

Sukhomlinsky News



Optimism, faith and goodwill

In this issue we are continuing the translation of Sukhomlinsky's One Hundred Pieces of Advice for Teachers. The extract given here is the third piece of advice, which relates to a teacher's mental health, and the significance of teachers' attitudes towards students.

Sukhomlinsky emphasises the importance of optimism, faith and goodwill in developing strong relationships with students, and suggests that we should also endeavour to inculcate the same attitudes in our students.

The newsletter also includes a brief account of my visit to the School of Total Education in Warwick, Queensland, where I had the honour of being invited to give a presentation to the staff about Sukhomlinsky's approach to education.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Sukhomlinsky Talk at the School of Total Education

On 8 July Alan Cockerill visited the School of Total Education in Warwick, Queensland, to give a presentation to staff on Sukhomlinsky's approach to education.

The School of Total Education is a remarkable school located on Australia's Darling Downs in South East Queensland. It first opened in 1977 in Melbourne, before moving to a rural base in Warwick in 1981. The educational methodology at the School of Total Education is aimed at nurturing children's spirits and bringing out their innateness, balancing academic and character development. The school encourages co-operation rather than competition, and models a co-operative ethos in the life of the school community. Parents attend weekly discussion groups with teachers that build strong relationships between home and school, and are encouraged to visit the school and help prepare meals for the children. More information about the school can be found at: <http://www.sote.qld.edu.au>.

During the presentation Alan gave a brief account of Sukhomlinsky's life and educational philosophy, and endeavoured to give an account of Sukhomlinsky's approach to working with 'difficult' children. Sukhomlinsky was working in a community that was still overcoming the trauma of war, and this presented him with very significant challenges. Sukhomlinsky took a very individual approach to the education of children, differentiating their instruction to a degree that was uncommon in the Soviet system. He sought to find each student's 'golden vein' and to ensure that each student experienced success in realising their unique potential. This process was facilitated by a very extensive extracurricular program. He urged teachers to try and enter into each child's inner world, and to treat them with the same concern they had for their own children. He also encouraged staff to take collective responsibility for each child, and staff meetings were frequently devoted to the discussion of individual children, with appropriate mentors being assigned.

Mental Health Advice for Teachers

The third chapter in Sukhomlinsky's collection of advice for young teachers is entitled 'How to avoid nervous exhaustion in the process of our daily work':

Our work takes place in the world of childhood, something that we should not forget for a moment. And this is a special, an incomparable world. We should get to know that world, but that is not enough. We should live in that world. You could say that in every teacher a spark of childhood should shine and never grow dim.

What is the world of childhood? Here I am merely giving practical advice to teachers and do not claim to be providing an academic, psychological definition of all the characteristics of childhood. I would say that childhood is first and foremost an emotional discovery of the surrounding world. The world of childhood is above all the heartfelt apprehension of everything that children see around them and do: a bright, full-blooded, expressive life of the heart, a play of feelings and emotions. That is what the world of childhood presents to us as the object of our labours and the environment in which we work.

Hour by hour the life of children's hearts brings us satisfaction and dissatisfaction, joy and sorrow, sadness and delight, bewilderment and amazement, affection and anger. In this extremely broad range of feelings presented to us by the world of childhood there are pleasant and unpleasant, joyful and disappointing melodies. Being able to make sense of this harmony is an important precondition for finding spiritual fulfilment, joy and success in educational work. If associating with children brings a teacher only disappointment, anger and indignation, this not only leaves unpleasant impressions on his soul; it disturbs the function of his internal organs. Teachers who are not able to appreciate the world of childhood and its complex emotional harmony, often develop psychosomatic conditions, the most unpleasant and serious of which is nervous exhaustion.

'I only teach three lessons a day,' writes Lydia N. from the Tambovsk Region, 'But I come home completely exhausted. I don't have the energy to even think, let alone prepare for lessons or read. Why is this? During my hours or work at the school I am stretched to breaking point. The children's pranks give me no rest.

It seems as if each little boy thinks of nothing else but how to cause me some unpleasantness. During the lesson I see Fedya dig Vanya in the ribs, and Vanya returns in kind, hitting Fedya over the head with his ruler... The other teachers say these things are trivial, but I cannot observe these things calmly: a hot wave of feeling surges through my body and my heart nearly jumps out of my chest. My arms and legs feel numb. I lecture the student, trying to speak calmly, but my voice shakes. The children notice this and seem to be making fun of me, thinking up new tricks. What should I do?'

