

LOVE OUT LOUD
Sermon by Audette Fulbright
Sunday, February 25, 2018
All Souls Church, New York City

As a member of Generation X, I grew up with *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. Fred Rogers taught me many things - how crayons are made; that Margaret Hamilton was a nice woman who had been a schoolteacher before she was the Wicked Witch of the West; and that it was ok to be me, just as I am. Mr. Rogers had a very Universalist view of humankind, it seems to me.

Mr. Roger's Neighborhood turned 50 just four days after the mass killings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High. That may seem like a strange thing to juxtapose, but it really isn't. Melanie McFarland recently wrote in *The Atlantic* (that Unitarian-founded magazine), "You may [wonder] what the fallout from the Parkland mass shooting has to do with a class PBS series turning 50. On the surface of it, maybe not much. But this forgets the entire point of *Mr. Rogers's Neighborhood* and the life's work of its host. ...Parkland and all the school shootings that have come before share many characteristics, but one that simply cannot be ignored is the fact that every single one was committed by a young man described as mentally ill, bullied or disconnected from others in some way." MacFarland recalls Rogers' testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Communications in May of 1969: "This is what I give: I give an expression of care, each day, to every child," Rogers tells the senators. '...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 think that it's much more dramatic that two men could be working out their feelings of anger — much more dramatic than showing something [with] gunfire. I'm constantly concerned about what our children are seeing.'" ("Fred Rogers, champion of gentle masculinity, has a cure for the gun violence that plagues us," Melanie McFarland, *The Atlantic*: <https://www.salon.com/2018/02/22/fred-rogers-champion-of-gentle-masculinity/>)

Rogers spent his career working diligently on one key thing: helping children learn to understand, accept, and deal effectively with their feelings. As someone who had been bullied himself as a boy and a pacifist, he was deeply invested in showing children a particular way to be a man. As MacFarland notes, "The host of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* had a kind, soothing voice that never spiked in frustration or sagged with sorrow, even in episodes navigating such rocky emotional terrain as divorce, or death, fear or anger. He never roughhoused with guests or invalidated the observations of the children to whom he spoke. Above all, he celebrated the importance of feelings, the very thing boys are too often counseled to ignore or stifle."

Do you remember the close of each show? He'd take off his shoes, and take off his sweater, singing. Then he'd say, "You always make each day such a special day. You know how - by just you being you. There's only one person in the world like you - and that's you, yourself!"

Fred Rogers built a lifetime on showing that it is ok to love out loud. Every weekday, he would come on our televisions and connect with someone. He would admire their work. He would speak of their virtues. And more often than not, after showing us how to honor other people, he would turn to us, his "television friend," and tell us that he loved us. He would sing it to us. Sometimes, he would draw us a picture. Time and time again, he showed us how to care for ourselves and love others in word and deed.

Ever since that fateful day in Parkland, teenagers around the country have been standing up and saying #NeverAgain. With the deaths of those they loved, they are not retreating in silent

brokenness, but rather choosing to love out loud - to bear witness to the lives and deaths of friends and family, to do what they can to change the chokehold of inertia and to dismantle the narrative frames and the structural powers that have allowed this kind of violence to continue.

Our fore-parent, the Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams, declared that we Unitarians needed to take responsibility for our lives, and behave “with the intention of making history rather than being pushed around by it.” He also said, “Religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one’s effort toward the establishment of a just and *loving* community.”

Put a shorter way: we Unitarian Universalists need to make sure we are loving out loud. We need to learn how to speak and show our love. We need to love in word and deed.

Fred Rogers’ quiet little children’s show taught almost two generations’ worth of children how to express their feelings in healthy ways. Preparing for this sermon, watching clips of the show, I cried repeatedly as I listened to him sing, “There are many ways to say I love you,” and “I like you just the way you are.” I think we too often forget how powerful it is to just tell someone how much you care - to let them know they matter to you, and that you accept them just the way they are. We forget how powerful it is to speak our love, out loud.

I think we also get confused, sometimes, about why we take action. In a 24-hour competition-based news cycle, media companies know that blood and anger are effective emotional hooks, and they want us hooked. We may take to the streets to protest an injustice, but what may not be quite as obvious in the cacophony is that we would not be there if we didn’t care. If we weren’t striving to protect or save or recover something that we love. The Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America don’t work as hard as they do just because they hate drink driving or gun violence. They do it because they love their children. I believe the upsurge we are seeing in this country isn’t just because people are angry about the things that seem so much at risk - I think it is because we love the promise of a great American melting pot and the hope of a truly functional democratic Republic. We are moved by what we love, even when anger sits at the top of our emotional bandwidth.

Meg Riley reminds us, “In 1803, the first time Universalists gathered as a whole, they affirmed that no loving God - no God worthy of their worship - would have created people in order to enslave them. They knew the living experience of a loving God, and so they rejected slavery not as a political position but as a religious affirmation [emphasis mine, AF]. They simply stood on the side of love. Two centuries later, we struggle with the implications of that.”

(“Prophetic Congregations in the Twenty-first Century,” Meg Riley. Pg. 3, *A People So Bold*, ed. John Gibb Millsbaugh)

Whether we have faith in a loving God or we have faith in the love that human beings can express for one another, a love that exceeds individual virtue and is capable of transforming lives, our work is to live that love out loud - to make it manifest in our own words and deeds. We need to find our inner Fred Rogers, and practice daily how to take care of ourselves and others by understanding and dealing with our feelings, and by saying to one another, ‘you matter to me. I like you just the way you are.’

So this morning, instead of just listening to me tell you these things, we are going to embrace our inner Fred a little, and love out loud. Before you get too nervous and the introverts start fleeing for the doors, let me promise that it’s painless - we’re going to write our love. Our ushers are coming down the aisles again with baskets. Please, take one of the pretty sticky notes, and if you need it, a pencil. Then, write a little word of hope or kindness - something encouraging you might say to a stranger, a little wish or prayer for them. What we’re going to do with these notes

is collect them, and place them in baskets by the doors as you leave to go out into your day or down to coffee hour. We invite you to take one of these encouragements with you, a sharing of love between friends and companions on this journey. In order for it to work, we need each of you to reach into your heart and give it a try. I will say that I did this when I led worship for the Pacific Regional gathering, and the small love notes were so beautiful. Trent will play some music while we write and then gather what you have written. ...

Fred Rogers said, "If only you could understand how important you are to the people you meet; how important you may be to people you never even dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person." Today, I hope you will go from here, strengthened to love out loud, to make your love felt in both word and deed. Blessed be.