



## Research Article

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# The Feelings We Feel: Care and Community in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*

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**Abstract:** *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was a show that focused on teaching children an ethics of caring for oneself and care for others. This article examines those ethics through the songs “I Like You As You Are” and “Won’t You Be My Neighbor.” It contends that these songs focus on a celebration of the self and others, welcoming individuals as they are into the community, and embracing authenticity. This article looks to understand these ethics in a contemporary setting and argues that Mister Rogers and the communal ethics of care that he taught are needed.

**Keywords:** Fred Rogers, care ethics, care, children’s media, television, politics

Every human being has value. This is the basis of all healthy relationships. Through living each day as it is given to me, I’ve learned that. It cannot be “taught,” but it can be “caught” from those who live their lives right along with us. What a privilege to be able to look for the good in our neighbor! – Fred Rogers<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, a quote from Fred Rogers, more popularly known as Mister Rogers, was widely shared: “When I was a boy, and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”<sup>2</sup> Fifty years after the first episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (MRN), Rogers’ message of reciprocal care continues to resonate. April 19, 2017, David Dark wrote an article in American Magazine titled “In the Age of Trump, Can Mr. Rogers Help Us Manage Our Anger?”<sup>3</sup> MRN is a refuge, not just for children but also for adults. It is bound together by an ethics of care in which no one is excluded. Everyone is welcome in Rogers’ community. No one is excluded. Everyone has a possible invitation.<sup>4</sup>

MRN was a show beginning in the 1960s that ended in 2001. The show focused on teaching children ethical lessons, using moral developmental theories. Fred Rogers themed the weeks to cover matters as diverse as death, divorce, friendship, and the environment among others. The show utilized a mixture of make-believe and the real world. In the real world, Rogers would invite guests who were a part of the neighborhood. He would interview them. If he traveled outside of the neighborhood to see a neighbor, he would play a video and invite the audience to join him in meeting the neighbor. This interaction with people was balanced by a kingdom of make-believe. The kingdom was full of puppets which were all acted and voiced by Rogers. The puppets interacted with neighborhood characters, and what happened in make-believe would often be discussed by Rogers in the real world.

*Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* begins and ends the same way every episode – in a comfortable living room. The set is unremarkable, except for the toy trolley – even the television in the wall, Picture Picture,

<sup>1</sup> Rogers, *Life’s Journeys According to Mister Rogers*.

<sup>2</sup> Judkis, “Mister Rogers and Newtown.”

<sup>3</sup> Dark, “In the Age of Trump.”

<sup>4</sup> Rogers, *The World According to Mister Rogers*.

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has become commonplace. Scholars such as Stephen Perry and Amanda Roesch state that Rogers utilizes vocabulary and intonation similar to the way children are typically spoken to.<sup>5</sup> Children connect to the show because it mirrors their daily life. Rogers begins and ends the show at home, his soothing voice reiterating the lessons the viewers had just seen. He feeds the fish in the aquarium and tells his audience that they make every day special simply by being themselves. Children's programming teaches children *how to live* – programs push their audience to consider collective versus self-interest, how to care for oneself and relationships, and the role of others in one's daily life.<sup>6</sup> One of the ways which *MRN* taught these lessons was through music. Two of his songs, "Would You Be My Neighbor?" and "I Like You As You Are," invite the audience into a relationship in which they are told that they are worthy of respect and care and that others have that worth as well.<sup>7</sup> The messages that children are people in their own right, deserving of respect, but also having connection to others is integral to *MRN*.

*MRN* focuses on the development of cognitive skills and healthy emotional development.<sup>8</sup> Rogers' show engages with the moral development theories that continue to be pertinent in the literature on children programming – Kohlberg and Gilligan's competing theories.<sup>9</sup> Each approach focuses on a different aspect of a child's moral development. Kohlberg studied young boys. He was primarily interested in understanding when children began to connect to conceptual pro-social and moral notions. Gilligan, in response to Kohlberg, studied young girls, looking at morality as a *happening*, rather than purely conceptual. She is the founder of care ethics. Rogers does not discuss these approaches to moral development outside the show. Nonetheless, this article engages with his show through the lens of care ethics as opposed to Kohlberg.

Care ethics contends that our worth is connected to communal worth. We cannot survive without care. All of us depend upon another person at some moment in our lives, particularly birth and death. Ethicist Joan Tronto contends that we have moral obligations because of this need to attend to others. Attentiveness is essential to care ethics and is also integral to the messaging of *MRN*. We have social and political obligations to recognize and see others who are in need – passing over another person's worth is a moral failure. The two songs that this article engages with both draw on this notion. The song "I Like You As You Are" holds the lyrics, "I wouldn't want to change you. Or even rearrange you. Not by far." Knowing who a person is and deciding not to ask that they change who they are, the individual notices who the other person is. By affirming the other, we demonstrate their worth.

