

Dr. Seuss, Mr. Rogers, and Sesame Street©
preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing
by the Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
March 2, 2008

So, March is a birthday month in my family. Today is my mother's birthday. I often miss it because February is so short. But we got an extra day this year, and I do believe my card got to her in time this year. Also in a few days, my son, Theo, turns 15 years old.

So March is a birthday month for my family - my mother and my son. Which, of course, has me thinking about childhood and growing up. There are some other important March birthdays of people who cared for and are important to children.

Today is also Theodor Geisel's birthday, Dr. Seuss, and when I was a public school teacher, we made a big deal about March 2nd, wearing those funny hats that the Cat in the Hat wore and getting to read lots of Dr. Seuss books which, as most of you know, I love. Dr. Seuss died in 1991.

and March 20th would have been Mr. Roger's 80th birthday, had he not died 5 years ago this February.

In fact, Pittsburgh is celebrating Mr. Rogers in a big way this year. Says Mr. McFeely (aka David Newell, the public relations director for Family Communications, Inc.)¹

"We're asking everyone ... everywhere (from Pittsburgh to Paris) to wear their favorite sweater on that day, It doesn't have to have a zipper down the front like the one Mister Rogers wore on the program, it just has to be special to you."

Sweater Day is part of Pittsburgh's 250th anniversary celebration and the first-ever "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" Days March 15 - 20. They wanted to recognize Fred Rogers, a native of Southwestern Pennsylvania, in a way that would reflect his deep appreciation of what it means to be a caring neighbor. It's a means of promoting neighborliness.

Finally, though the first episodes of Sesame Street didn't air until 1969, Children's Television Workshop, now called Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit educational organization, was founded in 1967, making last year a 40th anniversary and next year one too.

I don't know any March reasons for including Sesame Street this morning, although Kermit the Frog's birthday is February 29th - leap year. I didn't get the joke - the frog's birthday being on leap year day, until my husband warned me that you would laugh there

when I read him the first draft of this sermon. I was just glad to celebrate Kermit's birthday because it provided me that extra day that allowed me to get a card off to my mother on time.

But I have theological reasons for talking about all three of these forms of children's entertainment, advocacy and education. I have been known to say from this very pulpit that Dr. Seuss is my favorite theologian - I think that's because of what was said by Carol Hurst, that "his zany illustrations and rhymes allow the reader to enjoy the books and recognize the morals without feeling the weight of a sermon..."²

[though I do resent the fact that the term *sermon* is used here to describe something rather distasteful and unpleasant.]

Mr. Rogers, was in fact, ordained to the ministry - he was a Presbyterian minister - and I don't think you can get more theological than his statement "I like you just the way you are."

Finally, you may ask what is theological about Sesame Street? Well, my theological professor in seminary was an Emmy award winning producer - guess of what show? You've got it. Sesame Street. Thandeka who preached here in November, in honor of the 5th anniversary of our being together as minister and congregation - she worked on that show in the early years.

She helped me understand what theology is. Literally the study of God - right - but in many ways, all that means is the study of the outer limits of our understanding - that which is just beyond our ability to grasp - the mystery. The mystery of God and Love and really the understanding of ourselves, the self, and Life itself.

I'm not doing a hard critical analysis of these artists and shows - I'm not going to talk about whether Sesame Street sets kids up for short attention spans or Mr. Rogers can be boring. I'm talking this morning about why I think these books and these shows have been so successful, because they have, and what the theological messages are behind them that we need so desperately - that children and adults crave.

So, I begin with Dr. Seuss - I think Theodor Geisel taps into the creative spirit in all of us. His rhymes and play with words, his drawings and imagination - they touch this playful spirit that kids know so well and adults remember, if they haven't cultivated it throughout their lives.

Creativity, is the very definition of God, for many of us. Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman, of the last century, states the religious problem in this question:

"What can transform man (he was writing in the 1950s) in such a way as to save him from the depths of evil and bring him to the greatest good which human life can ever attain?"³

He explores creativity and the creative impulse and examines not creative work, but the creative transformation of the individual into the wholeness of being.

"Creativity," writes Wieman, "is an expanding of the range and diversity of what the individual can know, evaluate, and control. Creativity is an increasing of his ability to understand appreciatively other persons and peoples across greater barriers of estrangement and hostility. Creativity is an increasing of the freedom of the individual when freedom means one's ability to absorb any cause acting on oneself in such a way that the consequences resulting from it express the character and fulfill the purpose of the individual himself. The fourth component of the transformation here called creative can be described thus: Increasing the capacity of the individual to integrate into the uniqueness of his own individuality a greater diversity of experiences so that more of all that he encounters becomes a source of enrichment and strength rather than impoverishing and weakening him."⁴

And before you think I've left Dr. Seuss behind, let me give you an example. *What was I Scared of?*⁵ by Dr. Seuss, is about our first person character, I, and this empty pair of pale green pants with nobody inside them. Our first person, I, encounters this pair of pale green pants with nobody inside them first deep within the woods.

I wasn't scared.
But, yet, I stopped.
What *could* those pants be there for?
What *could* a pair of pants at night
be standing in the air for?

So, he has another few scary encounters with the pants but one night he has to go out. He is very scared of running into the pants. So, he says some affirmations:

I said, "I do not fear those pants
with nobody inside them."
I said, and said, and said those words.
I said them. But I lied them.

