

# *Introduction*



**IN HIS 1997 COMMENCEMENT SPEECH** to the Memphis Theological Seminary, titled “Invisible to the Eye,” Fred Rogers, at the age of sixty-nine, reflects back on defining moments in his life. He recounts the experience of being bullied when he was an overweight and timid young boy. Afraid to go to school each day, he was, in his own words, “a perfect target for ridicule.” One day, after being released from school early, he decided to walk home. Soon after leaving the school grounds, he noticed that he was being followed by a group of boys who quickly gained on him while taunting him verbally. “Freddy, hey, fat Freddy,” they shouted, “we’re going to get you, Freddy.” Rogers recalls breaking into a sprint, hoping that he would run fast enough to make it to the house of a widowed neighbor. He remembers praying that she would be home so that he would be taken in and sheltered from the ensuing threat. She was indeed home, and Rogers found “refuge.”<sup>1</sup>

As one might imagine, the painful feelings of shame that resulted from the social abuse and ostracism of bullying affected Rogers deeply. He recounts how, when he told the adult caretakers in his life about the bullying, the resounding message he received in response was to “just let on that you don’t care; then nobody will bother you.” But, Rogers recalls, he did care. He resented the treatment and cried to himself whenever he was alone. “I cried through my fingers as I made up songs on the piano.” He sought out stories about people who were “poor in spirit” and derived identification and meaning from those narratives. “I started to look behind the things that people said and did; and, little by little, concluded that Saint-Exupéry was absolutely right: ‘What is essential is invisible to the eye.’ So after a lot of sadness, I began a lifelong search for what is essential; what it is about my neighbor that doesn’t meet the eye.”<sup>2</sup> Rogers, who transferred from Dartmouth to Rollins College in order to study music composition, planned to become a minister. But an experience viewing the new technology of television during a break from college triggered his painful childhood experiences and prompted him, he recounts, to get involved in the novel mass medium. “I got into television because I saw people throw pies at each other’s faces . . . [a]nd if there’s anything that bothers me, it’s one person demeaning another.”<sup>3</sup>

In this book I explore Rogers’s search for “the essential,” that which is “invisible to the eye,” through a detailed and dynamic look into his groundbreaking, long-running public television program, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*—his life’s work. Integrating his advanced studies in both child development and Christian theology into the foundational rhetorics of his program, Rogers offered viewers a space of refuge, safety, and affirmation where dialogical connection, learning, and experience could take place at the parasocial level of television.<sup>4</sup> Rogers’s identification of the ways he responded to the hurt of bullying, both by finding emotional articulation and release in playing and composing music

and by encountering God's compassionate presence during his own periods of suffering, encapsulates well the overarching directive and ethos of *Neighborhood* and speaks to the ways Rogers conceived of the program as his "television ministry."

My overarching goal is to examine and analyze the vision, production, and reception of *Neighborhood* from the perspectives of communication, media and culture, rhetoric, and communication ethics. One cannot gain a thorough understanding of the breadth and dynamism of Rogers's communication project and the cultural phenomenon of *Neighborhood* through a consideration of the program alone; likewise, an inquiry solely into viewer mail lacks the critical other half of the communication puzzle that prompted its writing—the rhetorical offerings of the program. My study thus echoes the stages that Rogers's television creation went through from conception to production, reflection to refinement, utterance to reception and answerability. What follows covers an arc from imagining the program to implementing it and then moves on to an examination of how it was received through an analysis of viewer mail from the 1970s and 1980s. By analyzing Rogers's comments on the program, as well as episodes, scripts, other *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* regalia, and viewer mail, this work elucidates how Rogers conceived of his project, employed communication strategies that set the program apart from other children's programming of the time, reached viewers, and sustained interest for more than thirty years.

