A framed image with a dark grey border. The background is a sunset over a forest. The sky is a mix of blue, orange, and yellow, with scattered clouds. The trees in the foreground are dark silhouettes.

As human beings, our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is.

Mr. Rogers (1928-2003)

A TIME FOR EACH OF US TO SPEAK OUT

I am writing this before the outcome of the midterm election is known.

No matter what the result, I feel that many of the campaigns have been morally intolerable in a way that is frightening for the future of this country.

I'm still not sure where this whole issue of tribalism came from.

I have been told that one of its principal adherents, Steven Miller (1985-) now an adviser in



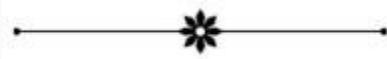
the White House, was an advocate when he was still a teenager at a California university. He objected to announcements being made in both English and Spanish. It was clear to him our light-skinned tribe should only speak English. I think that's wrong.

Fear has been a major strategy in this midterm of this election. I am old enough to have seen the use

of fear in the 20th century rise of fascist domination in parts of Europe. Probably as a result of that, I have always felt that people should be free of fear. And yet fear has been used as a primary motivation for supporting certain individuals in the election. I think that is ethically indefensible. As the distinguished Pulitzer Prize winning writer David Remnick (1958–) pointed out a few days ago, much of that fear mongering has been “generated foremost and daily by the President of the United States.” I think that is very wrong.

Perhaps you saw these things coming – I didn't. Watching the TV coverage of the white supremacist, neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Virginia and listening to chants like “Jews will not replace us,” took me completely by surprise. I wondered where all of this came from. But it is now a part of our political process and we are much worse off as a result.

I wanted to see another concept of America so I dipped into a little bit of Mr. Rogers and something written by a friend of mine who always manages to find humor in a bad situation.



In the news reporting the domestic terrorism occurring at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, there was one headline that caught

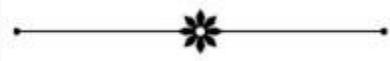
my attention, “Violence In Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.” It was not until later that I made the connection. Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood, Squirrel Hill, was indeed the neighborhood of The Tree of Life Synagogue. What an irony!

I never was a big fan of Mr. Rogers. I thought it was pretty corny — the sweater, the shoes, the puppets, the whole thing. But I did supervise a few members of younger generations in watching their TV programs. Looking back on it, I have to admit that I would love to see more of the ethos of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood replace the vulgar and crude mentality in our present world.

We are in the middle of the olive harvest and many of our Interns talking and singing in the field grew up with Mr. Rogers. They still have a fondness for him. Recently they had a discussion as to whether or not he was actually a Buddhist. Truth be told, the fellow was an ordained Presbyterian minister but he projected a spirituality that young people look back on with fondness. So I thought that reflecting on Mr. Rogers might



balance some of the disgust I feel about the propaganda, lies, division, work of trolls, gerrymandering, voter-suppression of minorities, and the like, in about the present political scene.



I find Amy Hollingsworth' s book THE SIMPLE FAITH OF MISTER ROGERS helpful at times such as these. She was a friend of the real Fred Rogers (1928–2003) of Pittsburgh.



One of the basic questions we face in this historic moment is the timeless question, “Who is my neighbor?” There are people starving and being murdered in Yemen, young girls in refugee camps on the border of Syria being married off at early ages because their families cannot support them, persons fleeing persecution, murder and poverty in Central America. This entertainer turned politician based some of his campaign tactics on the fact that these people are not neighbors but most likely terrorists or in some other way a threat to our culture. This occasionally also extended to Muslims, feminists, LGBTQ people, intellectuals and others.

So what is Mr. Rogers’ concept of a neighbor? It is quite simple. “It is the person who you happen to be with at the moment.” Like any other simple definition, this one is deeply profound. And that is why we here at Starcross, together with myriads of people and institutions across this country, are willing to sponsor and care for those neighbors who have traveled hard and long for peace and safety.

The next step is helping people who have been so brutally treated grow into the persons they were meant to be. Borrowing from Madeleine L’Engle (1918–2007), Mr. Rogers said that our task is simple — it is to recognize that “To be able to be accepted for who we are and to grow from there is one of the great treasures of life.” Our job is to be helpers in that process — even as others believe they are called on to hinder the process.



Now on to one of my oldest friends. We went to law school together and he went on to found a very impressive firm where he is still senior partner. He is also a distinguished member of the State Bar and a former military officer. This is what he wrote:

After our "Glorious Leader's" latest pronouncement that he intends to abrogate the Constitution with a mere Presidential Executive order, I called my brother and asked if he was packing up to be deported. It seems that our parents were not citizens of the US at the time we were born in the USA. They did not become citizens until a few years later, but before the War. Horrors! I am not sure they were here legally. Fortunately we live in a Sanctuary State, at least for the present.

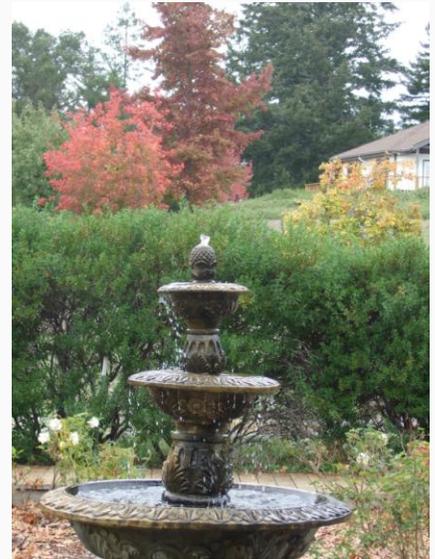
Of course our "Glorious Leader" is compassionate. He has now backed off from having the military shooting at the hoard of criminals and terrorists that are invading the southern borders. I guess with the executive order, as an anchor baby, at 86, I can't call it "our" border any longer!

I guess we keep the faith for a time. May we live long enough to at least see the pendulum start to swing. As my eternally optimistic grandfather used to say: "This too shall pass and probably something worse will happen!"



At the moment I am rather inclined toward the attitude of my friend's grandfather. My paternal great grandfather came off the boat, got a donkey and headed west like so many others who lived long enough to believe that they made a positive contribution to the development of this country.

I heard a young high school student say "The fiber of the country is coming apart." And he is right. Whatever the outcome of this election it is not going to resolve our issues. It will take a long time before we overcome the tribalism, the fear of the other, the racism, the anger, the nationalism, all of which divides us so seriously in these moments. But I hope that people like that young student keep fighting for what will make us healthy and compassionate, we will eventually return to all happily walking down the street, waving at each other, in Mr. Rogers' neighborhood.



Given the malevolent forces at play in our country today, I feel that the best way to end this reflection is with the familiar words of Pastor Martin Niemöller (1892–1984) who was liberated from a concentration camp in 1945, after another time of extreme stress and anxiety in history:

First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.

Whatever the result of the election, whatever our political and social outlook, it is time to speak out now — from teenagers to 86-year-old anchor babies. I am sure Mr. Rogers would agree!

All together now, “Won’t you be my neighbor?”

Brother Toby