Fred Rogers, as a Presbyterian minister, reflects the theological tenet that everyone is sacred. *MRN* is Rogers' pulpit, and he uses that pulpit as one of invitation and recognition. He invites us as equals into the neighborhood regardless of our differences. He begins each episode with the song "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" Within the song, Rogers repeatedly asks for us to join him in this community, "Would you be mine? Could you be mine?" The song tells the audience that when we are joining a community in which the other is recognized and noticed; we are joining a community of equals. Hannah Arendt's notion of pluralism rests on the notion that we are always with others as question asking beings, and our future depends upon recognizing this pluralism. We are unique due to our being born, or as she calls it, our natality.<sup>10</sup>

This article analyzes Rogers' neighborhood care through the lens of care ethics and Arendtian notions of power and natality, using two songs, "Won't You Be My Neighbor" and "I Like You As You Are." The dialogue method that Rogers' adopts affirms his audience's emotions and experiences, thus drawing the individual into the communal, an important part of care ethics. The article begins by contextualizing *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, both historically and within work on television and ethics. It then moves to examine the intersections of care, power, and natality. Next, it examines what it means to live with the other in a way that is attentive. It moves on to examine the importance of public care. The article progresses to address the

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<sup>5</sup> Perry and Roesche, "He's in a New."

<sup>6</sup> Hawkins, "The Ethics."

<sup>7</sup> Rogers, "Won't You;" Rogers, "I Like You."

<sup>8</sup> Perry and Roesche, "He's in a New," 202.

<sup>9</sup> Kohlberg's work continues to be the standard for research on children's development. Gilligan's work has largely been delegated to feminist studies.

<sup>10</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

moral and social debate within *MRN*. Finally, it concludes that Rogers' program explores care and noticing one another, a practice that sits in the nexus of moral and social debate.

## 1 Of morals and ministry

Fred Rogers began a career in television in response to the children's media that he saw. The recent documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* recounted Rogers being appalled by television shows that were just action-based and did not engage with children as *children*.<sup>11</sup> Media, Rogers argues, is often a medium for commercialism. He believed that the focus on selling a product does not enhance a child's life. Children's emotional and psychological needs were not being met by 1960s children's media. In a 1971 symposium on children and television, he states, "Television, like any other experience in a child's life, must be mediated by adults. In our society, adults are not always available for the children who are watching television, so, I believe that television itself must serve as the caring adult."<sup>12</sup> Television is paramount in a child's life because it is a common visual medium through which they see *how* individuals should interact with one another. Rogers advocated for slower programming that used child developmental research to focus on the child as the viewer.

*MRN* first aired in 1968 and was last broadcasted in 2001. The popular model of child's development in the 1960s, extending into contemporary media models, is Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Kohlberg's study was initially in his 1958 dissertation. He studied a group of young boys, all attending Chicago preparatory schools. Kohlberg asked the children a series of moral problems and studied *how* they reasoned their ways to an answer. Kohlberg developed three levels of morality – pre-conventional, younger than six; conventional level, 7–11 years of age; post-conventional, 11 years of age onward.<sup>13</sup> The first stage deals with avoiding punishment and acting in pure self-interest. The second stage is when individuals learn social norms. The third stage is when children understand universal ethical standards, such as notions of justice. He argued that as individuals aged, they progressed through the moral developmental stages, becoming more moral. Children become increasingly able to think and act in deeply conceptual ways. Kohlberg's study continues to lead moral developmental work. However, it has been criticized as being hierarchical.<sup>14</sup> Very few people reach the post-conventional stage in which they accept and absorb universal moral precepts. Moreover, his sample study was of highly privileged young boys. Kohlberg did not study marginalized minorities or young girls.

Studies of children's engagement with media is often paired with examining moral development along Kohlberg's scale.<sup>15</sup> These studies analyze *how* children perceive and absorb pro-social messaging. Pro-social messaging promotes fairness, caring for others, and consideration for other people. The messages are intended to facilitate children's unprovoked ability to act on pro-social values. Research indicates that children understand fairness at an early age, but their ability to take on others' perspective varies.<sup>16</sup> Cingel and Krcmar conducted an experiment in which they studied how parental engagement with media impacted children's absorption of media; they utilized the show, *Arthur*. The experiment concluded that children between the ages of 4 and 6 did not necessarily need to fully understand the messaging for it to be effective. Children, regardless of whether they are with their parents or are alone, were able to understand perspective-taking. This suggests that children can grasp that something is harmful to another *even if* it is not fully understood. Children's media, thus, can play an important role in moral development.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Neville et al., "Won't You Be My Neighbor?"

<sup>12</sup> Rogers, "Communicating," 456.

<sup>13</sup> Kohlberg, "Moral Stages."

<sup>14</sup> Kohlberg et al., "Moral Stages."

<sup>15</sup> Cingel and Krcmar, "Prosocial;" Geraci and Surian, "The Developmental;" and Narvaez et al., "Moral Theme;" Cingel et al., "The Role of Social Context."

<sup>16</sup> Kurdeck and Rodgen, "Perceptual."

<sup>17</sup> Cingel and Krcmar, "Prosocial," 368.

Although Cingel and Krcmar find that children's media can be significant in children's moral development, work on adolescents disagrees with their conclusions. Glover, Garmon, and Hull used a cognitive-based theory of *justice* reasoning in their work on adolescents.<sup>18</sup> The adolescents watched *The OC*, a one-hour teen drama. The researchers studied how adolescents would view cooperation and bullying after watching these shows. They found that the teens who had "greater moral expertise, higher levels of education and less familiarity with stories and characters in the television programme" were predictive of the teens seeing actions as unjust.<sup>19</sup> In comparing the research on adolescents with children, the research suggests that children are more receptive to media messages, whereas numerous social factors mitigate adolescent moral development.<sup>20</sup>

The work on children's morality and media demonstrate that children, more so than adolescents, are readily impacted by pro-social messaging. Moreover, children will take on another person's perspective whether or not they fully understand it. Children have a distinct moral view, informed by what they observe.<sup>21</sup> Rogers' songs invite children to think of his perspective. The song "I Like You As You Are" ends with Rogers singing, "I like you, Y-O-U, I like you, like you are you are." The child hearing this is not absorbing a moral message of including others; rather, they are encouraged to think of themselves from Rogers' perspective. By using language that children readily understand, Rogers is a vehicle by which children can understand themselves as having self-worth.<sup>22</sup> Rogers, engaging with cognitive science, which at the time noted that children readily absorb other's perspectives, would have understood the potential for adults to teach children how to see themselves through another.

