

THE BIG IDEAS

Be the Best

At whatever you are.

Our Job in Life

To encourage others.

I Like You

Just the way you are.

Being a Living Example

Is the only way to roll.

Mr. Rogers' Creativity

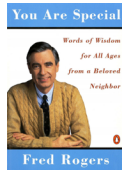
"Tortured of the damned?!" Yep.

Perfect Parents/Kids?

Nope. There are none.

The Gap

The essence of human creativity.



You Are Special

Words of Wisdom for All Ages from a Beloved Neighbor

BY FRED ROGERS · PENGUIN BOOKS © 1995 · 192 PAGES

"I care deeply about communication, about words—what we say and what we hear.

While our television communication might look simple to some, it really isn't. Children are not simple . . . neither are adults. I have always given a great deal of thought to how I present ideas during our television visits, and I'm always fascinated to hear how people have used what we have said—on television, in speeches, during interviews, and in our books. Often they've used our ideas in creative, productive ways I had never dreamed they could be used.

So may it be with the words in this book, which have been gathered from my speeches, songs, newspaper columns, books, and television programs. Once you've read them and made them your own, may they find their place in the innermost part of you—in that essential part of you that inspires you to be who you really are."

~ Fred Rogers from *You Are Special*

I got this book after watching the wonderful (!) documentary on Mister Rogers called [Won't You Be My Neighbor?](#)

(Note: I simply can't recommend that documentary enough. It's an incredibly inspiring look behind-the-scenes into one humbly heroic man's ministry to change the world one kid (and family) at a time.)

Technically, I got this book (and a couple others we'll be profiling soon) after one of our Optimizers told me that Mister Rogers had some great books in [a little comment on our Oasis](#). (Thank you, Stephana!!)

This book is a collection of wisdom gems from various sources. It's a quick-reading portal into Mister Rogers' brain that has an amazingly calming, uplifting effect. At least it did for me. Simply reading his words seemed to elevate my consciousness and make me a kinder, more patient person. (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

As always, it's packed with Big Ideas. And, as always, I'm excited to share some of my favorites we can apply to our lives TODAY so let's jump straight in!

BE THE BEST AT WHATEVER YOU ARE

"My good friend Emilie Jacobson, who was the 'Poetry Lady' on our television programs for many years, helped us all to feel good about who we were. She often quoted a poem by Douglas Malloch, and it became her trademark. Here are the first and last verses:

If you can't be a pine on the top of a hill,
Be a scrub in the valley, but be
The best little scrub by the side of the rill,
Be a bush if you can't be a tree.

"When we love a person, we accept him or her exactly as is: the lovely with the unlvely, the strong along with the fearful, the true mixed in with the facade, and of course, the only way we can do it is by accepting ourselves that way."

~ Fred Rogers

If you can't be a highway, then just be a trail.

If you can't be a sun, be a star.

It isn't by size that you win or you fail.

Be the best at whatever you are."

"One of the strongest things I have had to wrestle with in my life is the significance of the longing for perfection in oneself and in the people bound to the self by friendship or parenthood or childhood."

~ Fred Rogers

Ah... Just reading that soothes my soul.

It also reminds me of Martin Luther King's beautiful wisdom: "Whatever your life work is, do it well. Do it so well that no one else could do it better. If it falls on your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper.'"

(Get your soul stirred listening to MLK preach that [here](#).)

And, lately I've been thinking a lot about [these Ferrari pit crew guys](#) and their epic poetry in motion. In particular, [this guy](#) has really caught my attention.

His "ONLY" job?

Yank off the front right tire. That's "it."

But look at the way he approaches his job!!!

He's all lined up and ready like he's about to run a route for a game-winning touchdown in the Super Bowl.

I'm kinda at a loss for words as I think about the humbly heroic power of his demonstration of playing our roles well.

Reminds me of that poem above. Let's revisit it one more time as we celebrate the roles we've been chosen to play and re-commit to playing them as well as we can...

*If you can't be a pine on the top of a hill,
Be a scrub in the valley, but be
The best little scrub by the side of the rill,
Be a bush if you can't be a tree.*

*If you can't be a highway, then just be a trail.
If you can't be a sun, be a star.
It isn't by size that you win or you fail.
Be the best at whatever you are."*

OUR JOB IN LIFE: TO ENCOURAGE OTHERS

"As human beings, our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has—or ever will have—something inside us that is unique to all time. It's our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression."

We all have a lot of jobs with a little "j."

But, according to Mister Rogers, we all have one Job with a big "J."

It's our job in life to help people realize just how awesome they are. "It's our job to ENCOURAGE each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression."

As we discuss in [this +1](#), the word *encourage* is one of my new favorites.

It means "to inspire with hope, courage and confidence."

"One of the greatest dignities of humankind is that each successive generation is invested in the welfare of each new generation."

~ Fred Rogers

"There is no normal life that is free of pain. It's the very wrestling with our problems that can be the impetus for our growth."

~ Fred Rogers

Etymologically, it LITERALLY means to "give" someone courage.

As in, to inject them with it kinda thing.

