

## ***Topical Seminar: Fred Rogers***

**Friday, May3 at 1:30pm in the Lewes Library**

**Hank Gromada**

Discussion format: Hopefully participants will not only read the selected material identified below but will take the time to visit the cited websites. There is a made-for-TV documentary about Fred Rogers that was presented on PBS, entitled: *Mister Rogers: It's You I Like*, along with another PBS show entitled: *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*.

As you read through the materials and view the presentations, consider the following questions/issues: In a world in which conflict and other negative events are the focus of the public's attention, how might it be possible to foster the values and goals that were pursued by Fred Rogers throughout his lifetime? Which of these values, that he modeled for us, is most important to you and which might have a greater impact on society?

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### *Selected quotes of Fred Rogers:*

There are three ways to ultimate success:

The first way is to be kind.

The second way is to be kind.

The third way is to be kind.

It always helps to have people we love beside us  
when we have to do difficult things in life.

The real issue in life is not how many blessings  
we have, but what we do with our blessings.  
Some people have many blessings and hoard them.  
Some have few and give everything away

All our lives, we rework the things from our childhood,  
like feeling good about ourselves, managing our angry feelings,  
being able to say good-bye to people we love.

You rarely have time for everything you want in this life,  
so you need to make choices. And hopefully your  
choices can come from a deep sense of who you are.

When I was a boy I used to think that strong meant having  
big muscles, great physical power; but the longer I live,  
the more I realize that real strength has much more to do with  
what is not seen. Real strength has to do with helping others.

Selections from: *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers* by Maxwell King

[The French author, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, had a significant and formative influence on Fred Rogers.]

“Fred Rogers took profound stock of his feelings to find meaning, often spiritual meaning, that he could turn into understanding, and eventually into the sort of serious focus that’s could yield power. It was based on a profound conviction that what’s on the surface – the everyday pain and frustration and small joys of life – is not what is essential. The essential is to be found in depth and introspection, in searching for meaning, and then finding the truth that comes from that meaning. For Fred Rogers and for Saint-Exupéry, truth always came from the heart, not from an overintellectualization of life.

Saint-Exupéry died on a flight from North Africa over the Mediterranean Sea near the end of World War II, just as Rogers was excelling in high school back in western Pennsylvania. Saint-Exupéry inspired Fred Rogers to think, to seek, to understand, and to accept. As a seeker who could go deep below the surface and help children – and their grown-ups, for that matter – find the essential, Fred Rogers imparted what he’s gone through himself as he shaped his life, not in spite of his fears and insecurities, but because he could turn them into an education.”

WQED, that became part of PBS in 1969, went on the air in Pittsburgh in the spring of 1954. They had little in terms of funding (e.g., \$150/week for salaries) to buy or develop programming. All they [Fred Rogers and others on the crew] was their own imaginations “and good humor . . . and that made all things seem possible.” These circumstances led to the creation of *The Children’s Corner*. Fred’s partner was Josie (Vicari) Carey on this show. Fred Rogers had a longstanding preoccupation with puppets. For years, he had been shy and somewhat guarded about his love of puppets; he was unsure if the characters that he created with his puppets would resonate with anyone else. On the show, as the chemistry grew between Fred and Josie with their audience of small children. Fred gained the confidence to bring out more of his puppets. Fred and Josie adlibbed on *The Children’s Corner*; and Fred emerged as the creator and performer and Josie, most importantly, as the major listener. . . .