*MRN* became popular despite doing everything wrong, according to the popular trends within 1970s children's media.<sup>23</sup> The recent documentary on Rogers, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, interviews historians and people who worked on the show with him, who all reiterate that Rogers rejected 1960s normative media.<sup>24</sup> Media at the time was highly engaged in physical humor. Rogers commonly talks about feeling disturbed seeing people slap each other with pies – what would that teach children, other than violence is funny? Superheroes and westerns were popular and violent. Television shows were fast-paced, and there was very little pro-social messaging in television media. Rogers' show marked a change in children's television. The show is deliberately slow. Rogers is a simple host. He has no superpowers. He does not have an extraordinary voice, although he sings an invitational song each episode.<sup>25</sup> Rogers' ordinariness was striking in a field of television shows which highlighted the extraordinary. His show, in many ways, was fresh. It focused on children as people with their own distinct feelings, who were learning how to *be* in the world.<sup>26</sup> Rogers' engagement with cognitive-development work centers an early targeted messaging for children. Despite the prolific usage of Kohlberg's theories in which the highly educated and more privileged develop higher moral sensibilities, Rogers does not pursue anything but the every day. It is in the every day that care ethics is demonstrated.

## 2 Caring for the other

Care ethics begins in an approach to moral development through socially vulnerable voices. It was centered on a critique of Kohlberg's work on moral development. While centering privileged voices among women,

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<sup>18</sup> Glover et al., "Media's Moral Message."

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>20</sup> This connects with Kohlberg's study of highly educated and privileged children as the basis for moral reasoning.

<sup>21</sup> Tamborini et al., "The Representation of Altruistic and Egoistic Motivations."

<sup>22</sup> Klarén, *On Becoming Neighbors*.

<sup>23</sup> Moreover, to some extent, today as well – imagine a children's television show in which the host put on a timer for a minute to show how long a minute was.

<sup>24</sup> Neville et al., *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*.

<sup>25</sup> Rice and Haight, "Motherese' of Mr. Rogers."

<sup>26</sup> Blythe, "Working Hard for the Money;" Ignatieff, "Is Nothing Sacred?"

Carol Gilligan's work highlights the notion that when others view themselves as *connected* to others, their morality will be centered in care.<sup>27</sup> Care is something that happens among individuals. It can be conceived as a *communal morality*. By this, I mean that care is something that cannot happen in a vacuum. Unlike notions of justice and righteousness, which prioritize individual self-understanding, care is inseparable from others. It is impossible to think of a just action as unconnected to the self. In contrast to this, care is intrinsically interconnected. It is made up of a series of practices that are done directly to help others meet their needs, maintain those met needs, develop inherent capabilities, and alleviate any suffering so that they may function in their community.<sup>28</sup> Care meets individuals where they are, responding to needs as they are expressed. It decenters the self in that it requires the caregiver to consider the care receiver's needs first.<sup>29</sup> As a communal practice, we are asked to meet needs that we may overlook. For example, a child's needs are different from adults' needs. Sandra Laugier expresses care ethics as a form of ethics that "affirms the importance of care and attention given to others, in particular to those whose lives and well-being depend on particularized, continual and daily attention: ordinary vulnerable others."<sup>30</sup> Thus, care asks us to slow down and attend to each other as individuals with unique demands. Care is an activity that we can assess through our ordinary interactions.<sup>31</sup>

*MRN* provides children examples of ordinary care. Fred Rogers is remarkable in his ordinariness. Unlike other children's shows with clear protagonists, Rogers places himself in the background. He is a calming figure. In a time with children's media that was becoming faster and louder, through shows such as *Barnie* and *Clifford*. On the other hand, Rogers was a calming presence. The climactic moments in the show are often those in which he talked with other people, focusing on the importance of his neighbors, both new and old. Rogers expresses care in these ordinary interactions. It is not uncommon for us to interact with our neighbors, whether we are intentionally developing relationships with them or just asking for banal information. Children and adults can immediately connect with *MRN* because of this ordinariness. Unlike watching a fantastical creature, they are watching a man who could very well be an adult that they interact with. We depend upon care throughout our lives – from infancy to infirmity and hospice, we are never fully independent from one another. Rogers reflects this simplicity by inviting guests with disabilities that make them reliant, focusing on their autonomy and their bodily and social needs. As a child with physical impairments, this was striking, Rogers' guests demonstrated how adults *should* treat me. Rogers gives a model for children of what care they should expect from adults in their lives, providing examples of care that is simple but empowering.

