

## Fred Rogers and the Significance of Story

**T**here is a story about a mother who said to her child, “I wish you would change your behavior.” The child said, “That’s all right, Mother; Mister Rogers loves me as I am.”

Forty years in children’s television — with an approach that is so different from so many other programs — is an event of historic significance. Forty years as a gentle provocateur and a counterpoint clearly is more than a story of quick success. If you are trendy, you will last as long as a trend does. If you are going along with convention you will quickly get used up by television.

So what is it about *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* that’s outside convention or trend? My purpose is to try to place this program in a historic if not cosmic perspective.

If I ask you what is the unique or the most distinctive aspect of human life or the human species, what would you say? There have been many answers to that question. *Homo sapiens* is the tool-making animal, the social animal, the language-using, communicating animal. All are true but I don’t think any of those is *the* most distinctive characteristic of our species. Other creatures do some of each of those things. But there is one thing that no other species does: tell stories.

Our ability to tell stories is important not only because we live by storytelling, but also because we erect a world that is constructed from the stories we hear and tell. Most of our reactions are *not* in response to the immediate physical environment, which is what most other species do most of the time. We are not on this planet just to look at our immediate environment or to experience reality. We are here in a very general but very real way to exchange stories. We are here to contribute to that reality (or should I say that fantasy we call reality). Each of our stories contributes

#### 4 George Gerbner

to a larger context, a larger environment, a larger world in which we live — most of which we have acquired not through direct experience but through stories we hear and through stories we tell. To each story we adjust our everyday experience; by each story we judge and measure our everyday experience and even ourselves.

So it is the stories that animate the human imagination — the stories about how things work, what they are, and what to do about them — that provide the most distinctive and characteristic aspect of human life. And as Fred Rogers wisely notes, each of us is capable of contributing; each individual viewer creates his or her own exciting, vital story.

In theory, there are three kinds of stories. In reality they are all mixed up; there are few pure stories, but for the sake of analysis, the pure types can be reduced to three categories.

The first kind of story illuminates one of the most important aspects of human life: invisible relationships. It reveals how we relate to each other — the hidden dynamics of the network of relationships in which we live. By such revelations, these stories tell the truth about how things *really* work, because how things *really* work is not apparent, is not visible. It is something behind the scenes, and the only way to make it apparent is to make us see something that we otherwise cannot see. The way to do that is fiction and drama, or as Fred Rogers calls it, make-believe. “Make-believe” is the construction of a story that allows us to see what is usually covert. It depends on characters and actions that we invent in order to tell the truth about how things really work or might work or should work or should not work. (When Lady Elaine challenges a pronouncement of King Friday, it is really an inquisitive child insisting one more time, “But *why*, Mom?”) These kinds of stories — what we usually call fiction, drama, and fairy tales — are often dismissed as unreal or fantasy when they are in fact the unique and indispensable ways of illuminating not that which is but that which shows *how things work*, or what’s behind the scenes.

The second kind of story is that of factual explanation and explication. Histories, documentaries, the news of today — these are all examples of this second brand of story. By themselves, these stories are meaningless. A news story — a story of a fact — acquires significance only as it is fitted into a framework that is erected by the first kind of story of how life really works behind the scenes where we can’t see. Once we understand that —

and we all acquire some understanding of it as we grow up in a culture — *then* we can use the facts, *then* we can fit in the facts to confirm the fantasy we call reality and say, “Yes, that is real.” If it doesn’t fit, we discard it, or we say it is biased or false or invalid.

The third story is a story of value and choice. This type of story asks, “Well, if this is how things work and this is how things are, then what are we going to do about them?” These are the sermons, the instructions — today most of them are commercials — that present a little vignette about a style of life that says, “This is how things work, this is how things are, and this is a desirable outcome for us to attain (or an undesirable thing that you want to avoid), and therefore you should choose this particular direction, product, or service.” It is an enormously important cultivation and reinforcement of a framework of life, of what is desirable, of what are the values and choices of what to select, and how to select from them. Mister Rogers’ reiterative theme of recognizing the worth of the individual echoes and re-echoes in the lives of the children who watch.

