

# Episode #34 – Fred Rogers and the Healing Power of Fatherhood

**Donna Ferris:** [00:00:00] Welcome to Bounce Back Stronger, the podcast that explores ways to find peace and purpose after difficulty. I'm your host, Donna Ferris. And today we have a truly remarkable guest joining us. Author, journalist, and editor, Art Carey. A little bit about Art. With 34 years of experience as a reporter, staff writer, editor, and columnist at the Philadelphia Inquirer, he has a wealth of experience to share. From covering national affairs to delving into health and fitness, Art has captured the essence of human resilience, whether it's through covering stories of inspiration with well-loved celebrities like Fred Rogers or overcoming personal challenges, including depression.

He also is the author of one of my favorite health and fitness books *Body for Life*, which contains the accessible strength training routine I have been using for 21 years. I know it's 21 because I used it right after I had my second child.

**Art Carey:** Wow. That's terrific.

Congratulations. You [00:01:00] must've read one of the original *Body for Life* books.

**Donna Ferris:** I did. I did. We got I got it from one of my coworkers at SEI. So yeah, yep. I loved it. So welcome to the podcast Art. I'm so honored to have you with us today.

**Art Carey:** Well, thank you, Donna. I'm delighted to be here, and thank you for that very gracious and flattering preface.

**Donna Ferris:** Well-deserved introduction. Yes, well deserved. So, you focused on a wide variety of topics during your career as I mentioned, health and fitness, your book on marriage to the outdoors, most recently your project with your son and the Maine cabin. What drew you to all these subjects and how did you approach them so well as a journalist?

**Art Carey:** Well, that's one of the delights about being a journalist. It pays pretty lousy, but you have wonderful experiences and get to meet all sorts of interesting people. But I was never really a newsman. The news was sort of a

means to an end. It [00:02:00] was the writing and meeting interesting people and satisfying my curiosity that most appealed to me.

Kept me content as a journalist. So the fitness thing kind of happened accidentally. I was editor of the Sunday magazine for many years, 13 years. And they decided to launch a health and fitness section and they decided since I was the resident “body Nazi” to use Hunter Thompson's term for fitness freaks because I used to run at lunchtime with some of my buddies at the paper. And I was always walking around with my chest out and my muscles showing. So they said, they invited me to write a column about fitness, and I was delighted. I thought that would be a lot of fun, and it was. And so that's how I got a chance to express my Passion for fitness, although it had been something that I was doing on my own ever since I was 12 years old, probably partly because of my [00:03:00] grandfather who was a magnificent physical specimen and was reading all sorts of crazy books by Adele Davis about nutrition and Other books about how to achieve immortality.

That's how my interest in fitness came about. And then I'd been doing that for a while. And when I got into my late forties and fifties, I entered what Wordsworth called the years that bring the philosophic mind. And I began to become more interested in what makes people tick, what sustains people, the passions and the beliefs and the philosophies, particularly the philosophies of life that lead to a meaningful existence.

And so I proposed to my editors that I launch another column called This Life. And the title worked in two ways. It was usually a biographical sketch, but also it was a short profile that attempted to explore. What is it that we're doing here? What is it? “What is this great strange [00:04:00] journey?” to use Jack Kerouac's words.

And that was really fun. I would say that, those two years, 1998 to 2000, when I was doing both the fitness column and the This Life column were probably the happiest of my life. I really felt fulfilled because, as I said, I used to do Bodies on Mondays and Minds and Souls on Thursdays, and it developed quite a following.

I think it was just the right column at the right time for a lot of baby boomers who were at the same juncture in their lives.

**Donna Ferris:** Right, trying to keep fit and trying to understand what their lives are all about.

**Art Carey:** Yeah. Yeah. And it was also a way selfishly for me to tap other people's wisdom and then to share it with my readers.

And that was really, really felt like I was doing something useful.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah, I think I can relate a lot to that. We were talking a little bit about the impetus for the podcast. And I think that's a lot of what I feel like I'm doing myself. So [00:05:00] I do relate to that.

**Art Carey:** Roger Rosenblatt was one of the people that I interviewed and got to know a little bit.

Do you know who he is, Roger Rosenblatt?

**Donna Ferris:** I don't.

**Art Carey:** He used to write wonderful essays in the back of Time Magazine.

**Donna Ferris:** Oh, wow.

**Art Carey:** And then he was also an on-air essayist for the *PBS News Hour*. He used to deliver weekly essays, but when I interviewed him, because I had a crush on him because he's such a wonderful writer, he mentioned a story that he did, a profile that he did of the famous physician philosopher, Lewis Thomas, who said that with the same insight that we have about our flaws and shortcomings, we should also take into account the many ways in which we have achieved goodness and particularly the many ways we are useful. And, more specifically, uniquely useful.