Care ethicists argue that we can evaluate care. Tronto lays out five requirements for a caring community. A caring community must be: attentive, responsible, nurturing, compassionate, and respond to others' needs.<sup>32</sup> These five categories provide an outline for how we can assess ordinary everyday care. All individuals are subject to restrictions and privileges due to social and bodily differences. For example, as a person with invisible disabilities – my restrictions are very different from disabled people who use physical aids such as wheelchairs. Effective care also contends that social and physical differences matter. It does this by responding to people's needs as they are expressed. Nick Ward argues that care ethics, instead of universalizing needs, allows us to acknowledge and respond as a community to unique needs that individuals have due to social and political landscapes.<sup>33</sup> Rogers' simple yet powerful multiplicity of guests who experience multiple privileges and marginalizations demonstrates ordinary care's ability to move beyond our own personalized experiences of care. Care ethics' five values give us an empirical method by which we can evaluate a community.

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<sup>27</sup> Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*; Gilligan et al., *The Contribution of Women's Thought*.

<sup>28</sup> Engster, *The Heart of Justice*, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Laugier, "The Ethics of Care."

<sup>30</sup> Laugier, "Politics of Vulnerability," 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Laugier, "The Ethics of Care."

<sup>32</sup> Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Ward, "Care Ethics," 62.

The ability to evaluate a community's practice of care allows us to recognize what Tronto refers to as "moral failure" – when a member is suffering, and their suffering is either unnoticed or ignored.<sup>34</sup> If a community does not meet a category of care, it has failed to meet its obligations. Tronto and other care ethicists point out that not noticing needs is comparable to noticing yet ignoring them. We must be attentive to individuals within our community, and that attentiveness requires responsiveness. Engster contends that when we do this, people can lead *full* lives.<sup>35</sup> A full life is one in which they can enjoy their environment, play with others, and participate in community life, among other activities. By attending to our neighbors, being compassionate, and meeting their needs, we ensure that individuals are free from arbitrary suffering. Arbitrary suffering is any suffering that comes from a community not adhering to the five values of care.

Nonetheless, care can be difficult to evaluate because it is often a private practice. It happens primarily in the home or dedicated spaces such as hospitals or schools. For example, attending to children is rarely a public practice. Keeping childcare private makes seeing young children in public out of place and reinforces the belief childcare work that should not be seen. Children often have more access to care than adults; however, their needs can be overlooked by individuals not valuing their needs. Because individuals who need care are often vulnerable, there is a potential for them to receive care which disempowers the recipients. For example, it is easy to assume that a child's request for an innocuous toy is unimportant and perhaps even damaging their ability to be independent. However, that toy is significant to the child and their emotional and mental health needs at that moment. If we want to provide affirmative and empowering care, we would talk with the child. We would have a conversation with them about their needs. The private nature of care keeps these moments of affirmation and moments of disempowerment out of sight. It reinforces messages that care is restricted to certain spaces, limiting a community from learning what is effective.

The simple set of *MRN*, a neighborhood, brings care into the public sphere. By bringing children and other people who need specific care into the show's public part, the neighborhood demonstrates that care has positive social value. People in need of care are integral members of the community. Care is often an embodied practice – we *do* care. Maurice Hamington argues that the body is the site of care.<sup>36</sup> We iterate care, and we see ourselves doing it. We learn moral scripts through observing care. The publicness of care is an important way to teach and learn different ways to care. Rogers brings numerous disabled guests and people of color onto the show. He does not ask that these guests discuss any discrimination or hardship with him. Instead, he presents common care – he engages with the guests as they are, as children who are excited to meet him, and he reciprocates their excitement. Rogers maintains eye contact with his guests and actively listens. He does not turn away from his guest unless it is to get something behind him. He is close to them but never encroaches on their personal space. Rogers gives a physical distance that allows his guests to determine how close he can come. Rogers demonstrates quiet respect for his guests' bodies, which are often the site of bodily and socially created marginalizations.

Rogers shows an embodied care in his interviews that teaches us *how* to be with others. We listen. We observe. We respect the other person. We do not overreach their boundaries. As a child, I occasionally needed physical assists, such as a leg brace. I would become frustrated when adults would not respect my space – touching me to help me balance or grabbing me before I fell. I wanted autonomy, even if it meant hurting myself. Rogers was the opposite of the adults that wanted to help me but made me feel powerless when they helped me. The public care that Rogers demonstrates is a direct response to the fear that if recipients of care are seen in public, they will be seen as powerless. When care is public, it challenges notions of static autonomy. Our bodies need assistance, but the need for aid – whether physical, mental, or emotional – may change upon the space. Publicizing care complicates our understanding of how to care for vulnerable people. Rogers shows us that it decenters us. We are not the focus, and our tendency to want to help another person must be mediated by the other person involved. It is a relationship.

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<sup>34</sup> Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 127.

<sup>35</sup> Engster, *The Heart of Justice*.

<sup>36</sup> Hamington, "Care Ethics."

Care is a practice between individuals. Thus, the precepts of care should be created together. Engster notes that care looks different between communities due to varying cultural and political norms. The single thing that binds them together is that they are based on the same practices.<sup>37</sup> As the empirical values of care demonstrate, we have a responsibility to one another. By bringing care to the public, we establish our interdependence. Concepts of responsibility can differ because of these variations of cultures. Any community can come together and decide the limits of our responsibility. The community can develop a sense of responsibility, which is contingent upon the person in need to determine the limits of care. A community preserves power as potentiality, and a moral community would not deprive a member of power. Thus, the individual who needs care can advocate for themselves because they are a community member.