These three kinds of stories have always been interwoven, and together they provide the fabric and context of what we call the culture. (I am defining “culture” here as a system of stories that regulates human relationships, into which we are born and which we absorb and acquire as we grow and become socialized into our place in a social structure.) They have been woven together in very different ways at different times in history.

In the first (and longest) historical period, the preindustrial period of many tens of thousands of years, storytelling was oral, handcrafted, and infinitely adjusted to time, place, and circumstance. An oral story is always a play or production or dramatic interpretation. As Shakespeare said, “The play’s the thing.” It is in the *telling* — infinitely adjustable, always interruptable and transformable, depending on the listeners’ reactions. Such oral narrative — usually called mythology and later on religion — requires a great amount of human resources. Pretechnological men and women needed much more talent, needed much bigger and better memories, needed much greater skill in order to live as they did in a world of stories. They had to carry with them and in them most useful knowledge that had to be remembered and memorized. Education in a preindustrial age consisted of aphorisms and folk tales and stories and memorization of

instructions about the seasons and about how to handle the land and the animals. The older you were the more valuable you became because you experienced more and remembered more and could contribute more.

In order to accumulate this knowledge, this reservoir of human resources, “primitive people” developed *ritual*—a ritualistic repetition and reiteration of the stories, of the songs, of the dances, of the celebrations. Most celebrations had to do with a sort of rehearsal about what is tried and true and established and valid. And that ritual encompassed all three kinds of stories—about what the world is like and how it works and what is the nature of the universe and meaning of life, and what are the facts of life presumed to be true and untrue, and what to do about them. In other words, these rituals were embodied in the mythologies of all communities and of all tribes, and it was only when certain tribes explored and found that there were other people who had other mythologies that the notion of religion arose. All the great religious teachers—Buddha, Jesus Christ, Mohammed—were storytellers. They said to their people, “Listen to me. I know this; believe it.” And the people listened and believed.

Then came a major transformation in the storytelling process: the printing press allowed the first mechanical reproduction of stories in a book. This began the industrialization of the story-telling process, and remains one of the most profound transformations (if not the most profound transformation) in the way human beings live their lives. It had a direct impact on the mind; once stories were recorded and printed and later distributed, there was an immediate connection with the world that we erected and the way in which we lived through our stories.

The coming of printing broke up the ritual. You could look it up; you didn’t have to remember it all. It broke up the centralized ministrations of stories by the priests, the interpreters, the storytellers. You didn’t have to have somebody to interpret a book—for instance, in the Western world, the Bible. You could read it yourself, or take it with you. This was the beginning of the Reformation. The Reformation would have been inconceivable without printing because it was based on the possibility of a diversity of explanation instead of a grand interpreter of the book. It is the beginning of the notion that a community can exist with more than a single philosophy, more than a single interest, more than a single perspective. Printing helped establish the right of different classes, regions, ethnic

and religious communities to tell unique stories from their own points of view. With print, the storyteller was out of view, and could no longer look at the crowd and cry, "Believe me; I know." As receivers of story, we lost an absolute faith in the storyteller alone. The story was there, but we gained time and perspective. We could *choose* to say, "Yes, I've read this and I believe and I have faith" — or choose to reject that story in favor of another one.

To tell stories that illuminate the interest and perspective of a particular subculture and to permit the publication, dissemination, and analysis of those stories was a revolutionary development. Publication invented a new form of social enterprise called *publics*. Without printing and publication, the concept was unthinkable, because a "public" is a community who have something in common but who may never meet. Before the printing press, the territory in which a community could be governed was the area that its most distant citizens could reach in a short period of time, perhaps one or two days. Citizens had to meet to discuss matters face to face. The larger communities of the so-called ancient empires were really not communities but tribute-collecting organizations. You sent out the legions when the roads hardened in the spring to collect the taxes. Only since the coming of printing has it been possible through publication to enlarge the community's reach to what we today call a "public," which extends beyond all impenetrable barriers of time, space, class, and language, because print can be translated, disseminated, and preserved.