So I love that term uniquely useful, [00:06:00] because I think that's something that we can all strive for and also achieve. Because we're all unique and we can figure out a way to be useful in a way that nobody else on the planet is.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah. To tap into another PBS show *Thomas the Tank Engine*. All Thomas ever wants to be is a useful engine.

And it is something that I've been thinking a lot about recently. Something I always talk to my kids about. You know, you just really want to be useful and use your talent in the best way possible. Yes. And be a team player at it. So it's interesting you bring up something that for me taps into something that I've been thinking a lot about.

I think that's one of the joys of having a conversation is that you can, you know, see these ideas kind of float all over the place, and they can mean so much to you when you hear them from somebody else. Yes. So it means it means we're not alone.

**Art Carey:** Yes. And so the, the premise of the, This Life column was that number one, everybody has a story to tell.

[00:07:00] And then the number two premise was everybody has some wisdom to share.

**Donna Ferris:** I love that. Could you share maybe some specifically or particularly inspiring profiles that you wrote and during those times.

**Art Carey:** Well, there's so many, so many, it's really hard to choose, but often after I would interview people, because they were usually pretty deep, soulful interviews, one of my favorite ways of interviewing people was to take long walks at Haverford College.

And we would sit down at a bench, sometimes for three or four hours. And so the, the result was that many of these people became friends. The relationship didn't end with the interview. So two people in particular who fit into that category are Jack Bogle. Who was the founding chairman of Vanguard, the great mutual fund giant.

\$6 trillion under management now. [00:08:00] And Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers. And I ended up interviewing them several times and for several stories. And in the case of Fred, I became a pen pal. We exchanged letters and telephone calls and I think it's fair to say that he really became a friend. In fact.

Here's a, here's a letter from Fred. Aww.

**Donna Ferris:** That's amazing.

**Art Carey:** He wrote it in response to the story about my grandfather's last six months that I wrote for the magazine. He insisted that I send him some of my favorite stories. So I did.

And so one of them was, was that one. And his letter starts, Well, Artie. You made me cry. And he goes on from there.

**Donna Ferris:** That's wonderful.

**Art Carey:** But that's the kind of guy he was. And yeah there's sort of a funny story. I so the first time I [00:09:00] met him was when he came to Philadelphia because he had to do some business.

His publisher was here and I took advantage of that to interview him because I think it had just been announced that he was ending his show. And so I went down to meet him in this office and they were in a meeting with some other people. And as soon as I entered the room, he turned his attention directly to me, and acted like I was the only person in the room, and he had all the time in the world just for me.

So the first thing I said to him was, I like your bow tie because I'm a bow tie guy and he said, would you like to have it? He's going to give me his bow tie. And then he asked me if I had grown up with the neighborhood and I said, well, the show didn't start until I was a senior in high school. And he couldn't believe how young I was, how young I was in my early fifties at the time.

And then I said, well, that's a wonderful compliment. [00:10:00] Thanks very much. And I said, it really means a lot to me, especially now. And then he said, what do you mean by that? His voice turned grave, and he was very concerned. So that, then I told him that sort of what I told you, that I'm in a period in my life where I'm searching for meaning and trying to figure out what life's all about and interested in people who are engaged in the construction of a soul.

And so he said, that's wonderful, then you need to read these two books. He scooted over to his briefcase and pulled out two books for me, one about, by a woman about a relationship with her grandfather and another about finding meaning in life. So that evening he was to be honored at a big gathering in one of the center city hotels.

And I went just to watch and see the scene. And he has this shtick that is so affecting at the beginning of the speeches, he announces to the audience that none of us would be here would [00:11:00] be who we are today if it weren't for somebody other people who took an interest in us and loved us and made us who we are.

And he said, I would like now to take a moment of silence, and I want all of you to think of that person who helped make you who you are today. And Think how proud they would be to see who you've become. So inevitably, people start to tear up. Mm-Hmm. through this moment of silence. Yeah.

**Donna Ferris:** I'm tearing up now a little bit thinking of it.

**Art Carey:** Yeah. And it was especially interesting to see these hard charging businessmen type guys who were jiggling their legs and suddenly it, it just melts 'em. So after the speech, I went up to. Congratulate Fred, and he tore himself away from all these devotees and votaries, and It gave me a hug.

And then the next day, which was a Saturday, the telephone rang at my house [00:12:00] in the afternoon and my son, Teddy, who was about maybe 10 or 11 called to me and he said, Dad Mr. Rogers is on the phone, so I picked up the phone, and Fred said, I just wanted to tell you how much fun it was to meet you and how much I enjoyed our conversation, and This may sound a little bit weird, but I wanted to ask you a couple questions.