According to Arendt, a community that decides to have a public system of care, in which a person can assert boundaries, makes a new world.<sup>38</sup> Arendt states this as, “deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”<sup>39</sup> Power develops from people living in a community. Community gives meaning to our actions and words. In caring for people publicly, a society gives that relationship access to power. The question, “What do you need?” gives the person being asked the ability to change that relationship with the caregiver and to give themselves access to a different reality. Children, new to a community and dependent on someone to care for them, are a perfect example of Arendt’s argument that we are question-asking beings.<sup>40</sup> Children asking and responding to questions can clarify their needs and wants. This changes the community around them. Public care brings children into the community as active participants. Their actions and words are given a level of importance that does not exist when isolated.<sup>41</sup>

Natality is the basis for the political community because all labor and work focus on the notion that new people will be new.<sup>42</sup> Children are a condition of life, thereby making care a part of the political community – the political community centers around children who need care, prioritizing the relationship between caregiver and receiver. Children’s media gives voice to this connection between care and the political community. By bringing children into the forefront, children’s media prevents the child from being isolated. Rogers exemplifies this recognition of the importance of natality. At the beginning of this show, he sings, “I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you. I’ve always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.” This song plays through every episode of *MRN*; each new child is a potential neighbor. Rogers’ work recognizes and focuses on the new neighbors who stumbled upon his world. He notices each child. He sees their need for recognition and support because they are an ongoing necessary part of a community.

### 3 Attentive neighbors

Being an attentive neighbor is a practice, noted Fred Rogers scholar Alexander Klarén describes Rogers’ vision as holding an ethic that “recognizes that human beings live within an ongoing conversation that began well before a specific interpersonal interaction begins and is never concluded.”<sup>43</sup> Rogers inserts himself into a child’s life in a conversational manner that assumes the relationship between them is ongoing. The child’s continual invitation to become a part of the neighborhood in “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” gives the child the option to continue the dialogue or turn away. The show maintains a space of openness that gives the child the ability to decide their immediate future. The child holds onto Arendt’s notion of power, their participation in the dialogue matters. They dictate whether they are a part of that community.

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<sup>37</sup> Engster, *The Heart of Justice*.

<sup>38</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200; Gordon, “Hannah Arendt’s Political Theology.”

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Arendt, “Thinking and Moral.”

<sup>41</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 201; Arendt, “Philosophy and Practice.”

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>43</sup> Klarén, *On Becoming*, 80.

The song “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” welcomes the child to the neighborhood as they are, regardless of their societal positioning. Rogers reflects this in his guests. For example, Chrissy Thompson, a child with spina bifida, comes to the neighborhood. She shares that she is frustrated with the adults in her life when they try to help her. The adults’ actions of getting her physical aids may physically help her, but they make her feel disempowered. Thompson is visibly annoyed as she tells Rogers about these adults who are inadvertently hurting her. Rogers does not defend the adults. He quietly listens, and at the end of her story, he tells her, “I am proud of you.”<sup>44</sup> The ongoing nature of the dialogue between them gives Thompson the space to express her needs publicly without silencing or fear. By telling Rogers and the rest of the neighbors that sometimes care can accidentally do the opposite of its intended effect, Thompson lets them know what she needs. Children’s needs are given the space to be made real on *MRN*.

The realization of needs does not mean that Thompson’s caregivers changed how they made her feel. Nonetheless, it clarifies what those needs are and makes them real for the people because they have been stated and acknowledged. Rogers’ acknowledgment, Klarén notes, is important.<sup>45</sup> The importance of the acknowledgment that Rogers gives on the show is seen in letters to Rogers, in which audience members and family members of those children send him their thoughts and opinions on the show. They carry the dialogue into a more personal medium, to which Rogers can respond.<sup>46</sup> The children watching the show, and their caregivers, have a relationship with Rogers and want his participation in that relationship. By seeing an adult hear and acknowledge a child’s feelings as valid, children are recognized as persons, not just beings who are taken care of.

Recognizing your neighbor is central to being attentive. Tronto holds that when we pay attention to another, we see them as human beings full of the potential to need care and to give care.<sup>47</sup> “I Like You As You Are” declares, “I like you are as you. Without a doubt or question. Or even a suggestion. Cause I like you as you are.”<sup>48</sup> When we like another person whole-heartedly, we see them as a person with needs and faults and their unique disposition. Moreover, they are someone whom we may need to help, and we may need them at certain points. Whether that means a parent loving their child and knowing that one day they may need their child to take care of them, or a friend knowing that if their friend is sick, they will be the first person there to help them. By recognizing another person in their entirety and liking them for who they are, we become vulnerable.

As noted previously, the context of care involves understanding the other person’s identity. Identity is never monolithic. Likewise, needs and marginalizations are not monolithic. Nicki Ward points out that a person’s needs may shift depending upon their identity.<sup>49</sup> For example, if a woman is in a group of other women, she may feel more comfortable because she is at less risk of experiencing gendered violence. The dimensions of a person’s identity shape how they interact with others and the world as well as how others interact with them. When we recognize the plurality of experiences a person has in their daily life, we open ourselves up to understand the marginalizations they face in the world due to their identities. By liking our neighbors, we are placed in the vulnerable position of understanding another person as themselves and understanding our limitations in providing care for them without hesitation. The nuance of identity draws attention to the plurality of a person. Care ethics does not universalize our experiences. It does depend upon an honest awareness of ourselves, and this awareness is akin to attentiveness.

Attentiveness clarifies our interdependence. A child may need a caregiver now. They may be a caregiver in the future. Rogers’ singing, “Won’t you be my neighbor?” invites us to return to our relationships and reiterate the care that we provide *and* the care that we need. As neighbors, we depend upon one another, regardless if the neighbors are a child and a caregiver. Rogers reminds us that we should nurture those relationships by letting our neighbors know that we like them because we have ongoing relationships. This

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<sup>44</sup> Rogers, “1543.”

