

Sukhomlinsky News



Health and Humour

*In this twelfth issue of 'Sukhomlinsky News', which marks one year since I began to issue the newsletter, we are beginning the translation of another of Sukhomlinsky's popular works: **One Hundred Pieces of Advice for Teachers**. The extract given here is the second piece of advice, which relates to teacher health, and how teachers can reduce the stress that inevitably comes with teaching. Not surprisingly, Sukhomlinsky suggests that a sense of humour helps to keep things in perspective.*

There is also some humour in the children's stories this month. I rather like the idea of the queen bee reprimanding her guards for letting some wasps into the hive and calling them 'cabbage brains'.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

A Teacher's Health

Sukhomlinsky received hundreds of letters from teachers asking for advice. In response to these letters he wrote *One Hundred Pieces of Advice for Teachers*, and this month we are including one of those pieces of advice, entitled 'About Health and the Richness of a Teacher's Spiritual Life. A few words about the Joy of Work'.

I remember a farewell party for a teacher who was retiring. The teacher who invited me to the party was relatively young. She began work at the age of twenty, and on the day she retired she was only forty-five years old. We all wondered why Anastasia Grigorievna was retiring. We thought it strange that she did not want to work a single extra day. She retired on the day she completed twenty-five years of service at the school. All our questions were answered by Anastasia Grigorievna herself in her farewell speech to the gathering of young teachers. 'Dear friends,' she said, 'I am retiring because I do not love my work at school. I did not find satisfaction in my work. It gave me no joy. This has been a great misfortune, the tragedy of my life. Each day I have looked forward to the end of lessons, so I could escape from the noise and be by myself. You are surprised that a woman of forty-five would retire, while still enjoying excellent health. But I do not enjoy good health. It has been overtaxed by work that gave me no joy. I have serious heart problems. I advise you young teachers to search your hearts. If your work gives you no joy, give up teaching, and find your true place in life. Find work that you love. Otherwise your working years will be hell!'

Dear friend, let us reflect on this sad story. Our health, our mood, the richness of our spiritual lives, the joy of creative work, satisfaction from work that we love—all these things are interconnected and interdependent. Most important of all is our health and our strength of spirit. How necessary health is for a teacher, and what a tragedy it is if illness imperceptibly takes over our lives and catches us unawares.

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A Teacher's Health (continued)

It is not uncommon for a teacher to reach forty-five or forty-seven and find that they are completely spent. They have reached the peak of pedagogical wisdom, uncovered the mysteries of the art and science of education, and developed educational convictions, but they have no energy left to keep going. A teacher with twenty-five years' experience, who had begun work at the age of sixteen wrote to me: 'I do not want to reach forty-five as an honoured committee member, as a 'guest of honour' who is in reality a spent force. How can we work in a way that does not overtax our health? We need our health in order to work and be creative. I cannot imagine happiness without work.'

I have had conversations with about four hundred teachers aged forty-five to fifty. When we talk about health many complain that their hearts are playing up. Disturbances of the circulatory and nervous systems, heart problems, these can creep up on a teacher, and not only limit, but often put an end to their creative work, forcing them into an early retirement. We need to work in such a way that at sixty we are still healthy and enjoying life. It is hard to imagine something more tragic for a teacher than to feel at the height of their intellectual powers and full of ideas, but physically powerless.

But how can we look after our heart and nerves? We cannot turn away from anything that demands emotional involvement, and cultivate indifference. Here we need to consider the special conditions under which we work. Our work involves heart and nerves. Every day and every hour we are required to expend an enormous amount of psychological energy. Our work places us in constantly changing circumstances that lead to both heightened arousal and inhibition. For this reason the ability to manage our own responses, to exercise self-control, is one of the most essential skills on which both our success as teachers and our health depend. An inability to manage our own daily and hourly emotional reactions, to manage the situations that confront us, is the main factor that leads to overtaxing of our hearts and wear and tear on our nervous systems.