This theory of community — where competing interests can live more or less peacefully side by side, freely pursuing their conflicting interests by virtue of their power to tell stories from their own points of view — is only a few hundred years old, yet it has transformed the basis of our political, cultural, social, and religious life. So the notion of public, on which all modern theories of government and education and communication are based, is itself a product of the printing press. It broke up the ritual; it decentralized and pluralized communication; it gave rise to the notion of mass publics and, therefore, to a plurality of perspectives in modern society. But to participate fully in this pluralized society, to participate in the changed ritual of story, the individuals in the community must be literate. Without literacy human beings are without the story that is literature. We

have always asked that literature turn statistics into human beings. We have story to guide us and illuminate our thoughts and behaviors.

Now comes the present age, the telecommunications age, whose flagship is television. Despite other technological developments, television will, I think, dominate our culture for a long time to come. Television has certain unique and very specific characteristics that no other medium has.

The first and most important characteristic is that television is a ritual. Most people watch television by the clock and not by the program. Its true predecessor is not radio or film, but preindustrial religion. Children today are born into a home in which the set is on an average of seven hours a day. That means that in half of our homes it is put on in the morning and turned off in the evening. It is like the wallpaper: you are born into it; you absorb its patterns without knowing; and you learn a great deal about your surroundings.

We know from research that by the time children are five or six years of age — about when they first encounter the outside culture, either by going to school or by going to church or both — they have already lived in an informative, intensive, ever-present televised environment in which all the stories are told and retold but with very little variety. The same basic patterns are told in endless repetition but are disguised by what appears to be the novelty of the plot. Forget the plot — the plot is there to conceal what is really going on and to give the appearance of novelty. Look at the casting, look at the relationships, look at the fate of different social types in these stories. Whether it is news or drama or talk shows, you'll find great similarity in the basic constituents of storytelling among all these forms.

For the first time in human history the storyteller who tells most of the stories to our children, and at the same time to our parents and grandparents, is not the church or the school. It is a small group of distant corporations with purposes of their own that have great virtues and great weaknesses. They are the storytellers that in many ways have taken over and given us a world into which our children are born and in which we all live.

Let me tell you a few things about what kind of a world that is, both good and bad. Remember the positive things as well as the negative.

For the first time in human experience, the poor share a great deal of

cultural content with the rich. Isolation and parochialism are no longer a given condition of poverty. Because of television, a child from the farm may know just as many sophisticated brands and practices as the aristocracy. You are no more out in the sticks; you are part of the mainstream. You have been brought into it. You are no longer politically uninformed; you have been brought into a national flow of social, political, and cultural current. The great names and celebrities of our age, the beautiful and the ugly, the famous and the infamous, come into your homes every day, and provide an unprecedented social cohesion between otherwise very different and heterogeneous groups of people. This has never before happened.

Such a normative standard erodes traditional differences among human beings in our society. They get absorbed by a form of “cultural mainstreaming,” which is very different from its namesake, educational mainstreaming. In cultural mainstreaming, groups who are divergent from the great national mean — divergent in their points of view, in their philosophies and standards by which they measure how things work and what to do about them — are divergent only as long as they are “light” viewers of television. Being a light viewer doesn’t mean that one doesn’t like television, but that one watches more selectively and may engage in a variety of other cultural pursuits. Such viewers tend to have higher incomes, be more educated, have many more cultural opportunities available to them, and have more diverse tastes.

The heavy viewers are those groups who are otherwise divergent from the mainstream but tend to converge upon the mainstream. Television tends to erase cultural differences, and by doing that presents a kind of homogenized standard for response for action and reaction that is national, almost international, in scope.

