Mister Rogers: In memoriam

by Carol Zaleski in the April 19, 2003 issue

In the two decades since MTV captured the restless souls and short attention spans of our youth, it has become increasingly evident that teaching and learning require new strategies. The classroom lecture is dead, reading is an endangered art, and memorization belongs next to exorcism in the dustbin of discarded teaching arts. To engage the interest of young people, we have to dazzle them with quick-cutting graphics in an environment that is interactive, fast-changing and stylishly fragmented.

The above statements, commonplace as they are, are all false. How do we know they are false? Because of Mister Rogers, the saintly Presbyterian minister and TV presence whose death on February 27 felt to millions like the loss of a friend, a teacher or even a father. Mister Rogers won his devoted audience by breaking the rules of entertainment technology: he bestowed attention instead of grabbing it.

From its debut in 1966 until filming stopped in 2000, *Mister Rogers'* Neighborhood steadfastly refused to evolve. It kept the steady camera work, the meager props and the familiar performers who looked more like local talent than TV stars. But it would be a mistake to think that the shows were artless. There was high art in the way they conducted the viewer by trolley from the toy world of the village, to the inner world of the living room, to the outer world of factories and offices, to the otherworld of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, and safely home again.

I'm tempted to call it sacred art, for it's clear that this gentle and canny minister saw himself as offering through television the biblical hospitality that makes pilgrims and strangers welcome. Imagine, if you will, a televised moving icon of Abraham and his three guests.

Sacred hospitality requires homeliness. Therefore Mister Rogers' living room could not keep pace with the current standards for an American home. Where is the open floor plan? Where are the yawning abysses from conversation pit to cathedral ceiling? Instead, we are in a slightly frayed but cozy little sitting room, where we can be ourselves. When Mister Rogers changes into his sweater and takes off his shoes,

it’s a biblically charged gesture of self-emptying humility and welcome. Moses took off his shoes for God, and now Mister Rogers takes off his shoes for us, as he talk-sings the familiar litany: It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood, / A beautiful day for a neighbor. / Would you be mine? Could you be mine?

Unfailingly Mister Rogers displays courtesy rather than folksy familiarity, using titles rather than first names, and keeping his tie on along with the comfortable cardigan, as if to say that unlimited kindness expresses itself best through limits and routines. Mister McFeely, the Speedy Delivery postman, is a courier of courtesy as he travels from house to house, making a neighborhood out of what would otherwise be just a zip code. We are reminded that neighborhoods are arbitrary, tumbling us together with people we didn’t choose; and that what makes a good neighborhood is not emotional bonds but bonds of courtesy, a virtue whose courtly origins become transparent in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.

Oddly, Mister Rogers shows the same courtly attention to inanimate objects. True child of Pittsburgh, his vision of heaven is industrial-pastoral, a world of natural beauty and of marvelous yet human-scale machines. Looking through the Picture-Picture Machine into a crayon factory, Mister Rogers observes with awe the crayon’s journey by conveyor belt and human hands from bucket to mold to label machine to collating machine to boxing machine to stores.

In a wagon factory, we see a robotic arm paint metal-stamped frames wagon-red, as wheels upon wheels, spray-painted white, pop into a giant bin. It’s as if we’ve been privileged to look into the hidden world where things are made, and see at the heart of this shining contrivance the dignity and holiness of human work. Pausing near an assembly-line worker in a sneaker factory, Mister Rogers reflects, “She works carefully . . . I never knew it took so many people and so many machines to make a pair of sneakers. . . . I wonder if she ever thinks about the people who wear the shoes that she makes?” An industrial training film on the same subject would be a mind-numbing bore, but under the warm light of Mister Rogers’ attention the factory becomes an Elysian plain. Here’s proof that the antidote to boredom is not distraction but attention.

The disciplined, courteous, loving attention which he gave to each person, as a marvel of supreme worth, was what made Fred Rogers a source of endless comfort for his young viewers. You are special, he sang to them, and you can never go down the drain. In a message taped after September 11, Fred Rogers told parents,

“Probably what children need to hear most from us adults is that they can talk to us about anything and that we will do all we can to keep them safe in any scary time.”

Keeping children safe is our inescapable obligation and the measure of our adulthood. You and I may differ about what must be done to keep the world safe from moral chaos, tyranny and terror. We may not be pacifist vegetarian teetotalers like Fred Rogers, but if we can learn from him about the life-giving power of self-emptying attention, then there will always be reason for hope.

“I’ll be back when the day is new, and I’ll have more ideas for you.” Where have we heard that promise before?