But how can we develop this ability? First of all, we need to understand our own health, to understand the peculiarities of our own nervous system

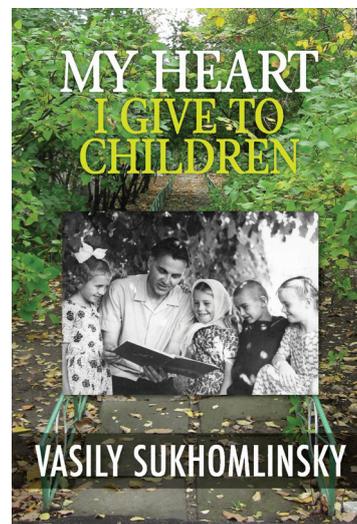
and heart. The nervous system of any human being is by its very nature very flexible, and a teacher needs to develop this flexibility to the level of mastery over their emotions. I have developed this ability in myself by not allowing the seeds of negative thinking to grow, whether it be gloominess, exaggerating others' faults, or imagining that children are intentionally trying to undermine my work. It is difficult to express in words, but one common weakness of educational practice is expecting from children what can only reasonably be expected of an adult, and turning children into either cold logicians, or indifferent repositories of truths and teachings. I always try not to fuel agitation, and not to suppress it, but to release it. What is necessary for this to happen, how do we avoid the constant need to restrain ourselves? The most sweeping measure is to direct the energy of the whole class, including the teacher, into an activity that requires psychological unity, collective creativity, the full concentration of each and every member, and an exchange of ideas. Experience has convinced me that such collective activity weakens the 'springs' that a teacher often has to 'compress' in order to inhibit arousal and not allow irritation to be openly expressed. If we do not weaken these springs, if we clutch our heart in a fist as they say, it will be overtaxed, irritated, and unsettled, unable to monitor the emotional hazards that arise in our work if our feelings run wild or if we have to repress them.

I went into the forest with my class. We have a mischievous little boy named Yurko, lively, mercurial, snub-nosed with blue eyes and freckles. While the other children were gathered in a clearing, listening to my instructions—where we were going next, and how not to get lost in the forest—Yurko ran off into some trees, hid in a gully, and started calling out so we could all hear him... At first it might seem that the child is doing this with the evil intention of disrupting our walk through the forest. But, I tell myself, we should not exaggerate a child's intentions. Yurko is just a little boy, in grade two, and his intention is not so far-reaching. I will not get upset, angry or irritable, but will turn this into an interesting game. 'Children, let us be very quiet and hide from Yurko. Instead of us looking for him, he will have to look for us.' Quietly, so the grass does

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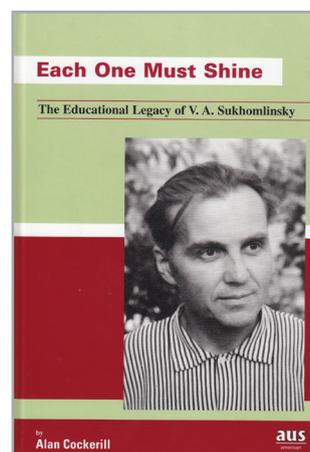
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not rustle beneath our feet, we make our way to a cave I know, and hide in it. The children are in raptures as they look around their hide-away. Yurko calls out a few more times, and then falls silent. Then we hear him in another spot, imitating the call of an oriole. He is approaching the spot where we were sitting. He calls out again, and now I can hear concern in his voice. He has reached the clearing. Now his is no longer imitating bird calls, but calling to us: 'Where are you? Answer me!'

Instead of forcing yourself to suppress your irritation, find an activity that will throw a totally different light on the thing that is irritating you and leading you to suppress your feelings. Find a funny side to what is irritating you, and you will become the master of your class's thoughts and feelings. The second way to release feelings of agitation and irritation is to exercise a sense of humour. The most tense situation, which can sometimes lead to a lengthy period of irritation, can be diffused if you have a sense of humour. Children love and respect a teacher who is cheerful, and does

not become discouraged or despair, if for no other reason than that they are a cheerful bunch, with a sense of humour. They have a way of seeing something funny in every act and everything that happens in life. The ability to make fun of the negative in a good-humoured way, without malice, and to support and encourage the positive with a joke, is an important quality in a good teacher and a good class of students.

