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A Sad Day in the Neighborhood: Remembering Mr. Rogers

by Bob Weaver, Kennedy-Schelkunoff Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science

Mr. Rogers died this past week. This gentle man—an ordained minister, an expert musician, an advocate for children—had spent the past thirty-five years working to make the powerful medium of television speak for and to children. He spoke to us all as he spoke directly and honestly to the children in our midst. He spoke of friendship; he spoke of feelings—and yes—he spoke of love to children and grownups especially at times of national or personal hurt when we may have found it hard to know that love could be very close to us. He dared to speak about



Paul Shnaittacher

Bob Weaver, Kennedy-Schelkunoff Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science, portrayed Mr. Rogers in last year's Faculty Show. It was one of the show's most popular skits.

divorce and violence and fears, asking difficult questions in a safe and caring environment. He spoke of the goodness and worth that is in each one of us and affirmed that we are OK because we are ourselves.

I have been privileged to "be" Mr. Rogers three times in Mount Holyoke Faculty Shows over the years —first in 1980 and most recently last year, a full generation later. Somehow, it has been easy to stroll in the Neighborhood of Make Believe knowing that someone might be listening and recalling a comfortable place in their memory—a time when they were helped by something that was said or a song that was sung. I never had to do much to "spoof" Mr. Rogers. Just recreating him on stage seemed to move the audience, and they were soon singing along with the songs. My part also required very little updating over the years because Mr. Rogers remained so the same. His message was timeless and true. He required neither focus groups nor public relations advisers to know what was important to say, nor did he try to change the nature of his daily visit into the homes of families to "keep up with the times."

I always felt some personal connections with Mr. Rogers. He was a Presbyterian minister from Pennsylvania (so was my father); his wife is an accomplished musician (as is my wife); and he loved to sing and to write music (so do I). I met him once in church on Nantucket where he summered and where I have occasionally visited. His wife has given several concerts at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, where my brother John is organist and music director.

Fred Rogers was a quiet and powerful force for good. He can put away his sneakers now—he really needed them in the early days when all the programs were done "live," and he didn't want to make noise in scurrying from the main set over to other sets in the studio. They and the sweaters can go to places of television memorabilia. But the memory of his message, more important today than ever, will live on in the hearts of all of us who have been touched by him.

I will miss you, Mr. Rogers. "It's such a good feeling, a very good feeling, the feeling you know that we're friends. . . . "

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