

## ***A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood: Forgiveness and The Inner Child***

### **Abstract**

Marielle Heller's 2019 film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, starring Tom Hanks and Matthew Rhys, inspires an introspective and enlightening discussion about the concept of forgiveness. While not an overtly religious narrative, the story of Lloyd Vogel's (Matthew Rhys) path towards emotional healing through the lessons of acclaimed television host Fred Rogers (Tom Hanks) presents an intricately woven tapestry of morals and beliefs that span many traditions. Among these transcultural understandings is the idea of forgiveness as liberation, an opportunity for new beginnings, and a conductor for moral transformation (Oxford University Press). More specifically in Western tradition, forgiveness is oftentimes viewed as a weakness, which can be interpreted as a prominent element of Lloyd's internal struggles throughout the film. How does Lloyd's curiosity about Mr. Rogers reveal a deeper understanding of his character and humanity? In this essay, I will seek to examine the religious and cinematic components that construct a poignant message about forgiveness, and propose the healing of the inner child as an embodiment of transcendent religious and/or spiritual conceptualization. I will compare this film to two other case studies of similar narratives on forgiveness in hopes to develop a broader placement of these ideas within film and religious tradition.

*Keywords: Forgiveness, film, religion, curiosity, inner child, Mr. Rogers*

### **Lloyd's Character and Mr. Rogers' Lessons**

The opening scene of the film brings to life the familiar and nostalgic world of *The Neighborhood of Make-Believe*, which *A Beautiful Day* is based upon. Mr. Rogers introduces his friend Lloyd and establishes that he's having a hard time forgiving the person who hurt him (his

father, Jerry). Rogers asks his audience, “Do you know what that means? To forgive? It's a decision we make to release a person from the feelings of anger we have at them” (Heller, 00:03:53–00:04:11). We come to learn early on that Lloyd’s father has reappeared in his life, unwelcome, as signified by the fight the two of them get into at his sister Lorraine’s wedding. Jerry’s intrusion back into Lloyd’s life naturally stirs up years of unresolved conflict and emotions stemming from Lloyd’s childhood and the death of his mother followed by his father abandoning them.

Although being tasked with writing a piece on Mr. Rogers’ heroic endeavors as a storyteller, Lloyd exhibits a presumptuous disinterest in him at first, not quite grasping the impact of his lessons on children perhaps because he had a lack of such a figure in his own childhood. The catalyst of Lloyd’s curiosity seems to be incited during his first face-to-face interview with Fred Rogers (00:30:33–00:34:05) Lloyd comes at him with a series of halfhearted questions regarding what it is he really does, to which Rogers responds, “We are trying to give children positive ways to deal with their feelings.” Mr. Rogers goes on to ask Lloyd how his face got bruised and beaten. Despite not being obligated to be honest with a man he’s only just met, at this moment a closeup shot reveals a slight innocence and vulnerability, a childlike essence emerging from the past. Lloyd answers honestly about the fight with his father.

A series of shot-reverse shots and zoom-ins next capture Lloyd observing Rogers act as Daniel the tiger puppet, placing Lloyd into the shoes of Mr. Rogers’ target audience: kids. The zooms on both Mr. Rogers and Lloyd allow viewers to gain insight into the passion and intimate identification Mr. Rogers shares with his characters and the lessons they represent. This is perhaps also the precise moment Lloyd recognizes the child within himself yearning to understand these lessons and reconcile with their past. In the next scene, Lloyd practically begs

his boss for more interviews with Mr. Rogers, no longer driven by his emotionally complacent adult self, but the curious and wounded child within.

### **The Inner Child**

“As we grow up, we hold onto what mattered most when we were younger,” cites an informative article by care center Cleveland Clinic (*Meet your inner child*). Your inner child is a representation of your childhood experiences and how they continue to affect you every day. Lloyd’s character is a prime example of how unresolved childhood trauma impacts the relationship with the self and others. The death of his mother and Jerry’s abandonment causes Lloyd to live a life isolated from his inner child and the intellectual, but painful emotions that come with it. Stepping away from the psychological implications of the inner child, is it possible to perceive such an integral part of humanness as transcendent?

Lloyd’s curiosity towards Mr. Rogers can be interpreted as a manifestation of his inner child seeking healing and reconciliation after so much time spent being suppressed. After finding out his father is dying, Lloyd resolves to go back to Pittsburg to “work.” Despite his wife’s horror and anger at him for wanting to leave at such a difficult time, Lloyd’s actions can be understood as the workings of his inner child driving him towards someone who can help him learn how to forgive, that someone being Mr. Rogers. Is this inner child reminiscent, then, of a higher power or vessel of knowledge?

### **Comparative Case Studies**

The films *Exhibiting Forgiveness* (2024) and *I Can Only Imagine* (2018) both present father-son narratives of forgiveness similar to that of *A Beautiful Day*. The two aforementioned

films rely more heavily on Christian ideology, but nonetheless embody messages and morals found across many traditions. *Exhibiting Forgiveness* features an artist, Tarrell, who struggles to forgive his abusive father. In a film review, Joseph Holmes examines the argument that “all of us are sinners; we all need forgiveness” (Holmes). In this case, Tarrell recognizes that his unresolved conflict with his father is destroying himself and hurting his family. He decides to forgive his father not with the intention of making amends, but with freeing both of them from the burden of hate so that they can move forward in their own directions. While Lloyd never sees the chance to welcome his father back into his life due to his death, he experiences a similar unburdening by accepting his father’s apology with a simple “I love you too, Dad” (1:28:46).

*I Can Only Imagine* is a biographical film based on the lead singer of the Christian pop band MercyMe, Bart Millard. He, too, faces the harsh reckoning of forgiving his abusive, alcoholic father who is dying of cancer. “That someone can overcome the effects of child abuse and forgive their abuser seems unbelievable and out of the realm of possibility,” Hosea Rupprecht reviews. “But for those of us who have faith...it is not only possible but truly healing” (Rupprecht). Through the healing nature of music, Bart becomes close with God and in turn resolves to forgive as He forgives His children for their misgivings. At the end of *A Beautiful Day*, Mr. Rogers whispers something to Jerry upon his deathbed, telling Lloyd later that he asked Jerry to pray for him. “I figured anyone going through what he’s going through must be awfully close to God,” he says (1:35:05). Although a rather confounding thing to say about a man who caused Lloyd so much turmoil, it upholds a fundamental truth: just as much as children have the innocent willpower to forgive, they also desire to be forgiven, in the sense that Jerry is a child of God.

## **Conclusion**

Through the religious and cinematic construct of *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, we arrive at the conclusion that curiosity is just one of many manifestations of an inner child that embodies transcendent capacities like those of forgiveness and redemption. Lloyd's journey to this reconciliation with both himself and his father shifts the concept of forgiveness as a moral justice to that of an internal reunion with a past, younger self. It is liberating and healing for Lloyd and his father. In essence, Mr. Rogers strives to impart knowledge to children on cultivating a fulfilling and perhaps divine relationship with the inner child so that it does not become something abandoned and suppressed when that child grows up.

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