Think about that for a moment...

Then let's remember that *"It's our job to ENCOURAGE each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression."*

How can you do that a little more Today?

P.S. Remember that we can't GIVE something to someone else that we don't already have in our possession. As Leo Buscaglia says in [Love](#): *"To love others you must love yourself... You can only give to others what you have yourself."*

Same goes with encouragement.

One could say: *"To encourage others you must encourage yourself... You can only give to others what you have yourself."*

So... Go look in the mirror and encourage that beautiful soul looking back at you. And bring that love with you out in the world. TODAY.

I LIKE YOU

"I like you just the way you are."

One of the books we got in our little Mister Rogers wisdom-binge was a recently published, beautifully illustrated book of Mister Rogers' poetry.

It's called [A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood: The Poetry of Mister Rogers](#).

It currently sits on our kitchen table. I've been opening it up and reading the poems to Emerson.

You should see the way he lights up when I read-sing him "I Like You As You Are." (And: "It's You I Like.") (I get tears in my eyes as I type that.)

P.S.: [Here's Mister Rogers rocking the song in his first rendition of it in 1968](#).

P.P.S. I like YOU just the way you are. :)

BEING A LIVING EXAMPLE

"That chores have to be done before play; that patient persistence is often the only road to mastery; that anger can be expressed through words and nondestructive activities; that promises are intended to be kept; that cleanliness and good eating habits are aspects of self-esteem; that compassion is an attribute to be prized—all these are lessons children can learn far more readily through the living example of their parents than they ever can through formal instruction."

That's from Chapter 5 on "Discipline."

Reminds me of Angela Duckworth's wisdom on parenting from her great book [Grit](#).

She tells us: *"Author and activist James Baldwin once put it this way: 'Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.'"*

I'm also reminded of Ralph Waldo Emerson's genius line: *"What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say."*

Here's to being the living example of what we'd like to see more of in our families and world.

P.S. Here's another gem from that chapter on Discipline: *"When I asked one of my colleagues, 'What is discipline?' she replied, 'Discipline is the gift of responsible love.' I think it's hard to improve on that description."*

"A friend of mine made a calligraphy scroll that I have framed in my writing room. It reads: 'The greatest gift one can give to another person is a deeper understanding of life and the ability to love and believe in the self.'"

~ Fred Rogers

"As far as I'm concerned, this is the essence of education: to facilitate a person's learning, to help that person become more in tune with his or her own resources so that he or she can use whatever is offered more fully."

~ Fred Rogers

MISTER ROGERS' CREATIVE PROCESS

"I've often hesitated in beginning a project because I've thought, 'It'll never turn out to be even remotely like the good idea I have as I start.' I could just 'feel' how good it *could* be. But I decided that, for the present, I would create the best way I know how and accept the ambiguities."

That's from a chapter called "Creativity and Play."

It reminds me of one of my favorite scenes from that documentary I loved so much.

I actually did a +1 on it called [Mr. Rogers' Creative Neighborhood - Won't You Be a Creator?](#)

We'll make it snappy, but it's worth quickly exploring again here.

Short story.

Mister Rogers created 900 (!) episodes over three decades. Once upon a time, after taking a little break, he wrote this memo to himself (technically, he typed it on yellow legal paper—check out the image in that +1 above):

Am I kidding myself that I'm 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 can't I trust myself? Really that's what it's all about... that and not wanting to go through the agony of creation. AFTER ALL THESE YEARS IT'S JUST AS BAD AS EVER. I wonder if every creative artist goes through the tortures of the damned trying to create.?. Oh, well, 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.

-> "Tortures of the damned"?!

-> "AFTER ALL THESE YEARS IT'S JUST AS BAD AS EVER"?!

-> "Agony of creation"?!

Is that the warm and sweater-wearing cuddly Mister Rogers talking?

Yes.

Creating isn't easy.

Thank goodness Fred moved through his despair and gave us what he got.

And thank goodness you're doing the same.

"I'd like to be able to let children know that they are not alone with their feelings—that there are other people and other children who have those kinds of feelings . . . the same fears and the same joys—to let them know there is an adult who cares."

~ Fred Rogers

P.S. I'm also reminded of some parallel wisdom from Ira Glass, host and producer of NPR's *This American Life*. He tells us: "Nobody tells this to people who are beginners, I wish someone told me. All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But there is this gap. For the first couple years you make stuff, it's just not that good. It's trying to be good, it has potential, but it's not. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is why your work disappoints you. A lot of people never get past this phase, they quit. Most people I know who do interesting, creative work went through years of this. We know our work doesn't have this special thing that we want it to have. We all go through this. And if you are just starting out or you are still in this phase, you gotta know its normal and the most important thing you can do is do a lot of work. Put yourself on a deadline so that every week you will finish one story. It is only by going through a volume of work that you will close that gap, and your work will be as good as your ambitions. And I took longer to figure out how to do this than anyone I've ever met. It's gonna take awhile. It's normal to take awhile. You've just gotta fight your way through."

Yep. That's sounds right.

btw: Adam Grant references Ira Glass and his wisdom in [Originals](#).