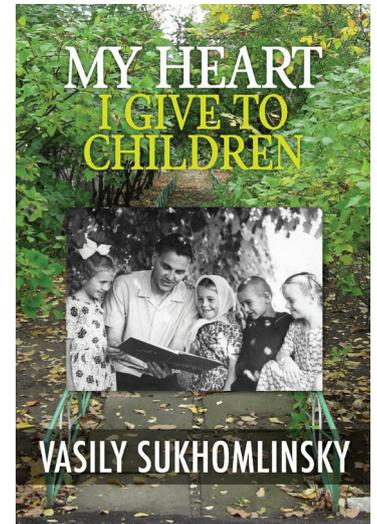
This has already reached the stage of a nervous disorder, caused by a failure to understand the world of childhood. On the whole this is a wonderful world, dear colleague, and if you know it and feel at home in it, like a fish in water, it will bring you far more positive experiences and emotions than negative. You must learn to listen to that music that we call childhood with your heart, and to discern the brighter, more joyful melodies. And do not content yourself merely to listen to the music of childhood; help to create it by becoming a composer. In the music of childhood, create those bright, joyful melodies upon which depend your health, your strength of spirit, and the condition of your heart. Your piano and your manuscript paper, upon which you write the music of childhood, your conductor's baton, with which you direct the melodies, come from a very simple and at the same time very complex thing, from your optimism. Remember that amongst children, adolescents and young men and women there are none with criminal intent, and if such do sometimes appear—one in a thousand or one in ten thousand—they are created by evil, and healed by goodness and humanity, and by that same magic violin and magic baton—optimism.

There is nothing in a child that would demand cruelty from a teacher. And if vices do arise in a child's soul, then that evil is overcome mainly through kindness. This is not preaching non-resistance to evil, but a realistic view of the world of childhood. I hate grating suspicion towards children, and the formal regulation of demands and

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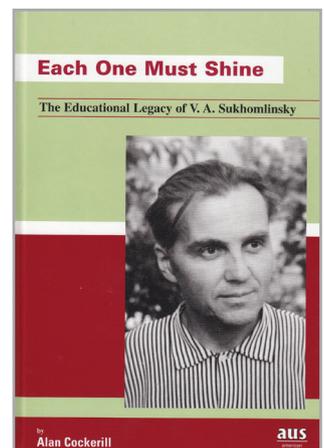
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prohibitions. I am not preaching sloppiness and 'free education', but I firmly believe that kindness, affection and love towards a child—not some abstract kindness, affection and love, but real, human feelings embodying faith in young people—constitute a mighty force, capable of affirming all that is beautiful in people and leading them towards an ideal. I do not believe that a child who has been correctly educated can become a hooligan, a parasite, a cynic, or a false and depraved creature.

Optimism and faith in people provide an inexhaustible source of creative and nervous energy, and of health for both teacher and student. Do not allow the seeds of suspicion or a lack of faith in people to grow in your soul. A lack of faith in people, however small and insignificant it may seem at first, can grow into what I might call—since we are talking about physical and mental health—a cancerous tumour of ill will. Ill will is a dangerous condition of the soul, which affects the heart and nerves. This condition covers the eyes of a teacher with scales, so that he cannot see the goodness in a person. Ill will is like a pair of magic glasses, whose lenses diminish anything good to microscopic proportions, making it invisible, and magnify anything bad to monstrous dimensions, so that it hides more subtle human characteristics. The deterioration in a teacher's health begins, my young friend, by allowing ill will to grow, feeding it with intentions and actions that have nothing in common with an optimistic faith in people. Ill will is the mother of anger and bitterness, and bitterness, figuratively speaking, is a

sharp thorn that constantly pricks the most sensitive corners of the heart, wearing out the soul and weakening the nerves.

Most of all avoid the malice that takes pleasure in another's misfortune. Suppose you have managed—may this never happen—to really get under a student's skin and hurt him. You have written in his diary about his misbehaviour, and somewhere in the depths of your consciousness a joyful thought has flashed: 'Your father will read my note, and he is very demanding your father, he will give it to you...' You glance at the child's sad eyes and they do not bother you; you remain calm. Understand, dear friend, that such moments mark the beginning of your great misfortune. Malice is taking root in your heart. It seems at first a weak, harmless creature, but in actual fact it is a poisonous serpent. Malice in turn gives rise to intolerance. A malicious heart becomes deaf and blind, incapable of sensing the subtle movements of a child's soul. A malicious person sees evil intentions in ordinary childish pranks. Intolerance of childish misbehaviour and pranks turns a teacher into a cold logician, a calculating overseer, hateful to children. And they pay him back for his petty fault-finding by baiting him and trying to unsettle him. Once this process starts, the teacher's heart gradually burns out from having to continually suppress his anger. Avoid this great misfortune my friend. If you do not manage to avoid this, you will become a peevish, irritable, gloomy creature. Your work will become hard labour, and you will develop a hundred ailments and a

hundred vices.

