Literature in Context:  
A Community-Based Education Guide  
to Cynthia Rylant’s *Life*  

by Robin Huntley  
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Summary

Beautifully detailed and metaphorical illustrations accompany deeply emotional wisdom in this work from an award-winning author and a talented illustrator. Rather than reading as a true story, Life offers up simple yet universally applicable life advice. Centered around the idea of allowing life to happen and adapting to change in order to survive (and love life!), the book pairs simple suggestions and thought-provoking questions with relatable experiences had by species from all around the world. Even young readers will see the clear link between the words and the natural images they are paired with – a connection that encourages deep thought and reflection. In addition to serving as a lesson for self love, the book encourages empathy and understanding, allowing it to serve as a catalyst for community-based learning opportunities existing within the practice of kindness.

Critical Thinking Questions

Life is in and of itself a set of critical thinking questions (and statements) – yet here are even further questions that can be used to spark deep thought and honest, meaningful discussion amongst readers.

- What do you think the narrator means when they say that life begins small, then grows?
- Why do you think the idea of life beginning small is related to an elephant? Why would the author choose to do that?
- Even though many of the aspects of life that the animals love are undesirable to humans, the animals are pleased to experience them. Why do you think the animals can love things like heavy rain, blowing sand, and cold, snowy skies?
- Many of the illustrations serve as visual metaphors for emotions, meaning they use pictures to represent emotions. What illustrations represent emotions to you? Explain.
- The book cautions that we may experience wilderness sometimes. What type of “wilderness” do you think the author means? Could “wilderness” be used to represent another idea here?
- Similarly, what might the idea of numerous roads represent in life?
- What can readers gain from learning to trust the rabbit, deer, wolf, and wild geese? What does finding your way back home mean in an emotional sense?
Community-Based Learning Map

*Life* gives advice to readers on moving through the flow of life with confidence, trusting that all is changing and shifting and will eventually fall into place. In addition, the story encourages readers to have empathy, showing them that *everyone* and *everything* around them experiences the natural ebb and flow of life. The book shows readers that it’s normal to experience challenges, and literally illustrates the power that the good things that come can serve as guiding lights in life.

Use the resources listed below to share kindness in creative and diverse ways while engaging in community-based education.

**Resources for Community-Based Education in Western Massachusetts**

**Resources for Mindfulness**
https://hilltownfamilies.wordpress.com/2017/06/07/htf-317/

Spreading light and kindness can often be done on a small scale simply through changes to your own mindset – especially those changes that area catalyzed by the practice of mindfulness. This post shares community-based resources for the exploration of mindfulness with all ages.

**Hilltown Families’ Guide to Cultivating Kindness Culture**
https://hilltownfamilies.wordpress.com/2014/12/09/rak/

Pair resources from the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation and inspiration from past community initiative as a starting point for identifying opportunities to practice kindness authentically within your own community. Tailored for the holiday season but not holiday-specific, this guide to cultivating kindness encourages the practice of community service for the sake of giving to others.

**Opportunities for Local Community Service and Giving**

**Volunteering in the Pioneer Valley**
https://forbeslibrary.org/community/resources/volunteering/

Northampton’s Forbes Library offers a guide to resources for learning about volunteer opportunities within communities in the Pioneer Valley. There are a wide range of opportunities available for most ages, interests, and abilities!
The Gift of a Mindful Presence
https://hilltownfamilies.wordpress.com/2015/12/15/htf-204/
Spread kindness through your own presence of mind; explore mindfulness as a tool for becoming more present for the benefit of yourself and others. This practice promotes true attention, close listening, and deep understanding of both the self and others, and is doubly beneficial for this reason!

Community Care Bags
https://hilltownfamilies.wordpress.com/2013/12/09/community-service-creating-care-bags-for-giving/
Community care bags are an especially meaningful method of spreading kindness for young children, as they are concrete and the process of creating them requires children to do concrete tasks. Care bags can be tailored for donation at a variety of locations within any community, but it's important to check with organizations to find out what items are most needed before beginning to make your care bags.

Gingy's World Travels
http://www.raregemsblog.com/where-in-the-world-is-rubys-gingy/
Gingy is a gingerbread character created by the Rare Gems Blog, a project spreading disability awareness, inclusion, love, and kindness. Rare Gems teaches by chronicling the life of Ruby, a teenager with a rare genetic condition called Stromme Syndrome. This holiday season, Ruby's gingerbread man is travelling the world to promote kindness, and to teach Ruby and her peers about holiday celebrations in other communities. Spread kindness, teach about your community's holiday season, and promote inclusion by printing a copy of Ruby's Gingy and including him in photos!

Spread the Bread
Become a part of Spread the Bread, a global kindness initiative built around a very delicious practice: the sharing of homemade bread with friends and neighbors! Next time you're baking, make a double batch and share one of whatever you've made with a neighbor – just for the sake of spreading kindness. Join the movement!

Socks for Seniors
Gather socks on your own or use Socks for Seniors’ resources to organize a sock collection initiative in your own community. All socks gathered by the organization are distributed to homes for the elderly, where they spread kindness, love, and warmth!