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*.

<sup>48</sup> Rogers, “I Like You.”

<sup>49</sup> Ward, “Care Ethics,” 143.

solidifies power. Arendt contends that we must maintain our political communities. Rogers' method of holding space is a way to solidify power, when the space is open for neighbors to come together, that space is powerful.<sup>50</sup> That community can realize needs, recognize potential futures, and actualize them through words and actions. For example, by coming into an open space, Chrissy Thompson can assert needs that can be realized and acted upon. The community can make a future in which she feels cared for but empowered.

Practicing this form of attentiveness is a neighborhood practice; it is also a political practice. Care is innately political, when it is designated as something hidden, the role of caretakers and receivers is shameful.<sup>51</sup> Whereas, when public, care is a practice that is accepted as a necessary part of living. It becomes something that can be appreciated by the community. The privacy of action erases care from the public consciousness. Arendt contends that privacy strips the action of any ability to be *real*. It makes care non-existent, because when care is not public it is shown to be unimportant. A neighborhood that is openly attentive to children communicates that they are appreciated as they are and can say “no” or “yes” to adults, making children important. Children are unique individuals and provide potential new worlds just by existing.<sup>52</sup> The neighborly practice that Rogers demonstrates is welcoming and extends care to unknown children in the public space. Neighborly care acknowledges that children have a distinct place in our communities.

Hiding children and care, alienates them from the community. It takes power away from children, erasing their future.<sup>53</sup> Futures can only be made through deliberating with each other. Care manifests itself by helping other people achieve their innate capabilities. The collective nature of politics and care brings children into the public arena. Rogers tells his audience that, “I like your disposition ... And with your kind permission. I'll shout it to a star.”<sup>54</sup> If we want it, Rogers will publicly announce how much he likes us, in all our differences. He will bring his liking us into the neighborhood. Children are brought into a public space, albeit a televised one. They know that they are liked and that this is being broadcasted across the nation. Their essential specialness is important to the world. There is no one like them. Thus, helping them reach their capabilities is also important. Rogers' makes empowerment public. He asserts that children deserve to be openly cared about.

Our sense of self does not develop in isolation. It develops within a community, and attributes of ourselves shape our relationships with our neighbors. Our identities are relational. Care ethics examines our sense of self as formed through our identities to other people. As members of a community, we can make an individual feel isolated and powerless or assure them that they are part of a supportive network. Ethical decisions are situated so that in making decisions, we seek to understand the other person and act in *their* best interest. We act in children's best interests because they are important members of our community.

## 4 Public newness

Rogers acknowledges us as coming together in the introductory song, “Since we're together we might as well say. Would you be mine?”<sup>55</sup> We are a part of his world and life. Empowering children happens only when we a part of a community. Others empower a person. Feeling sure of oneself and fully respected requires a community. A community will lift us and let us know how treasured we are to them. Rogers centers his neighbors as people who are recognized as special. There are no qualifications on who is special.

<sup>50</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

<sup>51</sup> Boston Review, *The Politics of Care*; Gadjos, “Everyday Compassion.”

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>54</sup> Rogers, “I Like You.”

<sup>55</sup> Rogers, “Won't You.”

Everyone is special. Care ethics asserts that while we may all share the same needs when we develop as people, our approach will always be unique to helping others. Coming together facilitates us becoming our unique selves. Rogers helps his audience feel comfortable in their difference through being his neighbor.

The narrative of the neighborhood outsider centers around discomfort. The Other is often treated with skepticism and fear. The Other is not a neighbor. The Other is an intruder, waiting to upturn our neighborhood. The things that make the Other different are not the *good* things that make *us* different – rather the Other is different due to qualities which are assumed as *bad*.<sup>56</sup> Getting lost in that fear of the Other is often what makes political communities identify their boundaries and who is included within that community. Rogers presents an alternative to that fear. Rogers states that we catch goodness from other people.<sup>57</sup> The Other allows us to become good. Rather than treat the Other as someone to be feared, the Other should be welcomed. They can make us better. They can improve us. The Other can be our neighbor. Rogers never defines *who* makes up his neighborhood; thus, anyone can be a part of it. It is an open community that anyone can come into.

Political communities based on care integrate the Other.<sup>58</sup> The Other is only sustained as an outsider when they are not seen as a potential member. Thus, when we begin to see the Other as a person who *could* be our neighbor, we are open to the possibility of acceptance. Keeping another at bay and outside a community is easy. It is easy to deny Rogers' invitation and to stay outside of his community. It is easy to live within normative narratives of danger, often rooted in bigotry. Narratives of fear and anger are often targeted toward people that are misunderstood or stereotyped. Rogers refutes stereotyping the Other. He tells us that no matter who the neighbor is, they are welcome and celebrated, "I'll shout it to a star."<sup>59</sup> He encourages us to turn away from a world of exclusion.

