

# “LET’S MAKE THE MOST OF THIS BEAUTIFUL DAY”

## PROGRESSIVE FUTURING THROUGH DESPAIR, HOPE, AND FRED ROGERS

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*It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood  
A beautiful day for a neighbor  
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?*<sup>1</sup>

As a dis/abled<sup>2</sup> person who, in many ways, lives through isolation, ever-expanding frameworks of interconnectedness (Padilla, 2022) and dis/Ability justice (Sins Invalid, n.d., 2019; Tataryn, 2017) impact my understanding of who might be my neighbor. What I call into question in this paper are the questions posed in Mr. Rogers’<sup>3</sup> song of welcome from the beginning of each episode of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. “Would you be mine? Could you be mine?”

In this reflection, I focus on why emphasis on the *progressive* moment of *currere* cannot be lost in the work of understanding the past and present and why it is a *futuring* of who I am and possibilities for the world I might live in that opens the possibility for greater awareness in the *synthetical* moment (Pinar, 2004, p. 55). Pinar (2004) writes about the *progressive* as clarifying the present. For this paper, I offer a glimpse into this clarifying work from my own ruminations on my lived autobiography and hopeful dreaming. As we see through this article, my careful study of the life and works of Fred Rogers and my growing partnership with the Fred Rogers Institute have given me new ways to trace my thinking and sense-making as I move from remembering to dreaming. The song “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” has been a helpful analytic framework as I try to think about what it means for me to come into this present moment with greater awareness of how I must move in the world with what I now know.

### REGRESSIVE RELUCTANCE

Based on intentional work through the four movements of *currere* as written about by Pinar and Grumet (2014), I begin with the *regressive* moment and my past experiences of whether and how I have experienced people’s interactions with me choosing to become or reject being my neighbor.

*... It’s a neighborly day in this beautywood  
A neighborly day for a beauty  
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?*

In preparing first drafts of this reflection and even engaging in meandering writing of the *regressive*, I was a reluctant writer. Thinking about my disconnection from community and the ways that in my time of need I was neglected and forgotten in spaces and by people I had invested

my heart and labor in is painful. As the events of the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, my family and I experienced acute isolation because I am seriously immune-compromised as a systemic lupus patient who relies on daily immune-suppressing medication. As vaccines rolled out and, wisely or not, people returned to or attempted to find “normalcy,” we continued to be very isolated. Month after month, year after year, new vaccine after new vaccine, extra vaccine doses after extra doses, I was unable to mount any traceable response. With the lack of available effective treatments, lack of response to vaccines, and knowledge of what could happen—like a case of influenza in 2012 that I almost did not survive—we knew that contracting COVID was not a risk we could take. Being in proximity with me indoors for the first several years of our global experience with COVID had to include isolating and wearing high filtration masks in public for a short time along with a testing protocol to be as sure as possible that I would be protected from possible infection. What we experienced was a shocking unwillingness temporarily to sacrifice comfort to have time with our family.

At one point while trying to write about my experiences, I texted a dear friend who takes autobiographical work very seriously. I expressed to him that I was having a really hard time engaging in the *regressive* and writing at all because of what it means to take up this “strategy devised to disclose this experience, so that we may see more of it and see more clearly” (Pinar & Grumet, 2014, p. xiv). So, I waded in quite messily to “penetrate ... public masks, the masks which keep us disassociated from our experience” (Pinar & Grumet, 2014, p. xiv). I tried to engage in free associative writing around my experiences with what it meant to have or not have people make choices to be my “neighbor” since March 2020 as a dis/Abled person with particular access needs. I wrote about new depths of loneliness I have experienced that increased for me through 2023. I wrote that the most intense loneliness came after years of isolation in light of just about everyone moving on or being unwilling to be cautious for a short time to be with me even momentarily, given my needs for caution and limited options with contagious diseases like the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In my *regressive* reflections, I also wrote:

*The excavating that needs to happen here is almost too painful to bear, too painful to write, too painful to symbolize and observe. Putting my realities of not being worthy of others' sacrifice to be in community with me and my family is too painful to write.*

Fred Rogers often received letters from adults facing a great deal of pain as they wrote to a television personality from whom they grew up learning and by whom they had been comforted. In a 1980 letter from a fan who had exchanged several letters with responses from Fred, this fan thanked him for a previous letter and some other materials he had sent her. She then went on to discuss her deep loneliness how she had “not been feeling very happy or interested in living for several months now” In this letter, she references Fred’s previous encouragement that she find ways of engaging in physical community and proximity to others as a means of hope. In his response to this fan, Fred wrote, “Your openness to what we offer is a sign of trust, care, and hopefulness.” While I never experienced a desire to not go on living, I felt devastatingly overwhelmed by being cut off from community, month-after-month and year-after-year. I see in Fred’s gentle and direct responses to her something that points me to similar hope from two excerpts of my own free associations about that time:

