It’s a Terrible Day in the Neighborhood, and That’s O.K.

Fred Rogers’s belief that we should validate emotions, not suppress them, is wisdom for all ages.

By Mariana Alessandri
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On the 51st anniversary of the first taping of the classic children’s show “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” Google published an animated “doodle” commemorating him. It depicts Mister Rogers walking through the neighborhood interacting with a variety of people, including a small child with his head hung low. Rogers fashions a paper airplane for the boy, which instantly cheers him up. People commonly caricature Mister Rogers this way — a gentle man intent on making everyone happy — but that may be more a reflection of America’s discomfort with dark emotions than of the man himself. The last thing Fred Rogers would do for a sad boy is distract him from his sadness.

Anyone who watched “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” would know that the host considered all feelings natural — including the dark ones — and believed they don’t need fixing. Many of the children raised watching the program are now parents, and a new appreciation for Fred Rogers has blossomed thanks to the 2018 documentary “Won’t You Be My Neighbor” and the new feature film “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,” starring Tom Hanks as Fred Rogers. Today, Rogers’s philosophy of difficult emotions stands a chance of being heard and heeded.

As a child I preferred the frenetic energy of “Sesame Street” to the dull pace of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” but that changed when I had children of my own and wondered how to raise them thoughtfully without depriving them of television. In my classroom, I regularly teach Neil Postman’s book, “Amusing Ourselves to Death,” in which he raises a critical eyebrow at attempts to put serious discourse on television, and especially at shows like “Sesame Street” that label themselves as “educational.” Mr. Postman implies that slow and even boring shows stand a better chance of teaching children important lessons than fast-paced, loud ones.

My memory of that boring show made me curious to see whether it offered anything valuable. It did, and so began my awakening to Rogers. With (and sometimes without) my children, I’ve watched hundreds of episodes of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” over the last seven years. I’ve read everything written by and about Fred Rogers and seen all the footage I could find. I saw the 2018 documentary once in the theater and then went back again to take notes. I went into “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” skeptical, since it’s much easier to get him wrong than right — and it’s critical that we get Fred Rogers right — but I kept my fingers crossed. The film’s emotional depth surprised me; in direct contrast to the Google doodle, it thoroughly conveys his philosophy of difficult emotions. It makes sense: the cast and crew had to study Rogers to make the film, which is what’s required to accurately represent the man, to animate the caricature.

Despite his sweet pastor’s demeanor, Rogers was tuned into our souls’ darkest feelings. He had an uncommon appreciation for anger, fear, stress, sadness, disappointment and loneliness. He respected the range of emotions and encouraged children to accept all their feelings as natural. This conviction came early: As an only child to proper New England parents, Rogers was discouraged from acknowledging sadness. This, along with his childhood
experience of getting bullied for being overweight, made “Fat Freddy,” as he was called, acutely aware that too often, and usually inadvertently, adults silence children instead of showing them how to deal with troubling feelings.

Rogers believed that variations of the “sticks-and-stones” adages intended to get kids to “shake it off” are stifling; they abandon children to their pain instead of teaching them how to process it. In contrast, Rogers encouraged children to face their dark feelings. Not a trained philosopher, Rogers would likely attribute his education in the emotional landscape of children to the psychologist Margaret McFarland at the University of Pittsburgh, with whom he collaborated for 30 years. And yet there is a foundation for the sort of philosophy of feelings that Fred Rogers practiced that can be traced back more than 2,000 years to ancient Greece.

In the “Nicomachean Ethics,” Aristotle described our souls as being made up of feelings, predispositions and active conditions. Our predispositions name our go-to emotions, those we feel most often in response to certain stimuli. Some people are prone to sadness, others to anger, and the occasional few to genuine cheerfulness. Our feelings, like twigs, catch a spark every time we brush past life's embers, but ignite only when they get stoked by our predispositions. Two individuals responding differently to the same event — getting fired, for example — Aristotle would attribute to their differing predispositions.

I am predisposed to anger, which played better in New York where I grew up than in South Texas where I now live, and yet it humanizes me to students. Those who share my predisposition relax their shoulders when I tell them they're not alone, and they laugh when I say I’m jealous of people who cry easily instead of wanting to punch somebody.

Feelings and predispositions matter, for Aristotle, but more for the sake of self-knowledge than self-improvement. It’s helpful to know which feelings I am predisposed to as well as what I am feeling at any given moment, but these two categories are much harder to budge than the third. Aristotle described active conditions as “how we bear ourselves” in the face of our feelings. As a believer in right action, Aristotle suggested that we train our souls to react beautifully to an ugly mess. He was implying that we not fret too much over our troublesome feelings or stubborn predispositions.