With *Neighborhood*, Rogers conceived of and implemented a dialogical rhetorical foundation that masterfully exploits the parasocial elements of the televisual medium. Rogers's project evolved through layer upon layer of dialogical practice—creating music to express human emotion, interactive learning with children at the Arsenal Family and Children's Center, using dyadic address, constructing and deconstructing everyday objects on the program, and corresponding with viewers via letter writing—and thus

follows a structural format of dialectical unfolding. *On Becoming Neighbors* establishes *Neighborhood* as a media and cultural event of indispensable importance in the creation of a specific social and emotional sensibility that millions of Americans identified with and embraced as their own.

In this regard, I have structured the study in the following sequential and dynamic communication staging: First, I situate Rogers's project in the sociocultural milieu of the period, paying special attention to the discourses on television, technology, and culture in order to show the ways Rogers is dialoguing with the culture at large. Next, I examine Rogers's own statements on the program, television, education, psychology, theology, and culture across his lifelong work on *Neighborhood*. From there I move toward a detailed analysis of the program itself and offer a dynamic reading of the child development theory that guides his rhetorical choices—in particular, his focus on secure attachment and object relations. Finally, I turn toward reception of the program and of Rogers's dialogical communication efforts through an examination and analysis of viewer mail.

In "Discourse in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin writes that "the listener and his response are regularly taken into account when it comes to everyday dialogue and rhetoric."<sup>5</sup> For Bakhtin, a text is always an intertext: a space for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices and modes of discourse, all of which are not just verbal but constitute in fact a sociohistorical phenomenon. It does not express a readymade and immanent autonomous individuality. Instead, the prose-text emerges in the course of the relationship between speaker and anticipated audience and in dialogue between different sociolanguages. Moreover, for Bakhtin, "the word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented to a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction."

Leah Vande Berg extends Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic to

the televisual text, asserting that a text is ambiguous because its meaning relies in large part on who is creating it and constructing the meanings.<sup>6</sup> The people who “read” texts tend to remake and reweave what they have read in terms of their own personal experiences and perceptions.<sup>7</sup> In turn, John Fiske argues that “texts are the sites of conflict” between their sources of production and modes of reception.<sup>8</sup> Further, different viewers may “see” remarkably different shows.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, the intentions of a television producer and a the perceptions of a viewer can significantly diverge or can achieve high degrees of convergence—as in the case, as we will see, of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*.

*On Becoming Neighbors* thus focuses on vision, production, and reception. A dialogic approach that necessarily includes reception keeps us from falling into the trap of looking at the film text alone, which would be like listening to the sound of one hand clapping. These three aspects of investigation have never been studied in their inherent and essential dynamic play of interaction on *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. Textual studies, semiotic studies and rhetorical studies, and reception studies make up the core of critical approaches to television today. My study makes a refreshing contribution to rhetorical studies with special regard to questions of communication ethics, persuasion, and the challenge of multiculturalism in the fabric of an assumed, but perhaps not fully justified, American *sensus communis* of the time. By engaging in a critical dialogic reading of Rogers’s envisioning texts, episodes of the first year of *Neighborhood*, and viewer mail, my findings show the effects of the permeating power of the dialogic on the program and illustrate the ways that Rogers was able to create a heightened parasocial dynamic between himself and his viewer as a result of his keen understanding of embodied communication (e.g., speech tone, sustained eye contact, and relaxed but controlled body movement), opportunities for which television uniquely affords.

My discussion of Rogers's pedagogical communication project is grounded in several compatible interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives on communication ethics and pedagogy that speak to the fundamental rhetorical frameworks of the program as designed by Rogers and his primary consultant, University of Pittsburgh professor of child development and Arsenal Family and Children's Center cofounder Dr. Margaret McFarland. At the core of Rogers's approach is a highly developed empathic, invitational, and dialogic ethos that creates a heightened parasocial dynamic between him and his viewer. By beginning each "television visit"—his term for an episode of his program—with an ethical orientation that seeks to establish a relationship of trust and care, Rogers, over the course of thirty minutes each weekday, creates the conditions for a dialogue in which participants explore possibilities and questions within the social dynamic of friendship and the larger imaginary social world of a neighborhood.

