

Preface

“She waited for you,” the priest told me. I believe she did.

It had been a long trip to get there and my Grandmother Mitsu had been on a much longer journey in this world. She was 111, though the priest pronounced her 113 by the Buddhist way of counting age. Her old body had finally broken down and I couldn’t just let her go, so I went to Japan.

With a heavy feeling that this was my last time to see her, I made the long trip across the ocean. When I finally arrived in her room and saw her tiny body, my heart sank, as she appeared to be unconscious. I stared at her for a while, thinking that I had come for nothing. But when I spoke to her, “Grandma,” she opened her eyes and looked into mine. “It’s me,” I said. “Stephen.” She recognized me and her eyes closed. We did this a few more times before she appeared to fall into a deep sleep. Wanting to get away for a moment from the enormity of the situation, I went outside into the falling darkness, wandering through neighborhoods filled with sights, sounds, and scents of home— fish grilling, television news blaring, students bicycling home.

When I returned, her condition had markedly changed. The nurse said that she was rejecting food and even water. The doctor was called and after examining her told me that she was “nearing the mountaintop”—an unfamiliar expression but one I instantly understood. He left the room and I waited alone by her side. The only sound was the rhythm of her harsh breathing. After a few hours, I grew weary and fell asleep.

A short while later I awoke to a strange silence. I knew that

it was over. Her long time in this world had ended. As I gazed at the lifeless body, I sensed that she was no longer there.

The funeral ended with family members placing flowers on Grandmother's body, especially around her face, before the coffin was closed. We then moved to the crematorium. There we watched as the body was rolled into the oven and the switch turned on. None of this was horrifying. I sensed no life in the body, no grandmother. Whatever form she was now in, it clearly was not attached to that body.

My mother could not make the trip to Japan, so as the only grandson I was the designated person in charge of the ceremonies. Many people came up to me and reminded me what a big heart Grandmother had. I saw how she had always been so attentive and aware of the needs of others, so compassionate in giving, and so responsible in serving the interests of the family and community.

When I was leaving for the airport, the priest told me once again, "She waited for you. It is good you came. It gave her peace and she was able to let go."

It's still a mystery that she waited for me. Maybe grandmother wanted to give me the final message that everything was all right. She was okay. I would be okay. We were connected so deeply. When I was a lost young man in my twenties, I felt called to be by her side and lived with her in the Japanese countryside as I regained my strength to go on. Grandmother cared for me and taught me many things about life. I absorbed some of her tremendous life energy. She taught me about the beauty of a way of being in which I needed to accept who I was, be grateful for it, and responsibly do what I could with what I had. My life was transformed in what my awed father called "a metamorphosis!"

Grandmother's passing birthed a renewed sense of being called back home; to connect with my heritage; to remember who I am. Reflecting on her life, I remember how much Grandmother lived with her heart. At the funeral, so many people spoke of her with the word *kokoro*, expressing a broad sense of wholeness, with heart, mind, and spirit. Her being expressed mindfulness, compassion, and responsibility, and the closest word in English that describes her is "heartfulness."

It has become clear to me that for many years I have been teaching what I learned from my grandmother about the art of living with heartfulness. At first, I called it storytelling, or narrative. Then it became emotional intelligence. More recently it was labeled *mindfulness*. All these words describe a way of living that is heart-centered, beyond a focus on mind. I saw that I had been teaching about heartfulness in diverse contexts, without calling it by that word.

The responses to a heartfulness approach tell me that it has meaning in people's lives. The training that I do with American, Japanese, and Singaporean government employees is described as "staying in your heart" rather than "disappearing from your brain." College and high school students call my classes transformative, with life lessons that remain with them. Doctors, counselors, and coaches alike declare that heartfelt courses empower them with both empathy and respect. Heartened by this response, I am propelled by the urgency of doing something, no matter how small, to heal personal suffering and to revive our sick society and destructive world. If we are awake and aware, we know that we live in a dangerous time in which our lives, the lives of our children and of future generations, and even the survival of the planet

are threatened. Despite being in the midst of material abundance and achievement, I am surrounded by anguished youth—some rushing blindly and heartlessly on their race to nowhere, others dropping out, numbed and disillusioned. My peace is shattered daily by the sharp blast of the train's whistle, reminding me daily of the five teens from my son's high school who took their own lives in a single year on the tracks near our home.

My sense of helplessness is a reflection of the vulnerability that many face in the world and provides a way of recognizing that our safety now depends on our loving and caring for the peoples of the world just as we love and care for our own families. Our survival depends on our willingness to transform ourselves into active global citizens. I see that my grandmother's teachings have meaning today in how to live a meaningful life, and I have been sharing them with people in many parts of the world.

I have put together some of Grandmother's teachings in this book, along with those of other mentors and guides. It is full of stories, as they make learning easier, and Grandmother loved telling them, as do I. My hope is that these stories will have meaning for you and help you to understand, and possibly even integrate, heartfelt principles into your life. Practice is necessary, so each chapter concludes with exercises that will help you to make the principles part of your daily activities.

Aging helps me overcome the fear that my words will not be listened to or will be misunderstood, and that what is most important to me must be made verbal and shared. I trust that a caring writer can bring new life to people by his honest self-portrait, as a service to those searching for some light in the

midst of darkness. I believe that it is necessary for those of us who write, to live and speak the truths that we believe and know beyond understanding. We survive by taking part in a process of life that is creative as well as continuing.

I tell my story of learning from Grandmother's wisdom in the belief that what is most personal is most universal. Yet it's just our story, hers and mine, and I've chosen to live like this. It's my belief that everybody's life can be like this, if they too choose to make it so, to reflect about what they've been through, and to share that with others. I am tempted by the desire to appear wise but strive to tell only what I know— no more and no less.

The stories I tell in this book show how I am here today and who I have become because of the love of Grandmother and of others who have given their lives for me. Throughout my life I've been blessed with countless teachers, some of whom are honored here and others who remain nameless. My story is their story, as my life has relied on their love and guiding light.

The song "Ripple" ends with the words "If I knew the way, I would take you home"—a reminder that we each must find our own way home. I am always on my way home. The path of heartfulness, though constantly challenging, has guided me, filling my life with wonder, truth, and beauty. I believe that it will also serve as a guide to finding your way home— transforming yourself and society with compassion, and making peace in yourself and in the world.