Indeed, Aristotle would discourage us from shaming ourselves over feeling sad when we “should” feel happy. He rejected “shoulds” altogether when it came to feelings, since he believed them to be natural and, without accompanying wrong action, harmless. All feelings, for Aristotle, are potentially useful in that they provide an opportunity to practice behaving well. Feelings alone can't jeopardize virtue, he believed, but actions can and often do. Mister Rogers agreed: “Everyone has lots of ways of feeling. And all of those feelings are fine. It’s what we do with our feelings that matter in this life.”

Rogers believed that all children (and adults) get sad, mad, lonely, anxious and frustrated — and he used television to model what to do with these difficult and often strong emotions. He wanted to counter the harmful message kids typically receive, some version of the ever-unhelpful you shouldn't feel that way.

In one episode, when he couldn't get a flashlight to work, Mister Rogers expressed frustration in front of the camera: He admitted feeling disappointed at the fact that the trick that he had wanted to show his viewers didn't work. In doing so, he validated his disappointment and showed his audience that talking about it helps. One of Rogers’ core beliefs was “what’s mentionable is manageable,” and he considered an urgent lesson for kids to learn
to name their pain. Rogers believed that if children were encouraged to talk about feelings instead of being shamed for them, they could get to work finding appropriate outlets. One of Rogers’ recurrent lessons was on anger.

Inspired by a child who asked him a question about anger, he wrote a song about it:

What do you do with the mad that you feel
When you feel so mad you could bite?
When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong …
And nothing you do seems very right?

This song was Rogers’ way of teaching kids how to be angry, instead of how not to be angry. The first step is for the child to recognize their anger as well as their temptation to bite, hit, kick. The second step the song suggests is to find appropriate outlets for that anger:

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 go?

Playing the piano as a child, Rogers wrote, taught him to express the whole range of his feelings. He recounts banging on the low keys when he got mad, and I imagine him exploring the minor keys when he felt sad. In multiple episodes, Rogers showed viewers how to tell their feelings through the piano. When he had famous musicians like Yo-Yo Ma or Wynton Marsalis on the program, Rogers would ask whether they played differently when they were sad or angry. They always reported that yes, they did, and that playing their darker emotions helped.

“Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” was purportedly a show for children. But I think Rogers also meant it for adults. We’d be better off if we’d stop negating children’s dark emotions with stifling commands like “Don’t cry,” “Calm down,” “Be quiet.” If we are convinced by Rogers’ and Aristotle’s claim that feelings are not wrong and that “what’s mentionable is manageable,” we should begin mentioning our own sad, lonely and disappointed feelings. In doing so, we would show children — and our grown-up selves — how to appropriately manage them.

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Allison Arnone Travel. What If God is Not Silent? OK, thatâ€™s my imagination wishing there was a cool breeze, but there is definite movement to the sky. We used Soie 100/3 which is quickly becoming a favorite thread of mine. Itâ€™s about the size of sewing thread. The first time I saw it, I swore you would have to be crazy to use it. Years later, I love it! A single strand in an open stitch is all that is required to give just a little life to our sky. We had 2 options for the sky stitch. The one shown below is how I stitched mine, but I included a second option in the instructions if you arenâ€™t in the mood to concentrate as much. The clouds are "Aristotle suggested that we train our souls to react beautifully to an ugly mess. He was implying that we not fret too much over our troublesome feelings or stubborn predispositions." - Mariana Alessandri.

Kevin J.S. Zollman 448d ago. This is such a great piece of public philosophy. I encourage you to take a look. 0. Dr. Leigh M. Johnson 443d ago. A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood (original title). PG | 1h 49min | Biography, Drama | 22 November 2019 (USA).

Trailer. 18 VIDEOS | 255 IMAGES. Based on the true story of a real-life friendship between Fred Rogers and journalist Lloyd Vogel. Director: Marielle Heller.Â Two-time Oscar®-winner Tom Hanks portrays Mister Rogers in A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood, a timely story of kindness triumphing over cynicism, based on the true story of a real-life friendship between Fred Rogers and journalist Tom Junod. After a jaded magazine writer (Emmy winner Matthew Rhys) is assigned a profile of Fred Rogers, he overcomes his skepticism, learning about empathy, kindness, and decency from America's most beloved neighbor.