*It just wouldn't take much, and I don't understand. Wearing a mask and not eating in a restaurant or having people over indoors for a week just isn't that hard. My children can*

*do this, adults should be able to figure it out. A momentary inconvenience, and it's not even inconvenient.*

*As someone who has poured into service in various communities ... to have it go so wildly unreturned is unbearable. Refusal to have any discomfort—sitting outside on a porch or something so that we could have company and community, going on Zoom because they were sick of screens, easy stuff. Care is a two-way street. No, care isn't a reciprocal two-way anything; it's giving and receiving when it's needed. I am comfortable with my typical capacity to give more than I receive, but it breaks my heart that, when we needed care, it wasn't given by so many individuals and multiple communities to whom we have given so much.*

In moments when I could not tolerate free-associating the past, I allowed space for not writing, for closing my computer, for putting the pen down. I allowed myself to sit with what the experience had been. In these moments of deep despair, my mind would wander to dreaming of past experiences of joys and hospitality, times before COVID of welcoming people into my home most days. This would also slip into dreaming of futures where community for me is possible and desired by others, even if it requires a temporary routine change or a couple negative tests. The move to the *progressive* opened space for gratitude and joy in the sadness of my *regressive* writings about this part of my experience as a community member and educator. The observing of my experiences is painful. It also contains hopeful recollections that defy the overwhelming despair and loneliness.

### PROGRESSIVE FUTURING

As I move to the *progressive*, I imagine spaces that are hospitable to dis/Abled bodies and minds. Here, I consider the ways non-normativity enhances neighborliness (Kittay 2011; McRuer, 2006; Schumm, 2010). This imagination is enhanced through the life and works of Fred Rogers.

*... I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you  
I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you  
... So, let's make the most of this beautiful day  
Since we're together, we might as well say  
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?  
Won't you be my neighbor?  
... Won't you please, won't you please?  
Please, won't you be my neighbor?*

As I took up the suggestion to “ponder meditatively the future” (Pinar & Grumet, 2014, p. xv) and to engage in thinking that is aspirational so that I can “ascertain where I am moving” (p. xvi), I found myself engaged in a prayerful act, and when I observed what I had written, I had lingering questions: How am I dreaming? What's here? What do I want to teach? Who do I imagine myself to be? What are my desires?

*It's a future of radical acceptance. A future where bodies and minds that don't "fit" aren't made inconvenient but are honored. This requires a continual working toward viewing and fracturing what has been made normal in efforts of hospitality. I see my syllabi in front of me full of texts that help us see anew. I want to teach, while I learn with students, new possibilities for welcoming anyone who has been pushed to a margin. In my classroom full of graduate students from beautifully varied perspectives, experiences, and disciplines, we can teach each other how to engage in projects and writing with others and communities that welcome bodies and minds that have been pushed aside.*

The despair of the past and present is evident in my *progressive* writings as I write of wishing and longing for scenes in the future that are reminiscent of the past. I write of seeing others and their needs in community fully and of being seen and given the care I need to be with others, to be welcomed as their neighbor. This *futuring* necessitates radical hospitality and collective desire for inclusivity, not tolerance. This dreamed of future holds hope through generosity through considerate and conscientious care for others' experiences and needs.

Part of my entry to being able to understand and even begin to write through a *currere* process is connected to my view of myself as a teacher and the way this teacher-self is connected to who I am as a learner, community member, and someone who encounter others. Whether I consider work with youth in my past and present, who I am as a mother, or who I am as a professor—the teacher-self carries through with desires to be welcoming and open-hearted. This *progressive* thinking has also left me with this question of *how* I am I dreaming. *How* do I engage in *futuring*? The heart of this reflection is how the *progressive* moment is connected to my desire to both “see and be seen” from my writings:

*I wish for a return to the full, loud, boisterous house of the past. I know that I have changed, but I want to be a place where people gather to eat and laugh and talk about what is on our hearts. I wish for more people gathered around my table than we have room for and for more food than we can eat. I also savor these times of the four of us and what it means that we are community. Our family is so close. I hope for a future where that continues to grow. But I long for and dream of a future with ease and flexibility to have people pop in relatively unannounced for a quick hang out.*