Many years later, with the creation of what became known as *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*, there were occasions when he sometimes invited children via the Make-A-Wish Foundation that arranged exciting experiences for children with serious medical conditions. Many of these children would ask if they could meet Mister Rogers. “One day, said Lynch [Elaine Lynch was Fred’s secretary], a group of such children included a twelve-year-old boy who was autistic: ‘I tried to get as much information from the family as I could so Fred had an idea of what their problems were. This was a mother and father, and the autistic boy was, I think, the oldest of three. He had a sister, and he also had a younger brother, all of whom, they claimed, had never heard him speak. He grunted – ‘Mmm, mmm’ – what he wanted, pointed to what he wanted.’ Lynch noticed that the father was the one shooting video of the event, and she maneuvered herself over near him to help him get positioned properly to get the best footage. But Fred, when he came out to visit with the family, had the King and Queen puppets on his hands, and he started talking to the family, and he finally got to the boy, who was almost as tall as Fred at that point. The child started speaking in full sentences to the King and Queen. Well, I don’t know whether you can imagine what the family was going through at that point, hearing their son speak for the first time. The father started blubbing to the point where he could no longer hold the camera, and I took the camera gently from him. Lynch got a *Neighborhood* crew member to film the rest of the encounter between the puppets, the boy, and his family. Rogers said nothing as himself. He stayed in character as the voices of

King Friday XIII and Queen Sara Saturday. And Lynch – who later referred to the whole exchange as a ‘miracle’ – rushed upstairs to get the family their own King and Queen puppets from Rogers’s office.”

... Fred’s social leanings were strongly progressive, but he learned from both his seminary experience and his television role to be circumspect about his views. Fred’s nature was the opposite of quarrelsome, and he eschewed the endless left-right debates of the seminary. Some of his friends in Pittsburgh were disappointed that Fred didn’t speak out publicly on behalf of the disadvantaged or vocally champion tolerance and inclusion, the values in which he so fervently believed. But Rogers worried that such public posturing would cause confusion with the parents and children he reached on television. And he always felt that actions – kindness, understanding, and openness in relationships – were more important than words.

... David McCullough, the Pittsburgh-raised historian and author who knew and appreciated Fred Rogers, emphasized the importance of Rogers’s ability to bring his creativity down to the practical level of producing extraordinary television: “I’ve always liked writing about people who made something,” said McCullough. “He made something.”

... [At the Presbyterian Seminary in Pittsburgh, his favorite teacher and mentor was Dr. William Orr] Rogers found that Orr, with his emphasis on kindness and caring and his deep belief in forgiveness, to be an example of how to live, and Fred decided to work hard to emulate his professor. When Rogers asked Orr what was the most important word in his theology, Orr replied that the word *forgiveness* was paramount because it alone could defeat the Devil. “One little word shall fell him,” Bill Orr told his students, who adopted the idea of forgiveness as the essence of human kindness. Rogers was strongly influenced by Orr to try to lead a life dedicated to human kindness, and he also found inspiration in Orr’s principle of “guided drift”. As explained by the Reverend William Barker, a friend and seminary mate of Rogers, Dr. Orr’s philosophy was that one needed to live a life that was open to change and serendipity, that embraced the possibilities of life rather than the confines of a rigid set of rules. “Once Bill Orr was talking about the Christian life, one in which you’re kind of going along a stream,” said Bill Barker, nearly half a century later in an interview. “You can put out some poles from time to time to keep from bumping into logs or hitting the banks, but primarily you guide yourself along. Still, it’s with a sense that you’re being carried along in ways you’re perhaps unaware of.” This notion of “guided drift”, that we’re guided by our principles but are also free to embrace the flow of life, was one Fred Rogers made his own and shared with friends for the rest of his life. It strongly influenced his willingness to experiment and take chances in his career. ... Fred got such pleasure from listening to Orr, and watching him perform, that he used to come back to the seminary years after graduation to attend his old teacher’s lectures. Rogers offered a simple explanation: “You know how, when you find somebody who you know is in touch with the truth . . . you want to be in the presence of that person.”