Who are the people in your life who have loved you, and who are the people that you love? Wow. And that was a question that most people can't answer off the top of their heads. No, but that was sort of the way he was. And yeah, I called him later in the week, and we had a conversation for a couple hours.

**Donna Ferris:** So he was really genuine. [00:13:00] And that was not a shtick, right. But it kind of was his shtick. It's so real. It's not, it's not even. Something we're used to seeing.

**Art Carey:** Well, I would have to say that he was probably the most saintly human being I've ever met.

Yeah. And I, I, I asked him some pretty hard questions at the beginning because I, I, I have a, I think Hemingway talked about having a built-in shit detector and I'm very, very cynical about people like that and wanted to see if his public persona matched who he really was. And I believe he was the real deal, the real thing, authentic kind, decent giving person.

He wrote handwritten notes. He would get up at five o'clock in the morning. He had a ritual. He would write handwritten notes to thousands and thousands of people a year. And a lot of the people who watched his television show were not children, they were adults. Many of them [00:14:00] going through difficult periods in their lives, and they would write to him thanking him for saving their lives or making them feel worthwhile.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah, yeah, he was an inspiration. One of the few shows that I was allowed to watch as a child on TV when I was little. So I did really love him.

Maybe we switch a little bit here because I want to make sure that we get a chance to go through some of the other things that we wanted to talk about. You mentioned your son Teddy Maybe we talk a little bit about the work that you just did with him in the Maine cabin. I'm really interested in that. It seems like such a great way to spend time with your child, but also, it kind of encompasses your interest in the outdoors, and that being a way to soothe the soul.

[00:15:00] So I'd be interested to hear about that experience.

**Art Carey:** Well, thank you, Donna. I'm delighted to talk about that because that summer of 2021 was fantastic. Probably the best summer of my life and the thing about which I'm most proud. So in 1959, my grandfather took me to Maine when I was a nine year old boy.

We spent a magical month together, just he and I. And he was a wonderful role model and inspiration. And so I fell in love with Maine and became infatuated. And I vowed back then that someday I would return and build a lobster shack or a cabin in the woods. So finally, in 2021, everything aligned to make it possible.

Teddy was at a transition point in his life, he was leaving Boston, Texas and was available to help me. So we spent four and a half months in the woods on a piece of land that we own. And built a cabin from scratch. We originally bought plans, but once we got [00:16:00] up there, we decided that we couldn't build the cabin.

**Donna Ferris:** Oh my gosh.

**Art Carey:** The cabin that was described in the plans, it was a little bit beyond our ability. So Teddy ended up designing the cabin. He was sort of the chief architect and engineer. And how many fathers get to spend four and a half months of exclusive, intimate time with their grown sons doing something like that?

**Donna Ferris:** What a gift.

**Art Carey:** It was just the most lifesaving experience, actually, for both of us. It pulled me out of a 10-year depression, and it was also very beneficial for Ted because he got his dad back. It was an incredibly gorgeous place and working with our hands and lots of very meaningful conversations.

And we got to know each other deeply

**Donna Ferris:** [00:17:00] And you've written a few pieces, at about that, right? But are you going to write a book about that?

**Art Carey:** Yes. Yes. As a matter of fact, I have written a book. It's finished, but now the process of trying to find somebody who might publish it and sort of tinkering with it to make it commercially publishable perhaps. It covers a lot of ground.

**Donna Ferris:** What do you think about that experience helped with your depression? I'm just curious, what do you think was the catalyst?

**Art Carey:** Well, I think I was already pulling out of it for a variety of reasons, thankfully.

Cause it was 10 years. That's a long time. Yeah, it's a long time. But to be engaged. I think that's the main, main word. To be engaged in something meaningful, with purpose. And to be outdoors. Be working with my hands to have a sense of agency Mm-Hmm. of being useful, being able to [00:18:00] do things and accomplish things.

A sense of purpose. These are all the things that all the sages of the ages say are essential to a sense of happiness or contentment. And being with my son, being in this sacred place, this place that I love so much, being outdoors in the sunshine, fresh air in nature, all the, all the things that are almost guaranteed to make you feel good.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah, and then it allowed you to write about it too, right?

**Art Carey:** I kept a journal up there. Right. And actually, here it is. Teddy gave this to me. Oh, wow. Can you see it?

**Donna Ferris:** Maine Musings. I love it.

**Art Carey:** Yeah. So he gave it to me. Back in 2009. Originally, wait a sec. No, he gave it to me for my 53rd birthday.

So that would have been 2003. Yeah. And I didn't do anything with it. So he re-gifted it to me in 2009, [00:19:00] hoping that I would use it. And so I did finally use it in the summer of 2021 when I took it up there. And that became the book that I kept my journal in. I was pretty disciplined about making sure that I made a daily entry and it became the basis for the book that I've written.



