

“Won’t you be my neighbor?” Community Comment Mike

Goldsby, July 12, 2018

Some friends invited us to go to the movies and I just assumed they wanted to see “ANT MAN and THE WASP”. But they wanted to see the documentary about Mr. Rogers, “WON’T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?”

I was disappointed but I went along with everybody. The PBS television show Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood came on the air in 1970 when I was 18 years old. I paid it no attention. It seemed kind of boring and I had a lot of other things on my mind.

I was really very pleasantly surprised by the documentary, observing the 50th anniversary of Mr. Rogers.

Fred Rogers was born in Pennsylvania in 1928. He learned piano at 5, got his Pilot’s license in High School and was later ordained as a Presbyterian Minister. He was intrigued by the power of television and hated how children’s programming was a bombardment of violent cartoons and advertisements, aimed at lulling young people into passively staring at the screen and turning them into consumers rather than thinkers.

He also saw that television, and most adults, talked at kids, not to them. So, he made his television set very simple, slow paced, no animation. He used peaceful, familiar routines like coming home, putting on his sweater and sneakers, and having a discussion with his young viewers. He would sit down, so he was at their level.

And he dealt with real issues. He talked directly about the assassination of Bobby Kennedy and reassured his young viewers that they were safe during the Gulf War. He also dealt with more mundane fears, like fear of going to the doctor or fear of being sucked down the drain in the bathtub.

He had a Christian view of the worth of every person and he showed this by telling children they were “special, just the way they are.” This statement has been criticized by some as being indulgent, making kids irresponsible. Fox and Friends even called Mr. Rogers “an evil man.” Fred Rogers was a life-long Republican who promoted individual responsibility and he also promoted racial

equality, respect for people with disabilities and discussing feelings rather than repressing them.

I asked some younger friends what they remember from their childhood and I got very positive feedback. Chris and Stacey said it was their favorite show when they were very young, a show they could watch before nap time. Rebecca said she felt like he was talking to her personally and she found this very reassuring. Shawn and Beth were fascinated by the miniatures and the trolley, interesting for such a low budget, low tech set.

Ann Hornaday, movie critic for the Washington Post, writes:

“With his singsong voice and reassuring demeanor, Fred Rogers presented a benign, maybe even milquetoast figure in his cardigan and lace-up sneakers. Underneath the bland exterior, he was acting as an ambassador for groundbreaking work in child psychology and what we now call media literacy, simply by acknowledging children’s fears and insecurities, and gently prodding them to question the values they were being sold elsewhere on the TV dial.

“The unspoken question that animates “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” is what Fred Rogers would make of the present day, when the culture seems to have congealed into a permanent state of outrage, vulgarity and mutual intolerance.”

This is Mike Goldsby for Community Comment