document history. The Gospels are not make-believe books but rather make-believer books.

We will discover finally that, in addition to teaching us mostly about love, the crown of the three Christian virtues, Mr. Rogers continues to teach us all about hope and faith as well. Rogers's favorite quote, one that he framed and hung on the wall in his office, came from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*: "L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux." The essential is invisible to the eyes. It's a great paradox. A man who was a creative genius within the domain of the visual nonetheless insisted that what matters most in life is invisible. It could not be seen directly, like the purple cape of King Friday XIII or the little red trolley that motored every day through the neighborhood. But all of the children, young and old, came away from all of those episodes of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* having seen the unseen.

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