



A Discussion Guide



Tuttle, Shea: *Exactly As You Are: The Life and Faith of Mister Rogers*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2019.

About this Guide

The following questions are intended to structure and enhance discussion of Shea Tuttle's book *Exactly As You Are: The Life and Faith of Mister Rogers*, an exploration of the ways in which the beloved children's program host, Fred Rogers, was influenced by and expressed themes of faith and theology in his television work. The study can be conducted over multiple gatherings, using the three sections of the book to organize discussion of the 18 chapters.

About this Book

Fred Rogers, a 1962 graduate of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, is most commonly known as Mister Rogers, host of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, a children's program that ran for over three decades on public television. A recent documentary and feature film have stoked a renewed interest in the show and the man, perhaps indicating a hunger for what his program engendered. Each day he explored themes of make believe, feelings, growing up, the world around, and the making of things – all things that constructed and affected the lives of the children who gathered around the TV set every day to spend time in The Neighborhood. The simplicity of the show's structure and themes stand in contrast to the complex man at its heart: Fred Rogers was a person of deep faith, an ordained Presbyterian minister, a skilled composer, and a student of child psychology, as well as flawed and graced. As Tuttle says, "Without using the overt language of faith on the air, Mister Rogers relentlessly preached his gospel: you are loved just the way you are." This book explores the theological themes embedded in his commitments on and off the screen and the complex, faith-informed inner landscape of the beloved host of The Neighborhood.

Section I: Introduction and Becoming Mister Rogers

1. Mister Rogers made the author feel "completely seen, completely loved." (2) Did this resonate with you? What is the connection between this outcome and the intended work of faith communities?
2. Fred was ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1963 and "given a special charge to minister to children and families through the mass media. ... 'It's very theological, what we do,' Fred said about the program ... In truth, Fred could have said that about pretty much any aspect of his life." (3-4) What was the "church" he served? What was theological about what he was ordained to do? What is the core of the theology he communicated? Is there a way to look at what you are called to do in a similar light?
3. What spiritual disciplines anchored his work? What anchors you?

4. Throughout his childhood, several relationships deeply influenced Fred’s adult commitments: bullies, mother, father, grandparents, neighbors, high school classmates. What influence did they have on him? Do you think he would have done the work he did if he had not been formed by these relationships?
5. What informed his embrace of *neighborhood* as a core concept? What is the connection between his view of neighborhood and the Kingdom of God?
6. How does Tuttle make the connection between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Mister Rogers show? “Hebrew Scripture makes room for every kind of feeling, and it sets these feelings to music. When Freddy the bullied, chased child took refuge at the piano, and likewise Fred the homesick collegiate, he was participating in an ancient tradition of expressing raw emotion through music” (32). What reactions does this quote evoke in you?
7. Chapter 6 addresses the role of “whimsy and seriousness” in his program. How is being a faithful Christian – and God’s creation – both whimsical and serious? Are both experiences embraced and affirmed in faith communities? By you in your life? How do we discern when to be one or the other?
8. Why do you think Fred decided to attend Pittsburgh Theological Seminary even while achieving such success with *The Children’s Corner*? What influence did Prof. Orr have on him? Why did Fred call him a “saint?” Would you?
9. “Life is for service,” wrote Fred on a piece of paper he carried. What was his vocation? If someone were to ask you what yours is, what would you say?

Section II: Broadcasting Grace

1. From the very first episode, broadcast during the Vietnam War, Fred incorporated issues that adults were facing into his show. Why was this important to him? What are your views on this? How do faith communities incorporate these issues – or not? Should they?
2. Discuss King Friday XIII’s fear of change. Tuttle writes, “Change causes fear, in some people if not all – this is a surety. But fear, if allowed to run rampant, can destroy creativity, rob pleasure from others, and deeply wound those in our care . . .” (90). Where do you see evidence of this today? How does it play out?
3. Liturgy, from the Greek “leitourgeia,” is often translated as “the work of the people.” On his program, Rogers employed an unvarying rhythm that marked each telecast – beginning with his entry, through the mythic story, to the closing song. Tuttle calls the rhythm “liturgical;” how

does it reflect the liturgy we experience in church services? Why would Rogers have chosen to structure his program this way?

4. One job of liturgy is to shape our deepest desires and form us in habits that ground who we are. What impact did the liturgy of the Neighborhood intend to have on its participants?
5. Tuttle writes, “Incidentally, ‘set apart’ is the Sunday school-approved definition of the word *holy*. It’s no stretch at all to say that Fred believed his visits with his television neighbors to be times of holy exchange” (98). How were they holy? Why was it important for Rogers to give the children viewing at home an experience of the holy? Where do you experience the holy in this way?
6. The words “discipline” and “discipleship” are yoked by a common root. Rogers was a highly, even rigorously, disciplined individual. Why? What influence did this have on his discipleship?
7. How were the episodes in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe like New Testament parables? Discuss the parable of the bomb/bridge building. How is the Kingdom of God like these episodes? (See pages 106-107.)
8. What was the vision of the Kingdom of God present in the Neighborhood’s parables?
9. Tuttle points out that Rogers had a mixed record when it came to dealing with difference. How did Mister Rogers deal with difference? How did it compare to the way Fred Rogers dealt with it? How do you?

Section III: Hello, Neighbor

1. Begin with lifting out a quote from this part of the book that moved you and discuss why.
2. Fred Rogers’ favorite book was *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery. The most famous quote from the book – and his favorite – is, “What is essential is invisible to the eye.” How does this quote summarize the theology of the Neighborhood? What does it mean to you?
3. Tuttle points out that Fred Rogers was “strange.” How was he strange? How was this an asset to his work on the program? What are the benefits to being strange? Is being strange part of what it means to be Christian?
4. Discuss Fred’s complicated relationship with Francois Clemmons. How did it change over time? Did Fred live into his theology of “exactly as you are” with Clemmons?

5. Helping children be present to their big feelings and manage them was crucial to the work of the Neighborhood; writes Tuttle, “(Rogers) saw his own feelings – and the feelings of others – through the lens of the life of Jesus Christ, whose own emotional roominess made way for Fred’s personal growth and his television ministry of wide welcome” (157). What reactions and thoughts does this observation evoke in you?
6. How was *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* a ministry? How would the program have been different if it had explicitly invoked church language or had been financially supported by the church, as Rogers had initially hoped?
7. For Rogers, Tuttle writes, Heaven is a neighborhood; “The neighborhood of Fred’s imagination, in other words, was a neighborhood that stretched not only to people of many races, genders, ability levels, socioeconomic groups, and sexualities; not only to tangible neighbors as well as television neighbors; not only to the joyful and the despondent; but also, ultimately, to both the living and the dead. The neighborhood of Fred’s imagination was God’s neighborhood, where heaven and earth, the human and the divine, are brought together in the generous love of Christ” (173). What does this mean to you? Where do you find this challenging to imagine? Where do you find yourself resonating with the image?
8. “The gift of a minute” – Rogers would often conclude talks or presentations by asking those present to spend one full minute in silence, calling to mind someone who had loved them into being who they are today. Conclude your time in this book study doing this exercise – and telling stories about the person who came to mind and heart for you.

About this Author

Shea Tuttle is the author of *Exactly as You Are: The Life and Faith of Mister Rogers* and co-editor of *Can I Get a Witness? Thirteen Peacemakers, Community Builders, and Agitators for Faith and Justice*. Her essays have appeared in *Greater Good Magazine*, *The Toast*, *The Other Journal*, *Role Reboot* and *Jenny*. She holds an M.Div. from Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. www.sheatuttle.com

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