During the musical introduction to the opening song, "Won't You Be My Neighbor," a camera pans aeri-ally through a miniature view of the neighborhood where Rogers apparently lives. The model neighborhood includes tree-lined streets alongside quaint houses and parked cars, like those of a typical middle-class, suburban neighborhood from the postwar period. We eventually arrive inside the home of Mister Rogers, who enters the scene looking straight into the camera and singing, "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day in the neighborhood. Would you be mine? Could you be mine?" He continues,

I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you!  
I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you  
So, let's make the most of this beautiful day  
Since we're together we might as well say,  
Would you be mine?  
Could you be mine? Won't you be my neighbor?

Won't you please,  
Won't you please?  
Please won't you be my neighbor?<sup>10</sup>

In his short song of welcome, in the performance of which he immediately establishes direct eye gaze with the television viewer, Rogers creates a dyadic relationship with the individual viewer, whom he asks, in the most intimate of phrasings, “Would you be mine?” Indeed, the first few lines of the song, which serves as the ritualized introduction to every episode, sets the relational ground from which the program unfolds as dialogical and intimate at the very start. Rogers first greets the day in an adoring and positive fashion, calling it “beautiful.” His orientation is open and embracing of the world, the day, and his interlocutor, the viewer. He exudes confidence, pleasure, and reassurance in his nonverbal approach as well, by smiling, standing tall, and moving into the home with purpose and good speed. After acknowledging the day, he asks the viewer to step into this space with him—“Won't you be my neighbor?” he asks. Notice, if you will, that his invitation here is not a statement but a question that requires a response. He does not simply state, “Welcome to the show.” In this seemingly simple choice of asking the viewer to join him on the program as his beloved neighbor, Rogers places the viewer in an active subject position in which she is called to accept or decline his invitation. Accepting the invitation swiftly and simply brings the two into relationship as host and viewer and establishes the relational and communicative ground from which dialogue and exploration of the world ensues.

I deploy the Belgian ethicist, philosopher, and theologian Roger Burggraeve's concept of “ethical emotionality” as an illuminating theoretical matrix for examining and analyzing Rogers's various points of departure in creating and recreating the social and moral world of *Neighborhood*, as illustrated above. Burggraeve reflects

on the dynamic between education and values that he argues accounts for the construction of a holistic and moral religious education. Burggraeve establishes as first principle for the project of such an education the orientation and practice of an “ethical emotionality” that gives way to an “experience of belongingness in security and participation whereby both the confrontation with what is ‘reasonable’ and ethically responsible as well as the integration in a sustaining perspective of meaning is embedded and made possible.”<sup>11</sup>

In explaining the concept of “ethical emotionality,” Burggraeve lays out the fundamental conditions for a “holistic moral and religious education according to a “trptych of emotionality, rationality, and meaning.” In this triptych, “emotionality” is posed as the “primary foundation for holistic education” due to its experiential nature, constituted by a sense of belongingness in security and participation, “whereby both the confrontation with what is ‘reasonable’ and ethically responsible, as well as the integration in a sustaining perspective of meaning is embedded and made possible.”<sup>12</sup> Burggraeve’s theorizing on the essentiality of “ethical emotionality” in education is rooted in a Christian theological framework that posits a “relational and emotionally involved God” who “comes near” and “binds himself” with his human children in a forgiving, reconciliatory, and loving way.<sup>13</sup> For this reason I will use Burggraeve’s concept of “ethical emotionality” as a framework for understanding Rogers’s communication ethos and affect.