Lisa Dormire, who worked on *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* and later served as a vice president of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, saw the comparison of Rogers and Jesus in terms of authenticity: “I think he had very Christlike qualities, and that is part of what drew children. Children know a fraud more than anyone . . . I truly believe he was one of the most authentic and Christlike people that I have ever known in my life. Just his manner. His ability to listen . . . Everyone you talk to that had any encounter with him: It was a real moment in their lives.” Interestingly, Rogers himself saw Jesus’s strength more in terms of Jesus’s authenticity as a real person than his mythological power as the son of God. In his occasional sermons, Fred Rogers would marvel at how genuine Jesus’s childhood was: “And like so many

other teenagers absorbed in their own pressing, growing needs, Jesus got scolded and went home with his parents. . . .

[Note: While living and working in Pittsburgh, Fred Rogers regularly met and consulted with Mary McFarland, Ph.D.; he also consulted with Benjamin Spock, M.D., Erik Erikson, and Berry Brazelton, M.D., who was a pediatrician, professor and researcher.]

Pittsburgh-born historian and writer David McCullough best described McFarland's special skills as an instructor: "There was a wonderful professor of child psychology at the University of Pittsburgh named Margaret McFarland who was so wise that I wish her teachings and her ideas and her themes were much better known. She said that attitudes aren't taught, they're caught. If the teacher has an attitude of enthusiasm for the subject, the student catches that whether the student is in second grade or is in graduate school. She said that if you show them what you love, they'll get it and they'll want to get it."

[Note: Fred Rogers moved to Toronto, Canada with his family; and he ran a 15-minute program/daily on the CBC from 1963 to 1967 called, *Misterogers*.]

In that show, Fred Rogers was the creator – writing the scripts, performing the puppets, writing and performing the music, directing and producing the show. All of this insulated him from his fears about performing personally, as himself. Yet, through the "screen" of his puppets, he "was so intent on shaping a good program that he didn't even think about portraying a character – he was just Fred being Fred." "Well, it was really very, very simple, because Fred was so totally honest, a naturally honest person. . . . He just couldn't be anything but himself. He managed that very, very comfortably and easily, once he found that what he did was accepted by the people around him. The studio people found it difficult at first – Fred seemed almost too good to be true – but they very quickly discovered that he was a true as he seemed. He was so focused on doing the right thing by his audience that he wasn't anxious.

. . . The other strong element of the show that later appeared in Pittsburgh was Rogers's emphasis on the fears and insecurities of young children. He frequently talked about his work with Dr. McFarland, emphasizing their strong belief that good programming for children must address social and emotional needs, not just cognitive learning.

[Note: there are a number of sites available, on Youtube and other sites on which you can see video of Fred Rogers speaking in a number of different interview settings; these are worth watching. One that is highly suggested shows the testimony that he gave before a US Senate Committee, chaired by Senator John Pastore of RI on May 1, 1969; he was testifying to securing federal funding for the initiation of PBS.]

In that testimony before the Senator Pastore's Committee, Fred Rogers read the words to one of the songs that he had composed for the children watching his show:

"What do you do with the mad you feel / when you feel so mad you could bite / when the whole wide world seems so wrong, and nothing you do seems right / What do you do / Do you punch a bag / Do you pound some clay or some dough / Do you round up friends for a game of tag or see how fast you can go / It's great to be able to stop when you've planned the thing that's wrong / And to be able to do something else instead – and think this song - : "I can stop when I want to / Can stop when I wish / Can stop, stop, stop anytime / And what a good feeling to feel like this / And know that the feeling is

really mine / Know that there's something deep inside that helps us become what we can / For a girl can be someday a lady, and a boy can be someday a man."

[Speaking *Freddish*: What Fred Rogers understood and was very direct and articulate about was that the inner life of children was deadly serious to him; what follows is an example, through the selection of examples of rephrasing to translate that goal into words.]