Care ethics is an intersectional ethical approach in that it understands marginalized persons' experience unique marginalizations. It attends to people as they express themselves and their needs. It does not universalize needs. Rogers' openness invites intersectional ethics. A danger of care ethics is parochialism – that we attend to those Others who are closest to us and do not expand awareness. Tronto refers to this as privilege blindness.<sup>60</sup> People in privileged positions may not notice if a space is non-accessible for disabled persons who need wheelchairs. They may look over unwelcoming language regarding the LGBTQ+ community or other marginalized communities.<sup>61</sup> Rogers' neighborhood is accessible to everyone. Anyone can live there. We find that his neighborhood welcomes everyone who *wants* to be a part of it. We need expressed needs by developing our neighborhoods into spaces where marginalized people find them comfortable and accessible spaces.<sup>62</sup> We are attending to the Other as a potential neighbor through these practices.

The openness of *MRN* shows children a possible community. Because natality is rooted in our future, the worlds that children see help shape our future. Rogers is keenly aware of this and demonstrates it in the show. In episode 1065 (1969), it is a hot day on a week with no defined topic. Rogers has filled a pool with cool water. Officer Clemmons comes to Rogers' house and is invited to soak his feet in the pool's cool water. This episode aired in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, during which Black Americans were assaulted for swimming in "white's only" pools. Rogers and Officer Clemmons, quietly and normally sharing a small pool together, offered a vision of a future where Black and white Americans could share space without violence. *MRN* opens up the possibility of a future without racist violence.

The futures that Rogers presents are an intersection of moral and social debate. By presenting the Other as someone who can make us better and demonstrating an anti-racist future, Rogers challenges what is

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<sup>56</sup> These qualities of "badness" often reinforce racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and other stereotypes of the "dangerous" Other.

<sup>57</sup> Rogers, *Life's Journeys*.

<sup>58</sup> Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*.

<sup>59</sup> Rogers, "I Like You."

<sup>60</sup> Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*.

<sup>61</sup> As a disabled LGBTQ+ person, I often find myself at the nexus of these exclusions.

<sup>62</sup> Ward, "Care Ethics."

acceptable. Rogers, in one of the first *MRN* episodes, holds a “peace party” in the middle of the Vietnam War. Neighbors come, and they make signs of peace. Rogers did not need to make an anti-war statement or to critique international relations. He simply held a party dedicated to peace. Rogers does not speak down to children about the politics of the day. He just holds the neighborhood open for expressing an alternative to what is happening around his audience. While their parents may debate war, he only talks about peace. While their community may be torn over desegregation, the neighborhood simply is.

The messages of the neighborhood revolve around how we interact with other people. The “Mistakes” week is rife with characters forgetting meetings, accidental rudeness, and worrying over whether their personal mistakes have hurt others.<sup>63</sup> Large conflicts are not the week’s focus. Instead the focus is on how small problems that can become larger issues if not addressed. Rogers forgets about a meeting he was supposed to have with Mrs. McFeely. However, rather than arguing, Rogers apologizes, and they reschedule. Simultaneously, in the neighborhood of make-believe, Daniel the Tiger worries that *he* is a mistake. Lady Aberline joins him in a duet about how she loves him as he is and does not see him as a mistake. Importantly, she never minimizes his fears over his unworthiness. Rogers shows us how to tell our friends that we love them in a way that allows them to express their feelings, and how to apologize when we have made a mistake. All of these issues, for Rogers, are central to being together. If we intend to be in community with each other, we must demonstrate care and hold ourselves accountable.

*MRN* is a quiet show. Rogers is slow and deliberate. Rogers’ possibilities open up to his audience, and his examples of how to be a good neighbor are laid out carefully. A caring political community is thoughtful.<sup>64</sup> Tronto and Engster believe that it will consider its members outside of their value as voters or citizens to be counted on a census.<sup>65</sup> A caring political community will quietly and thoughtfully lift examples of care without being lauded. We do not celebrate the political community; we celebrate all the individuals who make up the community. Rogers’ political messages may be indirect, but the show’s overall ethics, as Klarén argues, is based on potential. Rogers asks us to pause and consider different ways of being – whether it is different responses to people making mistakes to how to grapple with anger effectively, we must remember that we contain new possibilities.

## 5 Politics and power

Pluralism comes from the fact that we are all the same. Arendt articulates this by writing, “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”<sup>66</sup> Our sameness comes from our difference. We are different from everyone else around us, but we all are born and die. Our sameness, for Arendt, is tied into the fact that each child will never be identical to any other child except for the fact their mortality. Our power comes from this shared mortality. Political communities are powerful because by coming together, they can create new worlds. The actions that are done together matter and change the present as well as the future. Rogers centers difference as something that should be celebrated, “I’ll shout it to a star.”<sup>67</sup> Each child is the same in that they are special, but each is different. Our differences, for Rogers, make us remarkable. We *should* note our differences because those differences contribute to the neighborhood.

Caring political communities, while acknowledging that we share essential needs, our differences change both the type of help we need and what we can provide. Differences are not erased. A person who experienced the struggle of economic disparity would help those who have not experienced poverty to

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<sup>63</sup> Rogers, “1065.”

<sup>64</sup> Tronto, *Caring Democracy*.

<sup>65</sup> Tronto, *Caring Democracy*; Tronto, “Care as a Basis;” Engster, *The Heart of Justice*.

<sup>66</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> Rogers, “I Like You.”

be more empathetic to those who have. A political community that uses care would attempt to ameliorate any disparity making it difficult for a person to achieve their capabilities. If a person is concerned about meeting their basic needs, it is difficult for them to achieve capabilities such as play. Because of this, it is important to discuss disparities. These discussions bring public attention to these issues, and by bringing public attention to issues that are often hidden, a new future is possible. Rogers calls his neighbors to note that it is a “beautiful day in the neighborhood.”<sup>68</sup> The difficulties that we face do not diminish the beauty of our communities. However, it does not mean that we do not have an obligation to help people who suffer due to being different ways that could be changed, such as Rogers’ example of a desegregated caring community with Officer Clemmons.