Burggraeve’s emphasis on the body in regards to the conveyance of such ethical emotionality is keenly important to Rogers’s communication project, as television’s nature of secondary orality affords—through its embodied execution, location in the intimate space of the domestic, and episodic nature—a penetrating parasocial interactional sensory dynamic. Burggraeve’s discussion of a relational and emotionally involved God places emotionality and dyadic relationship at both the start and the center of the

educational process and in this regard helps to clarify and better explain Rogers's ritual practice of relational affirmation throughout the enactment of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

Burggraeve draws from child development theorist Donald Woods Winnicott's insights into the ways "emotional embedment" creates the necessary "potential space" for education to further elaborate the importance of ethical emotionality as first principle in education. Winnicottian psychological understandings of the emotional life of the child clarify Rogers's rhetorical frameworks and discursive thematics. Rogers's consistent movement from dialogical engagement and the embodied creation of an invitational ethos and atmosphere to the investigation and manipulation of an object speaks to a Winnicottian understanding of the necessary acts for the development of healthy personhood, which begins with the process of forming a secure attachment to one's mother and continues toward the growth of a more independent self who is able to detach from his or her mother and engage in culture (i.e., the constructive engagement with the wider material and social world).

Rogers saw the production of his children's television show as a space infused by the Holy Spirit in which he, as a servant of God, strives to minister to the *deepest* and most *essential* needs of children—to be loved and accepted just as they are.<sup>14</sup> Rogers appears to understand the relationship between God and human beings as a dialogical process of communication in which both sender and receiver are engaged in a mutual dynamic of discovery. In Martin Buber's "I-Thou" framework, "all real living is meeting" and "no system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*."<sup>15</sup> That is to say that in Buber's conception of being, the "I-Though" dynamic replaces the individual, solitary "I" of Descartes. Existence is predicated, thus, on the notion of mutuality. Rogers, too, is keenly interested in this meeting and posits it as primary for his "television visit." "I'm not

that interested in ‘mass communications,’” Rogers wrote. “I am much more interested in what happens between this person and the one watching. The space between the television set and that person who’s watching is very holy ground.”<sup>16</sup> In such a dynamic, God is neither dictator nor judge.<sup>17</sup> Rogers thus envisioned his program as a possible space for giving birth to what he calls “a holy ground of communication”—that space between any two people in which each is accepted “exactly as you are.”<sup>18</sup> This is the space that is essential and yet “invisible to the eye,” Rogers asserts, quoting Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*.<sup>19</sup>

The invocation of such a space between the television persona and the viewer suggests a lengthy consideration of communication ethics from the perspective of dialogue. In my discussion of Rogers’s dialogical approach, I further draw upon key concepts in communication ethics articulated by Robert C. Arnett. In *Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialogue and Difference*, Arnett and his coauthors posit that in the increasingly fragmented society of postmodern America, the application of various ethical goods is “negotiated and enacted through discourse.”<sup>20</sup> Considering Rogers’s practice of ministering through narrative and dialogue, Arnett’s understanding of narrative and dialogic communication ethics proves helpful in analyzing and interpreting Rogers’s approach.

Rogers’s dialogic understanding of television is clarified when he later asserts that, contrary to those who believe that television presupposes a passive audience and has little influence on people, the medium is in fact quite powerful not only because it can persuade but because of its invitation to response. “Why would advertisers pay so much money to put their messages on a medium that doesn’t affect us all that much?” he asks. “I do feel that what we see and hear on the screen is a part of who we become.”<sup>21</sup> It would seem here that Rogers’s vision entails an understanding of the viewer as an active participant in what

television critics of the time had characterized as a monologic communication process.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, his understanding of television's communication process points to an even deeper layer of consciousness that is constitutive of who we are—his statement borders on an ontological claim.

Television changed the definition and understanding of home entertainment by bringing the oral culture and dramas portrayed on screens once exclusive to the movie theater into domestic life.<sup>23</sup> With the introduction of television, we see a blending and overlapping of the times and spaces of entertainment. Television erased the boundaries between private and public time/space, and entertainment and family life. With the installation of television in domestic space, “the primary site of exhibition for spectator amusements was transferred from the public space of the movie theater to the private space of the home.”<sup>24</sup>