There are nine steps to *Freddish* translation:

1. State the idea you wish to express as clearly as possible, and in terms preschoolers can understand; e.g., "It's dangerous to play in the street."
2. Rephrase in a positive manner; e.g., "It is good to play where it is safe."
3. Rephrase the idea, bearing in mind that preschoolers cannot yet make subtle distinctions and need to be redirected to authorities they trust; e.g., "Ask your parents where it is safe to play."
4. Rephrase your idea to eliminate all elements that could be considered prescriptive, directive, or instructive; e.g., "Your parents will tell you where it is safe to play."
5. Rephrase any element that suggests certainty; e.g., "Your parents CAN tell you where it is safe to play."
6. Rephrase your idea to eliminate any element that may not apply to ALL children (as in having PARENTS); e.g., "Your favorite GROWN-UPS can tell you where it is safe to play."
7. Add a simple motivational idea that gives preschoolers a reason to follow your advice; e.g., "Your favorite GROWN-UPS can tell you where it is SAFE to play. It is good to listen to them."
8. Rephrase your new statement, repeating Step One; e.g., "Your favorite GROWN-UPS can tell you where it is SAFE to play. It is important to try to listen to them."
9. Rephrase your idea a final time, relating it to some phase of development a preschooler can understand; e.g., "Your favorite GROWN-UPS can tell you where it is SAFE to play. It is important to try to listen to them. And listening is an important part of growing."

Rogers's embrace of reality also included breaking one of the established rules of television, a prohibition against footage that is essentially empty. While *Sesame Street* used fast pacing and quick-cut technique to excite and engage young viewers and keep them glued to the screen, Fred Rogers deliberately headed in the opposite direction, creating his own quiet, slow-paced, thoughtful world, which led to real learning in his view.

Elizabeth Seamans observes that on the show with guests, Fred didn't allow talking constantly through whatever they were doing, even if it was twirling a hula-hoop. If Yo-Yo Ma comes on, let him play. Watch his hands. Move on his body with the camera so you can get so close that you can see his hands on the fret board – not just a cutaway, but a real look."

Silence – Fred's willingness, as a producer and as a person,, to embrace quiet, inactivity, and empty space – and his calm demeanor were completely unexpected in television in the 1970s. They were qualities that captivated children and their parents.

As soon as the *Neighborhood* gained a national audience, experts in child development applauded Rogers's approach. Dorothy G. Singer, senior research scientist in the Department of Psychology at Yale University and codirector of the Yale University Family Television Research

and Consultation Center, gave credit to the combination of Fred's direct, personal approach and the very real issues on which he focused: "I think because he dealt with issues that children were dealing with: divorce, he dealt with death . . . he dealt with jealousy. All through that little kingdom of make-believe – and that was very important – all these social and emotional issues came out. Fred was there to explain anything you didn't understand, acting like the parent who really clarifies things for you. All of the characters really expressed their feelings – jealousy, anger. It was as if he was having a conversation with the child. And there was silence on the program, time for you to think about what Fred said and time for you to answer him. He really was interested in the child as a developing person. That was appealing to us because that's what I'm interested in, in preschool children. The numbers and letters will come later."

[Comparison of the *Neighborhood* with *Sesame Street* by Wynton Marsalis] "*Sesame Street* came on, and it was a phenomenal show, deserving of the praise. And Mister Rogers, he had his show; he had his concept. People who looked at that show (the *Neighborhood*), they were informed by it. They were more productive in their lives. *Sesame Street* had impact of one kind; Mr. Rogers had his own impact. It's like telling me, 'Man, my grandmother can cook. And there's this great restaurant in my neighborhood, and I can go eat at it.' And I tell you, 'Well, McDonald's can serve twenty million.' . . . Fred Rogers was fantastic; he was not fantastic in relation to what? He was fantastic to himself."

[Arthur Greenwald] "There was a consistent theme in Fred's career of people underestimating him. I don't think that it's widely understood . . . what a powerful intellect he had, and . . . for lack of a better term, what a tough guy he was. He had a passion about helping children that his famous gentle manner belied, and he had a real steely core."

