

Livingness

By Michelle Manger Keip

Grandpa was in the backyard, sitting under the shade of the cedar trees by the fishpond. Mike pressed his hands and face against the window as he looked outside from the kitchen. His breath clouded up the glass. He licked a clearing in the middle of the foggy patch and then traced a circle around it with the tip of his nose. He stepped back, smiled with satisfaction at his expressive marks. Then he ran outside, the screen door slamming closed behind him.

“Whatcha doin’, Grandpa?” Mike asked, standing beside Grandpa. Full of curiosity, Mike kept looking back and forth, at Grandpa and then at the pond, back at Grandpa and back at the pond.

“I’m sitting, and seeing,” Grandpa said. He was sitting very still and looking towards the pond. He turned his head and looked at Mike. His face brightened into a wrinkly smile.

“I’m breathing in my livingness.”

“Your livingness? What’s that?” Mike scrunched up his face and scratched the back of his head, along the hairline of his neck.

“My livingness. It’s a way of saying everything is alive and I’m a part of that. So are you.”

“I am?” Mike asked, not so sure what Grandpa meant.

“See the big goldfish? The one with the dark streak over the yellow spot on its head?” Grandpa sprinkled some fish food onto the water and fish came swimming quickly from all directions.

“That’s Sunny,” said Grandpa. “You see, Sunny was born in the water and has always lived in the water. The water, the plants and Sunny go together. The plants in the pond make oxygen for Sunny to breathe. The roots of the plants absorb the nutritious compost made by the fish manure and the rotting plant stuff. The fish eat plants and bugs and other critters. All that livingness belongs to each other. It’s really all one, one livingness.”

“Can I?” Mike stuck his hand out, palm up, nodding towards the fish food jar Grandpa was holding.

“Sure!” Grandpa said, tipping over the jar, pouring a spoonful of fish food into Mike’s hand. Mike immediately tossed the fish food into the pond.

They watched the fish darting back and forth, up and down and around, gulping up the morsels floating on top of the water. After a minute of watching in silence, Grandpa said, “We don’t really need to feed the fish. They have everything they need in that water of livingness.”

“But I love to feed them,” Mike protested.

“Exactly,” said Grandpa, “We feed them with our love. And in return they come to us. Aren’t they beautiful?”

“Yes!” Mike chirped joyfully. “I love to watch them.”

“They’re watching you, too,” said Grandpa as he gently patted Mike on the shoulder.

“They are?” Mike wondered. He scratched his head again, this time with his other hand.

“Yeah, I guess they are!”

“It’s natural to love what we love,” said Grandpa as he wrapped his arm around Mike’s shoulder.

“But sometimes people get too busy, they get tired and grumpy and they forget how easy it is to love and be loved in return. We are all fed by love, by livingness. It can be as easy as sitting by the fishpond and enjoying whatever you notice. You might feel the cool breeze rippling across the pond, or smell the blooming hyacinth, or catch a quick sparkle of silver as a fish turns in the sunlight. The livingness we can notice is infinite. So is the love inside our hearts.”

Mike was leaning into Grandpa now and watching the pond. He tilted his head back to look at Grandpa’s face. Grandpa was watching the water with a dreamy look in his eyes. Mike rested his head back on Grandpa. Then he let his whole body sink deeper into Grandpa’s body. They sat together in quiet stillness for a few minutes.

Suddenly, Mike sat up and looked straight at Grandpa. “I’m hungry,” Mike said, rubbing his tummy and licking his lips eagerly.

“How about we get something to eat?” Grandpa asked, as he clapped his hands together.

“First one back in the kitchen gets to choose the snack!” yelled Mike, as he dashed back to the home. The screen door slammed shut behind him. He ran to the kitchen window and pressed his nose and mouth into the glass.

Outside by the pond, Grandpa was standing, stretching his body open in the sunlight. He saw Mike in the window and waved. Mike waved back. Grandpa smiled a big, bright smile and started walking towards the house.