If we differentiate space into distinct zones of nonverbal communication, depending on how far the speaker stands in relation to his/her audience, as Edward T. Hall does in *The Hidden Dimension*, we find that Rogers tends to occupy alternatively both personal and social space. Rogers does not cross into the sphere of intimate space and stays shy of public space. Hall identifies spatial zones in relation to the ways that physical environment, space, and territory become forms of nonverbal communication. He identifies four spatial zones—intimate space, the most personal communication, in which people are 0 to 1.5 feet apart; personal space, where most conversation between family and friends occurs and in which people are 1.5 to 4 feet apart; social space, where the majority of group interactions take place, in which people are separated by 4 to 12 feet; and public space, where, for example, a speaker is at least 12 feet away from his audience. As an object that belongs within the category of home furniture, the television is imbued with symbolic meaning tied to the social space of kinship and domesticity.<sup>25</sup> Rogers is keenly aware of this symbolic

space that television, as a system of communication, has come to play in the midst of the family, where before, outsiders were not embodied participants.

In regards to understanding these spatial dimensions between the viewer and the television's representation of social life and sociability, it is useful to keep in mind psychologists Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl's thesis regarding the development of a new space of communication called the parasocial.<sup>26</sup> Writing in 1956, Horton and Wohl argue that the characteristics of new media create the illusion of a personal relationship for the viewer between himself and the performer. They add that images presented on television create specific sociobiological responses in viewers. "In television, especially," they argue, "the image which is presented makes available nuances of appearance and gesture to which ordinary social perception is attentive and to which interaction is cued." Especially when an actor is playing himself, as Rogers does on *Neighborhood*, audience members respond "with something more than running observation." That "something" is *active* participation. This "simulacrum of conversational give and take," the authors write, "may be called parasocial interaction."<sup>27</sup> Though the authors refer to the family only once in their article, I contend that given this unanticipated dimension of the capacity of the television set to communicate within the family milieu, a revolution has taken place in the socioaffective space of the family. And this transformation is acknowledged and capitalized on with the creation of the character of "Mister Rogers." In retrospect, it would seem that *Neighborhood* is predicated on this phenomenon of the parasocial and the harnessing of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson's understanding of the interpersonal and familial foundations of the human psyche.

Prior to this unanticipated but momentous discovery of the parasocial effects of television on its viewers, childrearing experts attempted to intervene in the educational dimensions of the family

by providing advice to mothers. From reading Erikson, Rogers and his collaborator, McFarland, understand that the primary scene where the child develops is the family. Within that family milieu, the primary object of social concern is the figure of the mother as the chief educator in the family.

*Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was created for broadcasting on the National Education Television network, later renamed the Public Broadcasting Service. As such, it was designed to provide educational programming to very young children and their families. Identifying early on that because of the television's physical location within the family domain television discourses would likely become part of the family communication culture, Rogers eventually named his production company Family Communications Inc. Further exploring the educational elements of *Neighborhood* and the ways Rogers exploited its unique parasocial nature, I draw critical connections between the dialogic educational theory of Paulo Freire, Walter Ong's understanding of secondary orality and the ways embodied communication functions at primal biological levels, and Horton and Wohl's conceptualization of parasocial interaction that relates the critical episodic and domestic nature of television.<sup>28</sup>

In chapter 1, "Situating Rogers's Vision: A Sociocultural Framing," I contextualize Rogers's understanding of his project relative to the historical moment and to the dominant, residual, and emergent cultures of the American postwar era. I argue that Rogers, who was highly critical of the vaudevillian and slapstick performances dominant in early television, set out to employ television to restore the anthropocentric and community values of a residual, yet once dominant, mainline Protestant ethos through the integration of romantic agrarianism, an arts and crafts aesthetic, a gospel-inspired perspective on personhood and pastoral care, and the new and groundbreaking findings of the changing and

increasingly influential field of child development. I further situate Rogers's prescient articulations on television, its communicative power, and its parasocial possibilities within broader historical discussions of communication technologies and their cultural implications. Rogers set out to employ television to communicate through dialogical pedagogy a set of anthropocentric behavioral, ethical, and cultural values that he hoped would contribute to the formation of postwar subjectivities in a rapidly changing and culturally contested period. In this way, he performs a pedagogical intervention in the public sphere by privileging a televisual interpersonal communication ethic, with an emphasis on mutuality, the management of feelings, and the maintenance of ethical social relationships, in order to counter the increasing privileging of commercial, slapstick forms.