Community gives us strength. Pluralism bolsters the constant newness of communities. When each person is a potential neighbor, the opportunity to learn goodness increases, the strength that comes from being in a community is emotional. Rogers instills emotional resilience by reiterating to his neighbors who come to visit that he is proud of them. By noting their specialness, he helps children to feel certain that they matter. This way if they doubt themselves or are insulted, they will know that they are important to bolster them in those difficult moments. Communities that foster emotional resilience give children the knowledge that they have an important place in their community. Regardless of whether they can, for example, vote or not, they can still be a voice for change. We see this with young students who survive school shootings advocating for gun control reform.<sup>69</sup> Students feel empowered by their community to advocate for change, despite receiving negative feedback on their initiatives.

Rogers, throughout his show, demonstrates a knowledge of the power of a caring community. In 1983, Rogers had an episode that would be noted as a part of his “Conflict” week, which was last shown in 1993. The episode 1525 has Isaiah 2:4 on Picture Picture, “And they shall beat their swords into plowshares. And their spears into pruning forks. Nation shall not lift us sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore.” Isaiah 2:4 is a prophetic call against war. Rogers using this passage from the Old Testament draws on his theological background and usage of television as a ministry, but moreover it is a moment where he makes a political stance.<sup>70</sup> A community that cares will also be a community that beats swords into plowshares. War has no place in neighborly practice.

The neighborhood is a caring community that rejects violence. Violence not only divides people but also isolates them. Violence robs people of power by alienating them.<sup>71</sup> Rogers’ ethics of celebration and welcoming cannot exist alongside violence. By turning the Other into a potential neighbor and someone who can teach us how to be good, Rogers rejects the argument that violence is justifiable. He illustrates this in his quiet critique of segregation and war. Segregation is unethical because it robs people of opportunities to build relationships with neighbors who can make them better. War is unethical for similar reasons. Publicly renouncing violence occurs in pivotal moments in *MRN*. These moments exemplify the ethics that Rogers sings in every show. Any person is a neighbor, and we are welcomed into a community of former strangers. Rogers reminds us of Arendt’s argument that we are all the same, and care is built on this premise of equality.

Celebrating neighbors takes courage. Rogers is boldly countercultural in asking whether or not we consent to be celebrated. It does not matter whether a particular group of people is targeted as the Other. Rogers demonstrates that any Other is worthy of being celebrated. He establishes what this looks like, by situating himself in a position as a minister to children. Rogers welcomes guests who are often very different from himself and shows a genuine interest in them and their lives. He shows us what it means to celebrate our neighbors without expressly telling us that is what he is doing. Rogers demonstrates trust in children, believing that they will understand what he is doing.<sup>72</sup> This trust exemplifies the notion that children have

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<sup>68</sup> Rogers, “Won’t You.”

<sup>69</sup> Kramer and Harlan, “Parkland Shootings.”

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Beasley and Bacchi, “Envisioning a New Politics;” Engster and Hamington, *Care Ethics and Political Theory*.

<sup>72</sup> Rogers, *Many Ways to Say I Love You*.

an important role in a community. If we trust a child to celebrate their neighbors and notice their sameness, we recognize that child as caring. The child enacts the virtues of a caring political community.

## 6 Conclusion

A world with a deficit of care is frightening. Daniel Tiger, nervous in his clock, expresses that he feels like a mistake because no one else in the neighborhood is like him.<sup>73</sup> Daniel's fear is the fear of loneliness, but Lady Aberline reminds him that he is loved. This moment strikes a nerve. What if we are alone? How would it feel to be a part of a community that cares? A community that cares is not afraid of differences, much like Lady Aberline is not afraid of this tiger who speaks and lives in a clock – he is her best friend. Rogers embraces the fact that all people may feel alone or uncared for at times. Those feelings are mediated by a community that reminds us that we are loved. If that community does not exist, then we are powerless individuals, cut off from society.<sup>74</sup>

*MRN* teaches us that we matter. The show brings care and the assertion that we deserve to have our needs met and go beyond just those basic needs into the public arena. Rogers uses television as a way to publicly demonstrate care. Caring societies depend upon recognition, and Rogers reflects that in his songs and his guests. Rogers listens carefully and deliberately. The songs remind us that we are seen for *who* we are, rather than what we wear or do. We are more than the boundaries imposed socially and bodily upon us. We are bound together by our innate specialness. Rogers recognizes his neighbors as important beings, who each represent a radical future which can reject violence and dream of peace.

Rogers discusses social and moral issues sensitively but also shows them. His actions and words communicate political messages. *MRN* centers itself around important topics to children, and issues of violence and care *are* important to children. Because of this, the show engages with contemporary political concerns. Rogers uses the show to present a world which grapples with topics like war but never fully succumbs to violent impulses. The neighborhood struggles to maintain its peacefulness, but it *always* comes back to peace. The characters on the show express regret and forgiveness as qualities that are *necessary* for making a neighborhood in which violence no longer exists. Rogers shows us that through the power of community, we can make new presents *and* new futures. Even if our current world lacks care, if we come together, we can make a caring community. We are beings of potential.

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<sup>73</sup> Rogers, "1578."

<sup>74</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 201.

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