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Won't You Be My Neighbor?

John C. Lyden

Grand View University, Des Moines, Iowa, johnclyden@gmail.com

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (2018), directed by Morgan Neville.

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.

Fred Rogers (1928-2003) was planning to go to seminary to become a minister when he discovered television and decided he needed to participate in the shaping of this new medium. He did eventually go to seminary and became a Presbyterian minister, but he found his lifelong calling in his work with children's programming for public television. This film is a touching portrait of the man behind the puppets, what motivated him and what he believed, told by those who knew and loved him.

Mr. Rogers Neighborhood ran from 1968 to 2001 (with a three year hiatus from 1976-79) although some of his puppet characters appeared as early as 1954 on *The Children's Corner*. His preternatural calm and simplicity, right down to his trademark sweater and sneakers, have sometimes prompted parody or ridicule—but he appears so unusual precisely because he contrasted with the rest of television, and this was entirely deliberate on his part. Rogers was disgusted by most children's programming, filled as it was with frenetic comic violence, and he wanted to create a show that spoke to small children at their own pace, engaging them directly on the things that mattered to them. My own daughter, at the age of four, was convinced that Mr. Rogers was speaking *directly to her*—and this was exactly what he intended. Rogers held that each child had inherent value—a principle he learned from his own Christian beliefs—and he made this belief the basis for how he approached his audience. He listened to children's concerns, their fears, their need to express their feelings including their anger without turning to violence, their confusion and worries about death and divorce, and he made these issues central to the show. The Land of Make Believe in which most of the show took place was not a perfect world, but one filled with the same sorts of people that our world is: sometimes intolerant, rude, angry or frightened. Rogers' puppets gave voice to the fears of children—notably the central character of Daniel Striped Tiger, whom Rogers' wife Joanne believes expressed her husband's own insecurities most clearly.

When Daniel wonders on one show if he was a “mistake,” too different from others, too weak, Lady Aberlin sings to him that he is her friend and “fine just as you are.” It’s a simple message, but one that Rogers knew everyone needed to hear. He often said that everything comes down to love, or the lack of it—and everyone deserves to love, and be loved.

Rogers also knew that fears stood behind some of the most controversial issues of his day, including war, immigration, and racism. The documentary includes an excerpt from a 1968 episode that seems eerily relevant, when King Friday decides to build a wall around his kingdom to protect himself. Eventually, he learns not to be afraid of those outside when they show that they are peaceful, and the wall comes down. Rogers also had African American Francois Clemmons as a regular on the show, and when Americans resisted integrated swimming pools, he and Clemmons soaked their feet together in a wading pool. It was subtle, but the message was there. While Rogers always combatted racism, it took him longer to address homophobia; Clemmons was gay, and Rogers told him he had to suppress that identity to be on the show. Neither America nor Rogers was ready for a gay man on a children’s show at that time, but eventually Rogers fully accepted Clemmons’ identity as a gay man. It fit with his overall theme of tolerance, love, and acceptance, as this was what Christianity meant to him.

The film shows some of Rogers’ self-doubt as to whether he really could make a difference with such large issues. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 made him question the extent of evil and whether anyone could stop it. One wonders how Rogers would see the America of today with its persistent racism and fears of immigrants, often promulgated by those who say they are Christians. He was a lifelong Republican, but I also can’t help wondering how comfortable he would be with that designation now. Outside Rogers’ funeral in 2003, conservative Christians held up signs that said Rogers was in Hell; apparently not because they believed he was gay (he

was not) but because he had accepted gays. One of his friends recounts in the film that Rogers would have been most sad to see the children of these protesters who accompanied them on this errand of hate, and how unhappy they looked. Clearly his message of love and acceptance has not been heard by all.

That Rogers can still be relevant and controversial can be seen even in the news from June 25, 2018, when Florida attorney general Pam Bondi was scolded by protesters at a screening of *Won't You Be My Neighbor* for her plan to remove health care protections for those with pre-existing conditions, as they shouted, "What would Mr. Rogers think of you?" Her response was to invoke Mr. Rogers in turn: "We were in a movie about anti-bullying and practicing peace and love and tolerance and accepting of people for their differences.... That's what Mr. Rogers is all about."

Rogers would not have countenanced calling Bondi a "horrible person" (as at least one protester did), but to turn his legacy into one of a milquetoast who would never get angry or criticize wrongdoing is to make a mistake; the same reduction to an irrelevant nice guy who tolerated all views is frequently performed on memories of Martin Luther King as well as Jesus. Rogers believed in acceptance, love, and justice for all, but these do not come easily, and he knew that. He was frequently frustrated in his efforts to educate, but he didn't give up. This film left me filled with hope that we can use love and kindness not to be irrelevant, but to change the world. Fred Rogers was special; but then again, as he would remind us, so are we all.