



March 9, 2021

Genuine Curiosity

By Shawn Rutledge
Immanuel Seminarian 2021

Candidate for Holy Orders, Diocese of Arizona
Master of Divinity, VTS Class of 2022

A colleague of mine asked this question the other day, “How can we move forward in this difficult time with a positive attitude and not have everything that is going on negatively affect us?”

I decided to take his question seriously and reflect upon the truth God has shown me in my life.

I gave my colleague an answer specific to my experience, and I’m hopeful you’ll find it valuable, too.

The short answer to how we move forward with a positive attitude during difficult times is simple: genuine curiosity.

One of my personal heroes and a lived example of a Christian life is Fred Rogers of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. He was an ordinary, modern

American, working in two high stress jobs – TV and ministry – who, by all accounts, still somehow managed to be an extraordinary model of a good person.

Fred Rogers lived and taught a kind of genuine curiosity that allowed him to practice empathy at a deep level that made an impact. Fred's many biographers all share sentiments along a similar vein – Fred made them feel as though the things they had to say were important, and he was genuinely interested in what they thought and felt. That genuine curiosity and deep empathy had an astonishing effect on people, even coming through the medium of a television set.

In the recent podcast *Finding Fred*, one person commented that the difference between Fred and everyone else was that Fred “truly believed each person had something valuable to say, and people could tell that he meant it and believed it; and that gave them the space to believe it about themselves.”

When we start from that point, we are starting from a point of equality, a point of human dignity that allows for connection. By practicing genuine curiosity and deep empathy, Fred was able to “love his neighbor” in a way that was palpable to the person he was loving. Fred often said, “love is a verb, like ‘struggle.’ It’s an action word.”

For Fred, “Love your neighbor as yourself” was his life’s work.

In one interview Fred said, “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 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.”

Fred Rogers was always curious about that unique, God-given thing in each person he met – finding it and making sure to hold it up to that person to show them how wonderful it was.

That genuine curiosity was Fred’s way of seeing and honoring the *Imago Dei*, or Image of God, in which, we believe as Christians, that we are all made.

I believe the best way we can move forward with a positive attitude and not have everything that is going on negatively affect us, is by practicing genuine curiosity about others in order to build empathy, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

Is it easy? I certainly haven't found it to be, but I am trying, and there's one last message from Fred that can give all of us courage to keep trying, "Love and success, always in that order. It's that simple AND that difficult."