

December 25, 2019
Christmas Day
United, Oak Park

Who Loved You into Being?

During a pivotal scene in *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*—the newly-released movie about Mr. Rogers—Fred Rogers turns the tables and asks his interviewer named Lloyd Vogel to pause for a minute of silence and think about all the people who loved him into being. Even if you have not yet seen the movie, I don't think I'm spoiling anything by saying that scene is a significant moment, made even more dramatic because all of the dialog in the movie actually stops for a full minute while Lloyd considers the question.

I had the impression that this moment in the movie was specifically constructed for people in the audience to consider the question themselves. It's a marvelous technique that brings the viewer right into the story, in much the same way that Mr. Rogers was known to interact with the young children in his audience during his long-running television program on PBS. Who are the people who loved you into being?

Though I don't know if Fred Rogers and Lloyd Vogel had that exact exchange in real life, something like it actually happened when Fred Rogers accepted a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 1997 Emmys. When Mr. Rogers stepped up to the microphone at that awards program he said, "Would you just take...ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are? Those who have cared about you and wanted what was best for you in life."

It was an extraordinary moment for a televised awards show when the person being recognized is usually trying to claim all the attention for him or herself. But the audience took him seriously and soon people were tearfully considering the question for themselves.

We usually think of TV as a rather impersonal medium—there's no real interaction going on there. It's strictly one-sided. Yet Fred Rogers didn't seem to differentiate between how he conducted himself in daily life when he was conversing with someone who was truly right next to him and how he spoke to the many children in his television audience. He was always interested in knowing about the people around him. Who were they? What concerns did they have? And he

brought as much of his deep empathy for other people right into the television studio, so that members of his audience felt as if he were personally addressing them. It was a real gift for a television personality, and quite rare as well, when you consider that the main purpose in so much of what passes even for children's television is to turn viewers into consumers whose buying habits will be influenced for decades.

I've often wondered if there was something about Fred Rogers' training as a Presbyterian minister that made a profound impact on the children's television programming for which he was known. He had a pastoral sense to his compassionate listening. No doubt many people also experienced a spiritual connection through him. While Fred himself believed that it was possible to teach the faith through example, without needing to be overtly religious, I think that the profoundly personal connections he made were manifestations of God's earthly presence.

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Each Christmas Day we hear the beautiful passage from the beginning of the gospel according to John that proclaims God's love in coming near to us. In Jesus—God's word that has become flesh—God came to us on our level. God entered human life.

Or, in other words, God *loved* Jesus into being for the salvation of the world. That's essentially what our hymn of the day proclaims too:

“Of the father's *love* begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the source, the ending he...”

So Christmas is love. Christmas is when we celebrate God loving the world so much that God became one of us. We are *all* loved.

Though we may be doing any number of things during this busy time of year, most of us try to keep the people we love at the heart of our celebrations. And even while many of us spend quite a bit of time during the weeks leading up to Christmas thinking about presents that we are going to give to many people who are a part of our lives, what we really are attempting to do through those gifts is to demonstrate our love for others. Indeed, isn't that why many people who already have enough material things often say that they simply want our very

presence and attention at this time of the year? When we have a few days to get away from work and other responsibilities, we just want to be with those we love.

If we truly celebrate God entering our lives in a way that is very close to us, then nearly everything we do at this time of year might proclaim that closeness to God and to each other. To be sure, there are many things we might enjoy in these days at year's end that dazzle the eyes and saturate nearly all of our senses to great excess, yet the deep spiritual truths of the season are more about offering gracious welcomes and demonstrating our generosity to friends and strangers alike.

When people declare, "why can't every day be like Christmas?" perhaps it's a desire that the spirit of goodwill and the gestures of kindness so often shared at this time of the year might be more commonly experienced in the other eleven months of the year too. Maybe we can all concentrate on loving others into being. Certainly any time we do that would be a beautiful day indeed!