. . . "the importance of Rogers's distinctive approach to social and emotional learning: "It's not that he didn't introduce knowledge – all those tours of how you make ice cream – and there were lots of things that he had that very important in introducing children to the world. But he did it within a context that he was very much concerned with the social and emotional wellbeing of children, that that was in contradistinction to the time." This emphasis came, of course, from Fred's work with McFarland and the Arsenal Center (a treatment and research center in Pittsburgh). She and Benjamin Spock and Erik Erikson and the other researchers there had been learning that very young children simply don't learn very well in a cognitive sense unless their social and emotional development is advancing effectively. *Sesame Street*, by contrast, focused initially on learning words and numbers. It was decades before the field of early education and children's television caught up to Rogers. Though not persuasive to some, for the most part Fred Rogers's gentle, childish qualities came across well to parents. And his presentation was applauded by experts in education and child development.

In a 2007 interview, Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families and Work Institute and author of *Mind in the Making*, said: "He's authentic. He's genuine. He connects on an intellectual and social and emotional level all at once. He does care about people. That song about 'you're special' is real for him. He retained his childlike self. Particularly for teachers that's very important, because they care about that childlike self in themselves. He told stories. He would get louder, softer, pause. He was not afraid of silence . . . That really brought you in emotionally."

[In 1978 Fred Rogers developed a documentary series entitled, *Old Friends . . . New Friends*, and in 1994 another series, *Fred Rogers' Heroes*; in these programs, he worked with many adult, some of whom were well-known personalities] Though *Friends* captured many of the ingredients that had made *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* so successful, it never escaped the gentleness of Rogers's earlier work to translate effectively to an adult audience. In a television world growing ever more intense and overheated, Rogers on *Friends* lacked edge. This was, after all, the era in which shows like *All in the Family* were shaking up the television landscape with jarringly honest depictions of the very social conflicts Fred Rogers decried. He held on to a thoughtful, sensitive, slow-paced approach just as most television programming was speeding up, reflecting the culture of the time.

Rogers's former colleague Elizabeth Seamans observes: "When you are talking to somebody, they will give you an answer. Instead of moving on to the next question, you let them say that thing that isn't so obvious. Then if you're Fred, you probably wait again. Not only would he get more beautiful and much more nuanced and sometimes more intimate answers, but often just more interesting, complex, unusual ones – the unexpected, the thing you don't ask. Pretty soon, they'd begin volunteering things you would never have known to ask, and Fred would allow us to show those things in television time." . . . "Lee Strasburg . . . there's a guy who's, you know, defended with five inches of bulletproof armor," said Basil Cox. "He [Rogers] got through to him; and he got him to talk about things that were really personal. He had a – he had a gift, just an extraordinary gift, to get to people."

. . . at a graduation ceremony at Thiel College in Greenville, PA, early in his career (1969) Fred Roger said, "Our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is – that each of us has something that no one else has – or ever will have – something inside which is unique to all time. It's our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness, and to provide ways of developing its expression."

*Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* won four Emmy awards, and Rogers himself was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 1997 Daytime Emmys. . . . After Fred Rogers went on stage to accept the award, he bowed and said into the microphone, "All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are? . . . [this was followed by 10 seconds of silence]."

In 1992, Fred Rogers was a guest on the Arsenio Hall Show. In the course of their conversation, Arsenio expressed the concerns he had about the level of violence that some kids were experiencing, particularly in his LA neighborhood. When he asked Fred Rogers how to cope with this, Fred's response was: "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

In this book, there are numerous other citations that capture various aspects of Fred Rogers' life and his work. Most are marked by sincerity and, in their insightfulness, complimentary. However, in the spring of 2010, seven years after his death, the Fox News Channel devoted part of its daily newscast to a segment entitled "Is Mr. (sic) Rogers Ruining Kids?." Fox a& Friends took it all the way, describing Rogers as "this evil man" who taught kids that they are special, thereby sapping their will to work hard in school, or to improve themselves."

## ***Living With Mystery***

From: *The Gift of Wounding*

By Andre Auw, Ph.D.