There was some, lots of memory prompts in there.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah, that's really, really helpful. I think There are a lot of good things in all of the things you said - that we talk with the different people that I've had guests on the show. The being outside, the having purpose, the converting the feelings and the things that you're going through into writing or some creative pursuit is really, really helpful.

And then, the connection that you were having with your son is so powerful.

**Art Carey:** Yes. And using and [00:20:00] moving your body. That's another thing that I preach. Well, you know that from your yoga.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah. Yeah t is another way to convert. the energy and the emotions that can kind of get stuck in your body.

It helps to convert them through activity and moving and yeah, it's really, really helpful.

**Art Carey:** Yes, absolutely.

**Donna Ferris:** I could have you back, I think, multiple times to talk about all of the things, and I would like to do that, so I'm going to already ask you for that, but maybe before we tie up today, you could share one thing that you would like to let listeners know maybe in today, in this time frame, or, you know, where we are today in the world, or just out of our conversation today.

**Art Carey:** It's so easy to be despairing. I think it's like, I guess you're familiar with. Candide by Voltaire.

**Donna Ferris:** I mean, not as well as you are, but yes, familiar

**Art Carey:** Dr. [00:21:00] Pangloss, and he's actually a satirical figure. He's meant to be somewhat ridiculous because he's sort of pathologically optimistic. And one of the sayings that's attributed to him is “All is for the best in this best of all possible worlds.”

So Pangloss comes from pan, meaning everything in gloss, meaning everything is shiny and happy. But I think that if you have to choose between being pessimistic and cynical it's probably best to err on the side of being optimistic and hopeful. And that's pretty much the way I try to exists day to day, and sometimes I try to be militantly cheerful and KK Chesterton said, “Courage is

the ability to be cheerful in circumstances, we know to be [00:22:00] desperate.”

Again, I think that's a choice.

And the other thing from this stage in my life is Jack Kerouac said, “Life is just a great strange dream.” But I feel so grateful. I'm very interested in, I think gratitude is a huge component in being content and also pulling yourself out of depression. It sounds trite to say count your blessings.

And the thing that I went through was not just cognitive or attitudinal. It was clearly a neurochemical biological genetic susceptibility, but there is that the cognitive component does count as well.

Just the idea of being grateful for every day that we're alive. Just every day is a fresh start and a reason to rejoice. But the other thing that is a little bit of a hobby horse for me right now, and my wife teases me about it – is graciousness, being gracious to everybody.[00:23:00]

Just say something nice to everybody you meet. It's amazing how that kind of thing becomes infectious and contagious. It ramifies. I define graciousness as courtesy amplified by generosity. And when I say generosity, I'm not meaning giving big tips or money. I mean, just generosity of spirit.

**Donna Ferris:** Yeah. And you definitely have that. And I think it's interesting if we tie that back to Fred Rogers; he certainly modeled that.

**Art Carey:** For sure. Yes. Well, one of his favorite sayings was You've made this day very special just by being you—that kind of idea. There's something the Quakers believe in - the divine light.

Everybody has a divine light.

**Donna Ferris:** It's helpful for us to want to be that divine person. We want to be the best person that we can be in all situations, and not that we're going always to make it happen, but it is a thing to aspire to.

And it does [00:24:00] help. At least I find it turns you from your worst tendencies.

**Art Carey:** Yeah, but I also think that the idea is that everybody has a treasure. Everybody has a gem is sort of a gem in some way. And that's why. I'm so

curious. That's why I ask people questions because I like to try to discover that plum, their being or their soul or whatever and find out what is that special spark or whatever it is that makes them unique and interesting. Sometimes, I'll tell people I'm so glad that we are sharing the same time on the planet, that we're making this passage together.

How fortunate it is. Our past crossing.

**Donna Ferris:** Well, I'm so thankful that our paths have crossed.

**Art Carey:** Well, thank you, Donna. Thank you so much. It has been so fun. And I'm sure there's more. There's more out there that we can offer. But I really, we didn't even talk about the, the holy trinity of fitness and *Body for Life* and Jack Bogle [00:25:00]

**Donna Ferris:** But maybe you'll come back.

**Art Carey:** Certainly.

**Donna Ferris:** Well, thank you. Thank you so, so much.

**Art Carey:** Well, it was a pleasure. And thank you for inviting me

**Donna Ferris:** That's all for today. If you want to learn more about Art's books, writings, and editing services, those links will be in the show notes. Thank you so much for listening. I hope this episode has been helpful. And if it was, please subscribe, drop a review, or share it with your friends and family. That's the best way to get it in the hands of those who may benefit.

And if my daughters, Sienna and Sylvie, are listening, I just want you to know how proud I am of you.

And I love you so much. Bye now!