*I'm hopeful we'll find tools. Maybe molecular tests or other tools that can help this. I want people to want to find these solutions (not just tolerate them). I dream of a future that there's more generosity just to consider our experiences and do more to want to be with us.*

In a recent exchange with the same friend mentioned above, as we contemplated what it means to engage in *currere* work, I emphasized the importance of the *progressive* moment stating, “understanding the imagined future, even idealizing some things is part of understanding who we are in the world based on who we want to be.” I went on to state,

I think sometimes it can feel almost trite to imagine. Image what? Just pontificate about the ideal? Or not? And, of course it's “not,” but I've found in my own process I end up meandering through what I want to see the world *as*, and it helps me get to who I want to be or imagining in that way. And, then, it sheds some serious light on the *regressive*. It's almost like a prayer this stuff.

This “stuff,” this *currere* work, is prayerful. In my meditative moves to imagining, I allow myself to hope, to hope without restraint. In those moments, I am able to see my past in a way that helps me to understand the actions I must take for a better future.

This is not easy. The imagined future can seem like an impossibility. Parker and Dawe (2024) write that to “situate [oneself] in time” through future imaginings when the future is not made for you is “uncertain” and yet the move to the *progressive* is “an act of survival and resistance” (p. 39). It can also be a scary proposition as Forde (2023) describes how wading into dreams of being, personally and professionally, “is frightfully uncertain” (p. 4). While my reflections on neighborliness as experienced through my teaching, dis/Ability, and interactions are different from these authors, imagining myself in the world and in interactions unmediated by ableism can be disorienting, and the uncertainty of if or when can be frightening.

In his ruminations on curriculum in the information and social media age, Pinar (2019) points out, “Because it is imagined now, the future represents an expression of the present” (p. 79). For me, these meditations help me navigate despair and hope. As I dream of myself and the world as possible futures, I see the past with greater clarity. This clarifying *futuring* brings the hopeful remnants of the past into focus informing the imagined future. As I bring these together, I am able to engage the present with hope. I have learned through my engagement in *currere* as a many years-long process that it is the imagining, the reimagining, the wading into the uncertainty that allows the reorientation and analysis.

### ORIENTING ANALYTICAL MOMENT

My move to the *analytical* moment brings what I know through observing my experiences together with my hopes for the future. This *analytical* move aides my thinking through what is happening in my present to show me something new about how I might understand and engage with dis/Ability justice, with my histories, and with my “neighbors” given the complexity of interacting in an ableist world.

Vaughan (2023) frames the *analytical* as moving from reimagining to reorienting. She also shares that this reorientation is dynamic in ways that coming to understandings can lead to further disorientation as in her experience when she realized “that we already had many tools needed to make a more accessible world. What was missing was the desire to create the space we needed” (p. 67). Extending from uncertainty and fear one can feel in the *progressive* as we see in Parker and Dawe (2024) and Forde (2023), Vaughan demonstrates what I am naming as despair and hope as present in her analysis. I see this acknowledgement as moving me back to the present with a greater sense of what I must do. Connected to this slippage between writing through the *progressive* and how that enables my *analysis*, I see the ways this deepens my understandings. With this deepened understanding, as Pinar and Grumet (2014) write, “can come deepened agency” (p. xiv). The *analytical* moment is made possible by hope as an active agential posture.

In my *analytical* writings, I wrote about my experiences since the global crisis of COVID as *clarifying* when it comes to how I understand hospitality and care. In a chapter on dis/Ability, Fred Rogers (1983) writes about having a dis/Abled guest regularly on the *Neighborhood* as helpful “in many ways” for everyone involved in making the show (p. 78). He writes,

One of life’s joys is discovering that we can be open to new experiences that at first seem strange or even scary. It’s always exhilarating to find, as happens so often, that the barriers



that seem to separate us from other people are like mirages and vanish as we get closer to people. (p. 78)

He goes on to explain that acknowledging, asking questions, and talking about one's dis/Ability, and proximity to them "seems to clear the miragelike obstacles" and open modes of expression and acceptance not just of the dis/Abled person, but of everyone involved in the relation (p. 78).

As I sit with my experiences of the last many years and the anger—nigh, heartbreak—that I have felt being isolated as people chose to *not* be my neighbor, I return to thought of masks and masking. Perhaps, seeing through my public masks through *currere* and sharing parts of what I am learning here can "penetrate" (Pinar & Grumet, 2014, p. xiv) in ways that clear the mirage and open possibilities for neighborliness. At times, this might require a neighbor to put on a high filtration mask or look at me with my physical mask on to see me, to really be my neighbor rather than excluding and forgetting. It could be that it is in the asking questions, discussing my dis/Ability, and seeing me (often without seeing the lower half of my face) that another can find their way to disrupting the normalizing ableist practices of excluding different bodies and minds and find their way to my front porch, or walk the wooded path in my neighborhood, or to embrace a protocol that can welcome me and others who have been left aside.

