

How to Live (with thanks to Charles Webb)

Penny Kittle

Eat mounds of mashed potatoes and charbroiled salmon
caught just moments ago at a hideaway fishing hole
with bread you tear into chunks and smear with whipped garlic butter.
Make chocolate chip cookies with an angry daughter.

Walk your dogs two miles or more each evening
as the snow squeaks beneath your boots
and the full moon casts a blue glow on tall, feathery hemlocks.

Learn to fish by watching your father cast wide
into a deep stream and listen as he tells you his secrets
of fish, regret, opportunity, and love.
Ask him about childhood and his favorite books.
Listen hard while you can. See your mother
through his eyes and ask her to hand-write recipes for you
the oatmeal cookies, the halibut baked in lemon and spices,
the way to save money and tell a story.

Make music and trust yourself that it will be beautiful.
Learn flute or guitar and sing with power and joy until the windows
fog up. Read Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot.
Write poetry and story and all the passions that wake you in the night.
Mean what you say. Don't mislead people—there is more to learn
from hard truths than easy lies.

Create with your life a reflection of the beauty that surrounds you,
the color in a morning April sky, the smell of the desert
after it rains, the symmetry and simplicity of a single pine cone.
Visit the beach and chase the waves, hangglide at dusk on the Oregon coast,
gather broken shells and sea glass, share with children, honor their collections,
move slower when beside them, stop and wonder.

Love your work and nurture your place there. Be someone to believe in.
Cherish your family, however you define them, and find your way home.
Inhale the scent of green tomatoes and sage growing on your deck.
Light a candle and watch it burn. Be at peace with your place in life
and welcome each day given to you. Know that no one dies before their time.
Know this may be all there is and give thanks.