I had the occasion last year to spend a morning with a group of third-graders, and it was a great learning experience for me. I asked them to tell me of the things in the world of nature that posed questions for them. Some of their replies were: "What makes the sun go down and come up?" "Why is the sky blue?" "Where do the birds go when they are ready to die?" "Why is it hot in one place and cold in another?" "How does the moon make tides?" and "How do plovers know the way to Hawaii and back to Alaska?" (The latter concerns a phenomenon that amazes us adults as well as children, who observe this annual ritual here in Hawaii.) I was struck by the fact that the questions seemed to arise not from scientific curiosity but rather from a sense of wonder in the face of mystery.

Unfortunately, as many of these children get older, they will no longer maintain their curiosity about such phenomena, and they may well find their sense of wonder dimmed. All too often parents and adult teachers may discourage their attempts to find answers for puzzling observations. It is unfortunate because when they become adults they will be handicapped in their ability to relate to mystery, which exists in many forms during our life journey.

It is sad for another reason. Stifling a child's curiosity often inhibits the use of their imagination, which is the source of creativity, and the wellspring of invention and discovery. This repression occurs not only in the field of science, but in many areas of the child's artistic expression.

One of the rewarding experiences in counseling is helping clients to stimulate the imagination, to begin to discover new ideas, options, and possibilities for their lives and careers. I have often compared the experience to that of a child opening exciting new gifts at Christmas. It is the wonderful feeling of being in charge of one's life, rather than being a victim of circumstances. It is equally wonderful to witness.

However, many clients never experience this delight. They approach life's challenges as problems to be solved, rather than lessons to be learned, or as mysteries to be experienced. An inner conviction maintains they can solve problems and resolve difficulties by intellectual analysis alone. They want to understand the causes and explore the origins of their emotional distress. They seek answers to the whys and hows of the current experience, believing this will lead them to the Mecca of personal happiness and inner peace.

Of course this approach, which seems eminently sensible, ignores the fact that while they may have the curiosity of a child, they lack the open, accepting mind of a child. Philosophers from the East term this a "beginner's mind." It is characterized as a mind that is without prejudice, eager to learn, ready to accept new information, even though that information may seem to run counter to previously learned facts or theories. It is the difference between a response that says, "Well that doesn't sound like something that would work," and a response that says, "Ah! That is an entirely new way of viewing the situation."

The first response immediately questions, the second response accepts. The first response indicates a partial answer it is a closed mind. The second response recognizes its ignorance and is thus an open mind. I experienced the difference between these two attitudes a few years ago when I was conducting workshops for organizations in the United States and Japan as a management consultant. Some of these were aimed at reducing the conflict within an organization.

One of the challenges for me was the fact that the workshops in the United States were ordered by top management. The workers had no voice in the decision and came to the workshops with their resentments apparent to everyone. Their minds were closed by their resistance to the process. With a great deal of luck and some creative trust-building, it was possible to overcome this resistance in some cases. But the effort was time consuming and left little opportunity for more creative problem-solving.

During the same period I was invited to do some training with executives from large Japanese companies. We met at a secluded resort in a mountain area, and I was joined by a Japanese-speaking trainer. There were only twelve men in this group, and we formed a circle of chairs in a rather bare meeting room of a rustic hotel. I was struck by the respect they offered me, and the readiness to learn, as well as by their ability to accept some painful truths about themselves.

One evening after the day's work had ended I met with my co-trainer and shared my surprise at their attitudes. I said, "These are very important and powerful men in their companies, yet in this workshop they are a humble and open as young schoolboys." My friend replied, "Oh, but you see this is different. In their companies they know how to run the administrative aspects very well, but they recognize that they don't possess some of the communication skills and they want to learn. Besides, it has always been our tradition to show respect to our teachers because we believe they have great gifts for us."

For me this was a revelation, a first hand experience of well-educated men, willing to approach problems with an open mind. Later I was able to follow up with interviews and was not surprised to discover how well they had integrated the material and translated it into their companies with great effectiveness.