### PROGRESSIVE EMPHASIS

Pinar (2019) writes that, "by discerning the future in the past and present, we can expand the temporal range of what we experience now, discerning (dis)continuities within the three" (p. 79). In this way, the *progressive* is not simply a means to engage in the *analytical*. It is also through this *futuring* of who I want to be that actually reveals the profundity of the *regressive*. It is only through imagining different worlds, daring to think of who I want to be, that I can understand who I am now and who I was in the past. In other words, the *progressive* imagining of what I desire for myself and for who I will be in the future reveals who I am in the past and also enables my knowing of how to reenter the present. The *progressive* slip helps us to get a fuller picture of who we are by knowing what we want to be. In an excerpt as I pondered the future I wrote,

*I see myself as someone who can act with grace towards someone who has done something wrong, hurtful, or otherwise damaged their relationship with me. I dream of a forgiving future. As I teach, mother, form friendships, and reconnect, I see my future self as acting with generosity while not shying away from the pain of the past. I see a future where I can handle the nuance of what I have experienced, how these experiences have changed me, and engage others, especially those who have caused heartache, with openness, understanding, and love.*

As Pinar (2023) describes, "an expanded subjectivity," even momentarily, is made possible through the suspension of one's present experiences through our *analysis* of our experiences and *progressive* imaginings (p. 2). The *progressive* cannot be missed or skipped over. Fully engaging reflection on who one might be in the future and what one might experience lends us insights about those past experiences and how we might engage in *analysis*.

Pinar (2004) writes, "The point of *currere* is an intensified engagement with daily life, not an ironic detachment from it" (p. 37). My engagement with the *progressive* drives me back to this

sharpened awareness of my own interiority and my experiences with others and the world around me. In this way, *currere* becomes a means of embracing the fullness of living and a way for me to understand the complexities of keenly felt despair and hope.

### SYNTHETICAL SENSE-MAKING: DESPAIR, HOPE, AND FRED ROGERS

I have learned to understand myself, the world around me, and how I must return to the places I live my life with others with greater awareness of the complexity of emotion and being through my *currere* engagement. As I experience a *synthetical* moment even now through this writing, it is important to see that this engagement happens in careful reflexive practice on my own and in community (Vanderbilt et al., 2024). My process is also deeply informed by avenues of reading and study as I work my way through these expanding temporalities.

This query is fraught and can be quite tricky as I navigate a still ableist world embracing those around me while pointing out and working toward change. As Rogers (1994) says, “Often, problems are knots with many strands, and looking at those strands can make the problem seem different” (p. 99). Working through *currere* as an ongoing entangled process offers me a way to see the threads of knots I have experienced, and the *progressive* brings those strands into greater relief. This makes paths forward more visible. I am able to notice what I can do to disentangle the knots that have caused the pain and isolation and see ways around the twists and turns. Rogers (1994) notes that loss, whether temporary or more permanent, comes with grief that can also contain anger and a great deal of sadness (p. 98). He also explains that it is in loss that we feel a deep sense of hurt, especially when this has to do with loss of people we love and relationships (p. 101). Through *currere*, I am able to observe and feel the grief, anger, and sadness of the isolation and rejection I have experienced in a way that helps me understand the hurt and loss. This understanding along with dreaming of who I imagine myself to be in a less ableist world gives me new visions for future possibilities.

What I have learned through this *progressive* writing and linkages to the *regressive* includes the ways non-normativity enhances neighborliness (Kittay 2011; McRuer, 2006; Schumm, 2010). I have seen the ways and felt the ways returning to “normal” and what has often been called a “new normal” have been exclusionary. A radical acceptance of non-normativity is a *progressive* imagining. For me, there has never been a “return to normal” or a finding of “a new normal” as has often been said since the spring of 2020. And, as I theorize it, that’s good. I have had new ways to recognize how I and others reify normativity. I now have ways of seeing the world and, with that, perhaps, solutions to seemingly intractable problems we face. So, theorizing this lack of “return,” this moving farther and farther away from “normal,” is good. Living is a painful journey.