"When I was a child and would see scary things on the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

~ Fred Rogers

He tells us: *"If you want to be an original, 'the most important possible thing you could do,' says Ira Glass, the producer of This American Life and the podcast Serial, 'is do a lot of work. Do a huge volume of work.'"*

THERE ARE NO PERFECT PARENTS ... OR KIDS ... OR HUMANS

"There are no perfect parents . . . just as there are no perfect children."

Perfection.

It doesn't exist.

Those ideals we have?

They are GUIDING STARS not distant shores.

In other words, one more time: We're never going to arrive at Perfectville.

As Carl Rogers tells us (via our Notes on Tal Ben Shahar's must re-read [The Pursuit of Perfect](#)), *"The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination."*

This is also a good time to remind ourselves of Abraham Maslow's wisdom.

Yes, he said *"What one can be, one must be."*

But, important note: He NEVER (!!!) said *"One can be and you must be perfect."*

In fact, he said quite the opposite. In [Motivation and Personality](#) he put it this way: *"There are no perfect human beings! Persons can be found who are good, very good indeed, in fact, great. There do in fact exist creators, seers, sages, saints, shakers, and movers... even if they are uncommon and do not come by the dozen. And yet these very same people can at times be boring, irritating, petulant, selfish, angry, or depressed. To avoid disillusionment with human nature, we must first give up our illusions about it."*

He also put it this way: Self-actualizers *"show many of the lesser human failings. They too are equipped with silly, wasteful, or thoughtless habits. They can be boring, stubborn, irritating. They are by no means free from a rather superficial vanity, pride, partiality to their own productions, family, friends, and children. Temper outbursts are not rare."*

So... There ya go. One more time: THERE ARE NO PERFECT HUMAN BEINGS.

By extension, there are no perfect parents. And there are no perfect children.

And... One more time: You and I and our kids won't be the first. :)

We want to REALLY get this. Because when we fail to accept the common humanity reality of the fact that neither we nor our children are or ever will be perfect, we amplify our suffering.

It's kinda like that second arrow that Thich Nhat Hanh talks about in [No Mud, No Lotus](#) and the Suffering = Pain x Resistance equation Kristin Neff describes in [Self-Compassion](#).

As Thich puts it: *"Every life has its trials and tribulations. We can navigate them more skillfully when we don't waste time and energy shooting ourselves with a second arrow—such as dwelling on how much greener the grass in our neighbor's yards looks, compared to ours."*

Kristin says: *"He said that the key to happiness was understanding that suffering is caused by resisting pain. We can't avoid pain in life, he said, but we don't necessarily have to suffer because of that pain... he chose to express these words of wisdom with an equation: 'Suffering = Pain x Resistance.' He then added, 'Actually, it's an exponential rather than a multiplicative relationship.' His point was that we can distinguish between the normal pain of life—difficult emotions, physical discomfort, and so on—and actual suffering, which is the mental anguish caused by fighting against the fact that life is sometimes painful."*

"Strengthen a parent . . . and you strengthen a child."

~ Fred Rogers

"Moving confidently toward independence depends to a great extent on there being a sure foundation of early love to build on, and a fundamental trust that help will be there when we need it. Love and trust are what most enable children to risk trying to be themselves."

~ Fred Rogers

Back to Mister Rogers. He says: *"If the day ever came when we were able to accept ourselves and our children exactly as they are, then, I believe, we would have come very close to an ultimate understanding of what 'good' parenting means."*

THE GAP & THE ESSENCE OF HUMAN CREATIVITY

"There would be no art and there would be no science if human beings had no desire to create. And if we had everything we ever wanted or needed, we would have no reason for creating anything. So, at the root of all science there exists a gap—a gap between what the world is like and what the human creator wishes and hopes for it to be like. Our unique way of bridging that gap in each of our lives seems to me to be the essence of the reason for human creativity."

Art. Science. Creativity. And... Gaps. As Mister Rogers tells us: They go together.

And then there's our ULTIMATE creative project: Creating our own lives.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi comes to mind. In *Creativity*, he tells us: *"Indeed, it could be said that the most obvious achievement of these people is that they created their own lives. And how they achieved that is something worth knowing, because it can be applied to all our lives."*

You know that gap between who you *are* and who you know you *could* be?

Well...

I'm smiling as I type this but that gap (and the creative tension-pain we feel as we acknowledge it) is the very source of our creativity.

How will YOU bridge that gap a little more today?

B

Brian Johnson,
Lover of Wisdom

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[Love](#)

[We Learn by Living](#)

[Grit](#)

[Creativity](#)

[No Mud, No Lotus](#)

[Self-Compassion](#)

[Motivation and Personality](#)

About the Author of "You Are Special"

FRED ROGERS



Known as "America's Favorite Neighbor," Fred Rogers dedicated his life to serving children through public television as creator, composer, and host of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. He studied at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Child Development and was ordained a Presbyterian minister, with the unique charge of working with children and families through television. Fred Rogers' relentless commitment to all that is best in people led to an astonishing array of honors, from induction into the Television Hall of Fame to the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.