An open, or "beginner's mind," is not one that believes everything it hears. But it does receive the information without immediately evaluating it in light of previous information. When we function with an open mind, we accept the information and are willing to examine it in more detail, to get more data so that we have a fuller picture of the meaning of the information.

I remember my mentor Carl Rogers doing this during meetings with his colleagues when they would give him negative feedback. Someone might say, "Carl, I think that idea is crazy. It will never work." And Carl would respond without irritation and say, "Well, it may be a nutty idea. Tell me why you think it is crazy and why it won't work."

At the time I would feel some irritation for what I perceived as an indirect attack upon his judgment. And more that once I heard Carl reply to the reasons given by saying, "You know, I believe you are right. Viewed from that perspective I think it is a dumb idea, and it won't work."

Carl accepted the information given him, and was willing to wait and surround that information with additional data that enabled him to alter his original opinion. Not only was this an example of an open mind at work, it was also a model of responding to someone who is criticizing you. Both were valuable lessons for me.

One of the disadvantages of a closed mind is that we get locked into a fruitless search for answers. The closed mind works like a computer program. It knows only the information stored, and rejects the possibility of new data. It is what some term "left-brain thinking," using rational and intellectual approaches to problems. "Right-brain thinking" taps into our imagination and intuition, which offer creative ways of examining old issues. Furthermore, our emotional energy gets drained by the frustrating process of going over the same old material in the same old ways.

Virginia Satir, the founder of Family Therapy, once said that rather than attempt to get people to view their problems from new perspectives she chose another approach. She might ask the father and

his son, for instance, to change their physical positions. She would ask the father to kneel on the floor and the son to stand on a chair and have them talk to one another.

The experiment produced a number of reactions. The father might say, "I felt intimidated by his height." And the son might say, "I felt strong for a change." In some cases this led to laughter and above all, a change in the energy of the participants. The energy was no longer locked into the problem but connected to the father and son in a new way, sharing a search for solutions rather than fighting about the problems facing them.

An open mind functions without many preconceptions. It recognizes that in life we must live with mystery. There are things that we simply cannot adequately understand or explain. Philosophies and religions offer their theories in an effort to explain what may in reality be unexplainable.

From the beginning of time, humans have sought to explain suffering, sickness and death. Even the process of healing remains a mystery. We know the body heals, but not precisely how or why it heals itself. Some mysteries are to be explored and examined, but others can only be accepted. The open mind knows this, and chooses not to waste energy on possible explanations, but to use it for new ideas and even new adventures on our life journey.

Perhaps our need to fulfill our roles in life may serve to close rather than open our minds. We see many men and women who function along these lines: parents give the orders and children obey, teachers have the answers and students have the questions. With these attitudes, it can be very difficult for individuals to admit ignorance or ask for help. There is a fear of "losing face" that prevents the growth of humility and fosters a false form of arrogance. This need to appear all-knowing and wise can be a terrible burden as well.

A client told of an incident with his teenage son which proved to be not only a valuable lesson for him, but the beginning of a new and richer relationship with his son. This man had prided himself on keeping his word to others, and on doing his work in a timely and responsible manner. He had an understanding with his son that the boy would cut the grass on the following Saturday.

The day arrived, and morning became afternoon with no sign of the grass being mowed. The father began to get angry, assuming that his son was either being disobedient or irresponsible. By late afternoon when the son returned home from playing sports, the father exploded and scolded his son severely. When he paused for a breath in his tirade, the son quietly said to his father, "Hey, Dad, what's happening?" It was a genuine question, not a defensive response, and the father was taken aback.

The remark forced him to open his mind, and allowed his anger to lessen so that he could hear the explanation his son offered. The son said, "Dad, I agreed to cut the lawn, and I'm going to cut it now. I didn't tell you I would cut it in the morning. I decided to play ball in the morning and cut the lawn in the afternoon when it was cooler." And he added, "Dad, don't be mad at me if I decide to do it my way instead of your way."