The lack of a sense of humour in a teacher creates a wall of mutual misunderstanding: the teacher does not understand the students and the students do not understand the teacher. An awareness that children do not understand you is irritating, and that irritation is a state from which a teacher often cannot find a way out. Believe me, my dear colleague, at least half of the conflicts that eat away at a school and poison the life of the students arise from such mutual misunderstanding.

A teacher's work consists of alternating periods of great intellectual effort and of relative calm. Many years of experience

has convinced me that a teacher's heart and nerves require prolonged periods of rest from giving, from the expenditure of nervous and spiritual energy. This energy needs to be replenished. A necessary condition for this replenishment is the sensible use of rest time. Appropriate rest, especially during the summer and winter, develops and strengthens the compensatory capacity of the nervous system, assists the development of stamina, composure, and the ability to mentally control emotional impulses. Many experienced teachers, who have worked in schools for thirty or forty years, tell me that they have been assisted in the development of stamina and self-control by prolonged communion with nature, during which physical effort is combined with thought and observation.

At the same time it is necessary to economise the expenditure of nervous energy during our daily work. That is an important way of ensuring we have a healthy heart and healthy spirit.





Stories for Children

They buzz, but they don't bring any honey

The queen is the oldest bee in the hive, and mother of all the bees. During the hot summer she sends four young bees to the entrance of the hive every hour and gives them their instructions:

'Guard the hive, and do not let any wasps through the entrance, or they will eat all the honey.'

The bees guard the entrance. They watch carefully. If the wings are yellow like the sun, they are bees. If they buzz like bees and smell of wax, they are bees.

But then two wasps sneak up to the hive and quickly dive through the entrance. They buzz like bees and the guards do not notice them.

The wasps break into the hive and get stuck into the honey. There is a commotion, and the queen shouts:

'Where were you looking, you cabbage brains? How could you let the thieves in!'

'But they were buzzing like bees,' explained the guards, 'And they had yellow wings and smelt like wax.'

'They buzz like bees, but they don't bring any honey.'

Wolf berries

The leaves fell from the trees, the grass withered. The bare, empty forest was freezing cold. The wind blew right through it. No longer could you hear the merry chatter of the children. There was nothing to go into the forest for: no white mushrooms, no blackthorn berries, and no sour rose hips.

There was just one bush of wolf berries standing on the edge of the forest. It had sharp green leaves that seemed made from tinfoil, and from its branches hung red berries. The bush admired itself: 'How beautiful I am!'

Snow fell on the fields and trees, but the bunches of red wolf berries still hung from the bush. None of the birds came to feed on them, not the woodpecker, nor the thrush, nor the magpie.

'Why don't you try my berries?' the bush asked the birds.

'Because they are poisonous,' answered the birds.

'Then why are they so beautiful?'

'Poisonous things often are beautiful!'

A fox's tail

A little hare saw a fox's tail, and was amazed: it was so red and long and bushy. The hare asked the fox:

'Fox, why do you need such a long tail?'

'To wipe my tracks away. Say I steal a hen. People are after me, and if I don't watch out they will catch me. So I run over the snow and wipe my tracks as I go. The people don't know where I went.'

The little hare went to his mother and asked her:

'Can you make me a tail like the fox's out of hemp. I want to wipe my tracks away. I don't want people to know where I have run.'

The mother said:

'You silly little hare. You don't need to run away; you just need to be clever. If you see a man with a gun, that is a hunter. Hide away and keep very still. He won't see you. You don't need a tail because you've got a head.'

And the little hare's mother stroked his head with her paw.

The golden bee

A bee was flying and found a pumpkin flower, as big as can be. The bee crawled into the flower and gathered some sweet nectar. It gathered lots of nectar and it was time to fly back to the hive, but the bee wanted to have a good look at the flower. It spent a long time wandering over its petals. Yellow pollen was sprinkled all over its wings, and it became golden all over. It flew back to the hive, but the guard would not let it pass.

'You're not one of ours,' said the guard.

'You're yellow all over.'

'But look how much honey I have brought,' said the bee.

'Oh, now I recognise you,' said the guard, joyfully. 'You're one of ours. You're a golden one.'