Then I reached inside a Snide bush
and the next thing that I knew
I felt my hand
touch someone!
And I'll be that you know who!

so he yells and he screams,

but then a strange thing happened.
Why, those pants began to cry!
Those pants began to tremble.
They were just as scared as I!

I never heard such whimpering
And I began to see

that I was just as strange to them
as they were strange to me

and you can imagine that as the story ends these two characters become friends. Let me read the last part of that quote again by Henry Nelson Wieman: Increasing the capacity of the individual to integrate into the uniqueness of his own individuality a greater diversity of experiences so that more of all that he encounters becomes a source of enrichment and strength rather than impoverishing and weakening him."

creatively, Dr. Seuss, has the individual, the I, integrate this greater diversity of experience - being scared of an empty pair of pants - for which you can substitute a multitude of scary objects - into something he can relate to - *they were just as scared as I!* - and it becomes a source of enrichment and strength - friendship.

Brilliant. Dr. Seuss, the theologian. Though you may not have ever heard Henry Nelson Wieman's theology before, you know his theology through some of his students - Martin Luther King Jr.'s dissertation was called "A comparison of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Wieman." And a former minister, Tomm Smith, once told me that he studied under Wieman as well. Very influential in theology, even if he is not as widely known outside his field.

It's smooth sailing from here on out. I think it's easier to talk about the theology of Mr. Rogers, in part because he really was trained in theology and was a practical theologian. His thesis is very simple, and yet so profound. I think the words he opened with, say it all.

"I'm just so proud of all of you who have grown up with us. And I know how tough it is some days to look with hope and confidence on the months and years ahead. But I would like to tell you what I often told you when you were much younger, "I like you just the way you are." and what's more, I'm so grateful to you for helping the children in your life to know that you'll do everything you can to keep them safe and help them express their feelings in ways that will bring healing in many different neighborhoods. It's such a good feeling to know that we're lifelong friends."⁶

His is a relational theology that envisions and creates a place where children and individuals feel accepted and understood, where everyone is welcome no matter what he or she looks like, or what he or she can or cannot do. His love and acceptance is palpable in that video clip and on his show. I don't know anyone else who can say how proud he is of us, and even as adults, we are honored rather than insulted by the observation.

His sincerity is an easy target for comedy, but I think that's because, sadly, he stands in such stark contrast to what we so often experience in ourselves and in the world. He talks about his feelings in such a matter-of-fact way. Said Fred Rogers,

"Of course, I get angry. Of course, I get sad. I have a full range of emotions. I also have a whole smorgasbord of ways of dealing with my feelings. That is what we should give children.

Give them ... ways to express their rage without hurting themselves or somebody else. That's what the world needs."

If that seems too simplistic, I want to give two concrete examples - things I've been talking about in recent weeks from this pulpit - last week, I mentioned again the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib, and the week before the shooting at NIU - both, good examples of why Mr. Rogers says we need to give children - and the adults they become - ways to express their rage without hurting themselves or somebody else.

They talk a lot about feelings on Sesame Street as well - in fact, my points about all three fit for all three, but I think the emphasis is just slightly different. In addition to the creativity of Seuss and the self-acceptance of Rogers, Sesame Street focuses on how much we are different from each other. They made an effort in the creating the show of having African American actors and latino actors when that was rare on TV, and they speak Spanish as well as English on the show, (actually a multitude of other languages now also) and show urban life - which, as a kid growing up in a rural community, seemed so exciting and exotic, to me. It was different from my world, and yet the way that difference was presented to me made it all the more exciting. The message of Sesame Street was that we are accepted as we are and others are necessarily different than us, and that is also acceptable and interesting and fun.

Even Oscar the Grouch - we all know an Oscar the Grouch in our lives. He's a green muppet (orange when I was watching) who lives in a Trash Can on Sesame Street - he sings *I love trash*, and seems to hate everyone and everything - that puppeteer who created him, said he is modeled after a grumpy New York cab driver he once had.

The person who is a little contrary for the sake of being contrary - who is probably sick of everyone else trying to get along so hard, they don't tell the truth. So he speaks his hard, depressing, difficult truth every chance he gets. Poo-pooing ideas before he's even considered them, because that's who he is. He seems to not like life at all, or at the very least, he doesn't like other people.

It's a brilliant character, because we all know these kind of difficult people who hurt so much they spread their hurting around with harsh words and negative attitudes. But we love Oscar the Grouch, too, on the show, and the fact that we grow to love him is the point. It broadens our acceptance for people who otherwise are hard to like.

Or Kermit the Frog, born on Leap Year day, who wonders about his fate at being green - being different - and comes to a fine acceptance in his sad sounding ballad, *It's not easy being green*. It's not easy.

Like Mr. Rogers said, it's tough some days to look with hope and confidence on the months and years ahead. But with creativity, with self-acceptance, and appreciation for the other - I think it's possible. It's possible to look with hope and confidence. It's possible to love ourselves, and then love our neighbors as ourselves. With a little creativity, and a little help, it's possible.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.

¹ www.fci.org (Family Communications Inc.)

² <http://www.carolhurst.com/authors/drseuss.html>

³ Wieman, Henry Nelson. *Man's Ultimate Commitment*. p. 12

⁴ Wieman, Henry Nelson. p. 4

⁵ Seuss, Dr. *The Sneetches and Other Stories*.

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcvRMHz4mb4>