The father later admitted that for a moment they had changed roles. His son was the wise and calm one, and he was acting more like an emotional child. He also saw that he had learned to do a job and then play, whereas his son found it easier to have a relaxing time first and then tackle the job. Neither way was in itself right or wrong; they were simply different approaches to a problem.

The valuable lesson for the father was that his son's approach seemed to be one that was more satisfying. His own way was marked more by a sense of obligation, and the satisfaction came from an awareness of "doing one's job." Reflection on these differing approaches helped the father to realize that much of his sense of accomplishment in life had been rather joyless. What he learned from his son was that it was possible to play and still "do one's job."

Some time later he was able to share this with his son, and today, although their lives are quite different and his son is married, their best times are “playing” together when they regularly set aside time for camping trips. In this incident, the son’s gentle response enabled the father to abandon his notion that “father knows best,” and accept suggestions from his son with a more open mind.

This need to appear all-wise or knowing can foster an arrogance that makes it very difficult to have an open mind. I remember the story told of Sigmund Freud discussing one of his dreams with Carl Jung. At one point Jung pressed for further details and Freud said he did not want to tell him those details. When asked why, Freud said, “Because I am afraid you will lose respect for me.” And in telling the story years later, Jung said, “It was that response, rather than the details of the dream that made me lose respect for him.”

Maintaining an open mind is the secret of learning to live with mystery. We no longer have to have an understanding of everything that occurs, or a need to search continually for the underlying causes of suffering and tragedy in our lives. We are better able to be satisfied with the belief that there is a reason for these things, even though it may not be immediately available to us. We can accept in faith the things we cannot explain by reason.

In some ways it is having the open, innocent mind of a child, rather than the suspicious, questioning mind of a world-weary adult. It is a positive response to the biblical directive: “unless you become as little children you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” In many ways, the metaphor is most apt. We are, after all, very much like little children in the face of a universe that is extremely complex and filled with mystery beyond our powers of comprehension.

One of the most striking aspects of the experience of the astronauts, after they returned to earth, was a common admission of their feelings of humility and smallness when faced with the vastness of mystery of outer space. With all their technological brilliance and scientific expertise, they were awed by the experience of viewing the universe from the distant reaches of space travel. They felt like little children again, gazing at miracles beyond their intellectual grasp. They also described the incredible sense of wonder at the majesty of the universe in which we live. The result for them was a humility and openness to new ideas and perspectives that would have a profound effect on every aspect of their later lives.

Richard Moss, in his book *How Shall I Live*, tells of a revelation of his own life that helped him to open his mind and ultimately to learn to live with mystery. He said that for many years he had fixed notions about various aspects of his life. Most of these had rigid value judgments attached. His work as a physician was challenging and absorbing, but he discovered that he was “addicted to intensity.” Things that brought excitement were considered good; things that were not exciting were to be avoided. Work was great, but washing clothes was boring.

The revelation was the awareness that he needed to direct his energies toward “undoing” rather than “doing” as he had values previously. He had to let go of these long-held ideas, and allow his rigid values to soften and change, to permit fresh air and different perspectives to inform his choices. The process was, in fact, like the beginning of a new life for him, moving him from a traditional physician into a metaphysician and healer.

The recipe for living with mystery is simple, if not easy: acquiring humility; adopting the child’s sense of wonder; or the “beginner’s mind”; exploring mysteries that seem to contain a lesson for us; as well as accepting mysteries that we cannot understand. Some of the explorations will open up new worlds of creativity and invention, while the acceptance of others will bring inner peace to our hearts. Mystery then changes from a puzzle to be explained, to a source of wonder and beauty.

Albert Einstein said it well: **“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.”**

***Recommended websites and Additional Reading:***

[www.fredrogers.org](http://www.fredrogers.org) and

<http://www.fredrogerscenter.org>

Another book: *The World According to Mister Rogers; Important Things to Remember*. This book has numerous quotations.