Chapter 2, "Creating the Dialogic: Christianity, Child Development, and the Parasocial," analyzes the ways Rogers incorporated psychological and ethical insights derived from his experience working with children as a student of child development at Pittsburgh's Arsenal Family and Children's Center and as an MDiv student of pastoral care at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. I argue that he developed a dialogical, I-Thou communication ethic and practice centered on social emotional learning and the creation of meaning, which he honed and developed for the television medium. McFarland, who consulted with Rogers on every script that he wrote, profoundly influenced and assisted Rogers's understanding of how children might read each rhetorical choice; Rogers's theological formulations and the debates ensuing at the seminary while he was a student show how he incorporated this critical element of understanding into his communication project.

In chapter 3, "Inside *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*: Objects, Play, and the Cultural Dialectic," a detailed look at a selection of programs that ran during the first year reveals that a consistent and ritualized emphasis on investigating the uses of everyday

material objects, their social meanings, and their creative potentiality is central to the show's construction. The object thus becomes the starting point for the creative, enacted, and embodied unfolding of a culture and a people who constitute and occupy the small, manageable world of the neighborhood. The program, I argue, constitutes the representation of a culture's materiality that is organized by social principles that promote values of discovery, transformation, and growth at the levels of the material world, the social world that gives meaning to the material world, and the emotional and moral world of *Neighborhood*.

In the fourth chapter, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?: Intergenerational Dialogics in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* Viewer Mail," I examine correspondence between viewers and Rogers—correspondence that reveals the success of Rogers's dialogic ethos in prompting discursive responses among viewers. Viewer letters affirm Rogers's sense of dialoguing with his audience; he responded to each one. That he retained all the correspondence over thirty-three years testifies to the unusual importance it holds for his communication project. As in previous chapters, I draw on Burggraeve's conceptualization of ethical emotionality as a theoretical framework for analyzing the letters. These letters reveal a remarkable consistency in their collective thematic quality and constitute a field of study about the dialogical relationship between "Mister Rogers," the historical Fred Rogers, and *Neighborhood's* audience. Most viewers write to express an emotional and affective identification with Rogers, illustrating well the success of his dialogical ethos, the social-emotional developmental emphasis of the program, and Rogers's ability to create emotional safety that breaks through the parasocial dimension and into the realm of individual communication exchange.

When I embarked on this project, I did not expect that the questions I asked would be answered with such overwhelmingly complex, dialogical interplay between the fields of developmental

psychology, communication ethics, television studies, and American and religious studies. While I knew that what many people see as a dull, slow, and simple children's program was likely to be revealed as more complex and dynamic beneath the surface, I did not expect to find such complexity of thought, integration of knowledge, practical engagement, and contemplative idea creation displayed both behind the scenes and in front of the camera. This book reveals the hardworking dedication, intellectual and emotional struggles, and intensive consideration of a television artist striving to create a dialogical production that placed valued ideas and practices from a residual American culture (an agrarian and mainline Protestant ethos) in conversation with an emergent and influential discipline of study (postwar child development psychology) to create a cultural product that spoke to the perceived needs of transitional subjectivities searching for new meanings and ways of coping and being in a new mass-mediated age.

Rogers displayed prominently in his WQED office the quotation from *The Little Prince*, "And now here is my secret, a very simple secret. It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye." It served as a constant reminder to himself and to those involved in the production of *Neighborhood* that the program envisions the affective life as the defining faculty of being human. Rogers's mass communication project was thus constituted by the dialogical communication acts of seeing and being seen. For Fred Rogers, one can only truly see through the heart—the symbol of the socioemotional psyche. In Mister Rogers's neighborhood, the heart, the symbolic home for affect and emotion, is the organ of vision and the dialogic is the place where we begin.