

The Journey Thus Far

May 3rd, 2020

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I make a rather dumb joke quite often. With exasperation, I grumble that “18-year-old Joe is horrified by where we have ended up.” And to be honest if you found me at 18 and suggested that I would be working in ministry, my younger self would have had a melt-down. Eighteen-year-old Joe understood religion as prescriptive and limiting. Clergy were either wise but disapproving Presbyterian women or *celibate* but disapproving Catholic priests. I could not imagine myself as either.

The joke is in the tension: who I knew was and who I *thought* a minister should be. But within that tension is also a lot of fear and uncertainty. I had already been called to ministry, but I was too afraid to admit it. As puberty hit, my personality became more expressive (gay), artistic (gay), whimsical (super gay.) It was becoming painfully clear - though never stated outright - that I was no longer welcome as a parishioner in either my mother’s Presbyterian congregation or my father’s Catholic parish. And in a dozen different ways, I was told that a minister - especially - could not be gay. Calling or not, how would anyone ever accept me as clergy?

I had not learned resilience yet and I was not strong enough to meet the challenges needed to live a life of faith. So, I pushed that idea out of my head. I shut it down. I packed it all away, the bad *and* the good. I stopped looking for God and ran away from religion.

Little did I know, *that* was the beginning of my journey.

There is another journey that I want to tell you about. Fred Rogers aka “Mister Rogers.” As a kid I adored him on TV, but on my journey to ministry, I have really come to admire the man behind the persona.

As you may know, Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister. What is not often noted is that his formal ordination was unorthodox. He says, “When I was ordained, it

was for a special ministry, that of serving children and families through television. I consider what I do through "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" as my ministry." Before his ordination, he had already created his show and his reason for getting into television was because he was unimpressed by early children's programming.

In his view, the existing children's programming was nothing more than slapstick pies in the face and thoughtless strings of cartoon reels. He felt this type of programming failed to teach children to honor human dignity // and it failed to speak to children as *real* people in their own right. He was so confident of his calling, he even agreed to testify before congress on behalf of *all public television*, winning \$20 MILLION dollars of funding ... with a single speech.

Junlei Li, a fellow at the Fred Rogers Center recently discovered a small note Fred Rogers typed out. As it was never sent, the note is presumably from Fred, to Fred himself. It says:

Am I kidding myself that I am able to write a script again? Am I really just whistling Dixie? I wonder. If I don't get down to it, I'll never really know. Why don't I trust myself? After all these years IT'S JUST AS BAD AS EVER. The hour cometh and now is when I've got to do it. Get to it, Fred, get to it! But don't let anybody ever tell anybody else that it was easy. It wasn't.

This was not written at the beginning of his successful TV career; it was written right in the *middle*. Fred was already the "Mr. Rogers" who was beloved by an entire nation of children and who stood as the quiet confident hero - willing to honor the worth of children and help attend the emotional challenges of childhood. *That* Fred Rogers is asking "am I kidding myself." Who could possibly doubt the calling of Mr. Rogers? Yet, it is *that* Fred Rogers who tells us it isn't easy.

It is here that I am reminded: not one of us - even Mr. Rogers - is superhuman.

Friends, I will tell you what I know. I have had the good fortune to work with many UU congregations and I encounter the same thing, time and again. Unitarian Universalist congregations are full of successful, caring, compassionate folks, the kind of folks who have deeply touched the lives of one - if not many - people. You found the strength and motivation - the *resilience* - to keep putting one foot in front of the other, in the face of doubt, adversity,

and challenge. *And you are here today.* Somebody somewhere finds inspiration in your journey.

Those journeys required resilience. I learned it late. I did not have enough resilience to carve out a place for myself, in church, as a young gay kid. But somewhere along the way I picked it up and have needed it many times since, as I elbow my way into the ranks of clergy. Fred Rogers expressed that moment of doubt somewhere in the *middle of nine hundred and twelve* episodes of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood. Somewhere, he found the *resilience* to write a few hundred more episodes, despite the difficulty of the task.

Resilience is one of those things that is really easy to spot in others but often only visible to ourselves in the rearview mirror. But how can we actively foster resilience when we need it? How can we call upon it in times when we need it most - times like now?

Resilience is a big word with a simple meaning. Resilience is the capacity to endure *one more moment* of challenge or adversity. Easy, right? People in recovery from drug addiction and alcoholism know this concept well. We talk about getting through life one day at a time. And I can tell you from experience that it is often one *minute* or one *second* at a time. Life on life's terms, without the numbing effect of chemicals, is *tough*. Recovering Alcoholics and Addicts learn to endure one more moment of this challenging sobriety, this new life, then another, then another, then another. And we become resilient.

More importantly than the mechanics though, the putting one foot in front of the other, is the *why* at the core of that effort. To better understand Fred Roger's "why," here are words pulled from his actual testimony before congress:

We've got to have more of this neighborhood expression of care. And this is what -- This is what I give. I give an expression of care every day to each child, to help him realize that he is unique. I end the program by saying, "You've made this day a special day, by just your being you. There's no person in the whole world like you, and I like you, just the way you are." And I feel that if we in public television can only make it clear that feelings are mentionable and manageable, we will have done a great service for mental health. I'm constantly concerned about what our children are seeing, and for 15 years I have tried in this country and Canada, to present what I feel is a meaningful expression of care.

Fred Rogers' *why* was to honor children and model the sanctity of caring.

As a kid, I wanted to know God and the mysteries of the divine. As a young adult I wanted to dismantle the mechanisms of harm that had been built into dominant religion. Today my *why* is to broaden the reach of the capital L Love we find together on Sunday mornings, and in our zoom meetings throughout the week, and in the relationships that we will build here and nurture here, that will last for the rest of our lives!

So again, I turn it to you. When you face challenges and adversity, what motivates you to endure one more day, one more minute, one more second? When you are fully present with yourself and listening deeply, what does that still small voice within say to you? What is your *why*?

Friends, we need to be resilient right now. Bound by Love and the interconnected web of life, bound by this awesome human community of souls, we are indeed *all in this together*. And the *this* we find ourselves in is scary, it is frustrating, it can feel senseless, and it can weigh us down with a weight so heavy our very souls become weary. Unlike my earlier examples, we were not called to this, it was pressed upon us. And yet, we are all in this together. And *together* is what Unitarian Universalists do best! Yes indeed! From our potlucks to the protest lines, UUs *know* about building and sustaining community and working together toward a common cause. *That*, friends, is the calling at work here, that's our voice of the divine. The calling that draws you into this faith and keeps you engaged with these people *with your people* is the most important calling right now.

So perhaps it is best to ask it this way: friends, *who* is your *why*?

Amen