Goodwill and rational kindness—that is the atmosphere that should characterise the life of a class of children, and relations between a teacher and children. What a beautiful word that is, and at the same time what a deep, complex, many-faceted human relationship it denotes—goodwill. If it is mutual, one human being opens up to another with all the depth of their soul.

I have said it a thousand times, and will repeat it till the day I die, that mutual goodwill between a teacher and children creates those subtle threads that connect hearts, and thanks to which—this is so important in our educational work—one person understands another without words, feeling the subtle movements of their soul. Many years working in schools has firmly convinced me that if I have goodwill towards the children, and have educated goodwill in them, they will spare my heart and my nerves, and will understand when my soul is troubled, and when it is hard for me even to speak. Sensing my state of mind, feeling that my soul is troubled, the children even talk softly, avoid making a noise, and try to afford me as much peace and quiet as possible, during both lessons and breaks. In this mutual reading of hearts and souls is an inexhaustible source of health for you, my dear colleague. But here we are entering a very special aspect of school life, an area about which very little is said, but much needs to be said. We are speaking of the very essence of goodwill as one of the most important aspects of emotional education.





Stories for Children

How they took the rooster to market

Grandma Maria lived with her grandson Yura and a rooster named Panko. They were all great friends. Early every morning Panko called out, 'Cock-a-doodle-doo!' and Yura woke up. The boy always took Panko a handful of wheat. The rooster pecked at the wheat and thanked Yura.

But then hard times came upon them. The crops failed and there was nothing for the rooster to eat. Grandma Maria put Panko in a basket and set off for the market to sell him. Grandma Maria carried the basket, with Panko poking his head out, looking around and nodding his red comb, and Yura walking behind, crying.

They reached the Maple Bridge and sat down to have a rest. Grandma dozed off, and Yura took the rooster from the basket and let it go. Panko ran all the way home.

Grandma Maria and Yura reached the market. When grandma reached the bird section she opened her basket, but it was empty.

Grandma was overcome with joy, and hugged and kissed Yura. The grandmother and grandson came home from the market as happy as can be.

'We will share our porridge with Panko, but we won't take him to the market and sell him,' said Grandma Maria when they reached their gate.

'I will eat cabbage soup as well,' said Panko, when he heard what grandma said.

The apple at the top of the tree

Every week grade one student Misha visits his grandfather Ivan. His grandfather does not work any more, and lives on the edge of the village.

Today is Sunday, and the boy is visiting his grandfather.

'Let's go into the garden,' says grandpa. 'The apples are ripe.'

In grandpa's garden there is a big apple tree. Beautiful, tasty red apples are hanging from it. Misha walks up to the apple tree and sees lots of juicy, sweet-scented apples on the ground under the tree.

'They are falling because they are ripe,' says grandpa.

No sooner has he said this than a big, red apple falls at Misha's feet.

'Why don't you take the one that is looking at you?' invites grandpa.

But Misha does not want to pick up the apples on the ground. He raises his head and grandpa sees excitement in the boy's eyes. How he wants to climb that tree! He likes the look of that beautiful apple at the top of the tree.

Misha is standing, admiring the apple, but he is embarrassed to ask his grandfather's permission to climb the tree.

Misha asks his grandfather, 'That apple at the top of the tree... Do you think it will fall soon?'

Grandpa smiles and answers, 'No, not for a while... Why don't you climb up and pick it?'

And the boy joyfully climbs the tree.

Tania is smiling!

Grade three student Tima is really happy. He has a new sister named Tania.

His mother is constantly by Tania's cradle, smiling at her, but Tania just sleeps or cries. When Tania starts to cry, her mother picks her up and holds her. Tima wants Tania to look at him. He bends over Tania and shows her a teddy bear, but Tania seems not to see anything.

'Why doesn't she want to look at me?' an upset Tima asks his mother.

'She is still too small,' answers his mother. 'When she starts smiling she will look at you and at your teddy bear.' Every morning Tima goes to Tania's cradle and waits to see if his sister will smile at him today.

And then one day she does smile. Tima calls out joyfully, 'Mum! Tania is smiling!'

His mother comes running and bends over Tania, and the baby smiles at her too.

'Run into the field, Tima, and tell your father that Tania is smiling.'

Tima runs into the field where his father is sowing wheat. He runs up waving his arms. His father stops the sowing-machine and waits for Tima with anxious eyes.

'Dad, Tania is smiling!' shouts Tima.

His father's eyes light up with joy. He smiles, and hugs and kisses his son.

And all the people working in the field with his father also smile.