As I think through the *analytical* moment as enabled by my *progressive* dreaming of extending hospitality in new ways, and as I grieve not knowing welcoming community in the same ways or in any sense of a return to before 2020, I am reminded of Roger’s (1994) words,

Something we all need in order to feel the fullness of life: It’s not only a sense that we belong on our planet, but also that we belong in other people’s lives—that we are loved, loveable, and capable of loving. (p. 21)

As I come to this moment with a greater awareness of the ways I can foster relationships in community and the ways I believe we need to see community in the future with greater hospitality

toward varied access needs, I see who I must be in such a world. This helps me understand my experiences with isolation and despair and reenter the world hopeful with a sense of the present and my role in it. Rogers (1994) reminds us that “relationships are like dances in which people try to find whatever happens to be a mutual rhythm in their lives” (p. 21). I believe this flow in community is possible and that my *progressive* imaginings as informed by my recollections, however painful, bring me to the world with greater hope in my despair.

*... Neighbors are people who are close to us  
And friends are people who are close to our hearts  
I like to think of you as my neighbor and my friend*

This means I will continue to think through the emotional, intellectual, and physical understandings of what it means for me to be in the world knowing that so many find it hard or impossible to engage dis/Abled people as neighbors. And, even with that, I turn to the prompt, “Let’s make the most of this beautiful day.” I turn to this while some decide they won’t be my neighbor. As I have written with others before, I am able to come to the *synthetical* because of the relational work of what it means to collaborate with others like Kelly Vaughan and Jamie Buffington-Adams (Vanderbilt et al., 2024). The experiences with community, in the context of deeply caring relationships, with people who choose to be my neighbor, allow this greater awareness that propels action. Rogers (1994) reminds us that “taking care is one way to show your love. Another way is letting people take good care of you when you need it” (p. 25). Through the dance of friendship, community, and giving each other what we need when we need it, I am able to find my way to meaning.

As I conclude, I would like to offer something I have learned as I have engaged in this ongoing, difficult, encouraging work over the past several years specifically related to my experiences with isolation because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As alluded to, my self-awareness through *currere* enhances how I am able to bring myself to community and to relationships in the present in my city, my neighborhood, in my classroom, and in other spaces. Rogers (1994) reminds us that “you bring all of who you ever were and are to any relationship you have today” (p. 24). As I acknowledge and gain new insights into the ways that “anger makes us feel so isolated” (Rogers, 1994, p. 26), I am able to reconsider what that anger is showing me. Rogers (1994) teaches that

forgiveness is as important to our emotional well-being as being able to wait for what we want or to cope with stress. Like most of the important inner strengths of life, the ability to forgive (to let go of resentments, to give up being an accuser) takes root early in our becoming. (p. 109)

While Rogers encourages adults who interact with children to consider, teach, demonstrate, and encourage forgiveness in this quote, I find it a part of the budding awareness of how I must reenter the present. Through imagining who I want to be in the future, I am able to realize what forgiveness looks like in community in greater ways. At times it is a moment that needs to be worked and realized again, to let go of resentments, to let go of needing repentance, to learn the dance of being in and building community that moves us towards welcoming dis/Abled people like me.

I also offer a heart-felt acknowledgement that, while I have been expressing these ideas in discussions with friends, in conference presentations, and in meetings with students interested in



*currere*, writing this article was itself *currere*. Rogers (2005) states, “Who we are in the present includes who we were in the past” (p. 50), and Pinar (2023) extends this to the ways moving through *currere* and how *currere* “provides a portal to a different future” (p. 2). For me, this is enabled because of the engagement with the *progressive*—the taking seriously the meditative.

Rogers (1994) states, “Listening is where love begins: listening to ourselves and then to our neighbors” (p. 115). I end with this quote as I continue to ponder listening to self with *currere* and thank you for listening and for journeying here, perhaps, in a way, as my neighbor.

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## NOTES

1. The lyrics of “Won’t you be my neighbor?” are published in several locations and opened each episode of the PBS series *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. The lyrics are used as interludes throughout this article and can be found along with an instrumental arrangement in Rogers’s (1983) book.
2. I punctuate dis/Ability throughout. In the tradition of scholars like Gallagher et al. (2023) who extended dis/ability punctuation with the capital A to highlight the socially constructed nature of disability and ability and to also “resist deficit thinking and language” with the use of the capitalization along with the punctuation.
3. Fred Rogers was a beloved television personality beginning with a regional television show, *The Children’s Corner*, which aired on Pittsburgh area public television from 1955-1961. He is most well-known for his national program, *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, which aired from 1968-2001 with daily half-hour episodes where Fred Rogers discussed what he called “important things” with children and other characters in his neighborhood. Each episode also included interludes in the “Neighborhood of Make Believe” where humans and puppets interacted and emphasized important lessons and ideas for viewers.

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