What kind of a world does this mainstream present? We have a group of maybe 40 or 50 million Americans who had very little before television but a lot of boredom — who are not book readers, who have never been book readers. Television has monopolized the lives of people who have had little cultivation of diversified tastes. Television has become all of culture for them. It has become, in the lives of people less culturally privileged, the most interesting thing going on any time of the day or night, and that is a tremendous attraction. Instead of being automatically critical of television and everything it stands for, we should try to under-

stand what is going on; we should examine the kind of world it presents, become more active citizens in constructing that kind of world, and appreciate the few historical phenomena such as *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

I'm going to pick out some results of our research on the TV world and its basic story-making elements. This "mainstream" television world is a place where men outnumber women across the board at least three to one. Starting out with that kind of cast, what can you get that is really accurate and valid? There is a basic flaw in almost every play, in most of our news, in most of our formula-bound children's programs (where the disproportion is even greater). Representation is not only a question of numbers, but also a question of the range of opportunities one sees a significant majority element of human beings pursue. If you are underrepresented in the culture in which you grow up, you see yourself limited in the number of life's opportunities. You see yourself undervalued, underendowed, overvictimized, less powerful, and more vulnerable. That is the true meaning of representation and its distribution in the world in which our children become encultured.

It works the same way with age. Young people are vastly underrepresented, less than one-third of their true proportion of the population. Likewise, people sixty-five and older are portrayed on TV in less than one-fifth of their true numbers. They are practically invisible. And when either group is visible, they play the obligatory parts that are the most stereotyped — a romantic partner, a grandmother baby-sitting, or a child who is either overly charming or overly abused.

The most victimized populations on television are young boys and adolescent girls. One way to measure victimization is not to simply calculate the sheer number of "violent acts" but to construct a ratio of the frequency of someone asserting his or her will over an unwilling person — which creates a good definition of violence with someone subjecting another to that kind of violation. That "violent/victim" ratio establishes a gauge for measuring *relative power*. In that sense, young boys are the most victimized, young girls are the second most; in general women are more victimized than men, and minorities more so than majorities. If you are a white male in the prime of life, although your chances of getting into a violent situation are frequent on television, your chances of getting away with it, of being the winner rather than the victim, are the greatest.

Violence is being shown on television an average of five times per



hour in prime time; twenty-five times per hour in children's weekend prime time programming. It has become a cheap industrial ingredient to hype otherwise lagging interest in relatively poor programs (most of the highly rated programs tend to be the least violent), and it has become a great exercise and demonstration of power in our society. This role of violence on television is subtle, unrecognized, unwitting, and certainly unacknowledged.

The ratios between the violent and the victimized reflect the hierarchies of power in our social structure. If you get ten violent perpetrators on a television show, the overall average number of victims is about twelve. But for every ten women written into the scripts (women who are able to enforce their own will), about sixteen women will be victimized. For older women, this "victimization ratio" is one to thirty-six. And so on with nonwhites, with boys, with girls, and other cultural minorities.

Violence is essentially a demonstration of power — the very thing that perpetuates the underrepresentation of women and minorities. The frequency of violence enforces the kind of cultural colonization of our people that takes place in the world of television. What really counts in violence is not only the *possibility* of imitation (although that is a price we pay for maintaining the structure of power), but who can get away with what against whom most frequently. Television violence is simply a convenient dramatic shorthand for this kind of power equation.

The occupational distribution in the world of television is peculiar because of this power play. Prime time is essentially devoted to a world of power, where power plays are dominant. Daytime TV is maybe artistically less pleasing, but at least it's a world of more equitable, *internal* turbulence rather than external power.

Children's commercial programming involves an extended combination of both. It is not muted. Everything in terms of stereotyping and violence — and in terms of the imbalance found in prime time and daytime programming for relatively mature and sophisticated tastes — takes on its crudest and most exploitative aspect in children's programming. This is not just a little aberration. It is a world-class scandal.

Children are also viewers of prime time. Four-fifths of children's viewing time goes into prime time. The average viewer of prime time sees a cast of about three hundred characters week in and week out. The single

highest occupation on television is law enforcer; about forty-four characters enforce the law per week, and about twenty-three criminals violate the law. There are about twelve nurses, ten doctors, six lawyers, and three judges. The intimate glimpses of how law-and-order and medicine work are mostly untrue but very realistic. Thanks to television, who doesn't know what a courtroom or an operating room looks like from the inside? And every child has an image of what a police station looks like, and an executive boardroom. Most children today have a better understanding of these types of occupations than they do of what their mothers and fathers do at work each day.

Television culture presents to our children and to all of us a world of manufactured, assembly-line, mass-produced, high-pressure daydreams. They are dreams that scare, that shame, that hurt too many.

Mister Rogers explores the very stuff of this world. In one episode (one of many examples), he goes behind the scenes of a scary television show, *The Incredible Hulk*. He shows all of us how this is made. In a single stroke he achieves the shift from attribution to inference. "Attribution" is a kind of childish way of looking at a story as something natural arising out of the natural world — in other words, attributing meaning to something that's merely an image. "Inference" is when you can get behind the scenes and know there is a script, an actor, a camera, and make-up. Infer from what you see. You are in control. And as soon as you do that, it becomes an enriching experience no matter how bad the program may be. Rogers allows a young audience to make this crucial shift.

In this world of too many manufactured dreams, Fred Rogers is hand-crafting — for us as well as for our children — the dreams that heal. Just how does Fred craft these dreams? First, he always has something to tell, rather than something to sell. He has a purpose, a message that respects the viewer and what the viewer may need, rather than what the viewer may be induced to buy.

His perspective on life's needs, problems, and conflicts does more than help the child. It confers a measure of immunity from other programs that may be damaging. Knowing that there is another way of looking at things counteracts the unwitting absorption of what is seen elsewhere.

His dreams, his stories, offer ways to control the chaotic life of the streets and neighborhoods in which many children live. Children are

starving for story, the kind that builds on hope, the kind that echoes for a lifetime. We need story in our lives, not dreams based on greed. Mister Rogers turns to the viewer and says quietly, “Believe *you*. It is *your* story that is important. It is *your* mind and heart that can make things possible — just because of who you are.”

*Jeanne Marie Laskas's highly personal look at Fred Rogers traces the businessman's-son-turned-icon from his roots in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, to his days as floor manager on NBC's Kate Smith Hour to joining WQED, the nation's first public broadcasting station. Acknowledging both the frustration and rewards of interviewing a legend ("him on one end of the couch, me on the chair, he so skillfully dodging all direct questions about himself, me frustrated by that skill yet moved by his words"), Laskas lets Fred Rogers' own words trace a complex self-portrait. What emerges is ironic: a complicated personality whose many layers form a seamless coat of simplicity.*

*"Like your first hero, your first psychotherapist, and your first-grade teacher, anything that inspires that much awe becomes just that: a thing," Laskas writes. "I think Fred is often regarded this way, certainly by the media, by scholars who study his work, by museum curators like the ones who put his sweater in the Smithsonian Institution as a permanent piece of Americana. . . . It's the hidden human, the Fred of Mister Rogers, whom I hope to uncover, at least for a glimpse."*

*Laskas is a columnist for the Washington Post Magazine, where her personal essays column, "Uncommon Sense," appears weekly. Her first collection of stories is The Balloon Lady and Other People I Know. Laskas's essays and profiles are featured in GQ, Life, Allure, Health, Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine, Good Housekeeping, Reader's Digest, and others. Formerly a writing instructor at the University of Pittsburgh, she has an MFA in nonfiction writing.*