

# Sukhomlinsky News

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## Each One Must Shine to be translated into Korean

## The Acquisition of Knowledge

For this month's newsletter we have translated chapters eleven and twelve from Sukhomlinsky's *100 Pieces of Advice for Teachers*.

### 11. Knowledge is both an aim and a means

I have been convinced a thousand times that one of the causes of the difficulties that children encounter in study is the fact that their knowledge is often a dead weight that is accumulated for future use, but is in fact not put to use, not applied (most importantly in order to acquire new knowledge). In the educational practice if many teachers the concept of 'knowing' means being able to answer the questions that are put to the student. Such an approach encourages a one-sided approach to assessing the intellectual work and the abilities of students. It is considered that those who are capable and knowledgeable are those who are able to store knowledge in their memories and retrieve it when the teacher demands it. What does this lead to in practice? It leads to the fact that knowledge is divorced from a student's spiritual life, from their intellectual interests. For students the acquisition of knowledge becomes a burdensome, wearisome activity, from which they want to free themselves as soon as possible.

We need first of all to change our view of what it means to have 'knowledge', to 'know'. To know is to be able to apply knowledge. We can only truly speak of knowledge when it has become a part of a person's spiritual life, when it engages thought and arouses interest. The energy and vitality of knowledge are decisive factors supporting the constant development and deepening of that knowledge, and knowledge is only alive when it is being developed and deepened. Only when knowledge is being developed is it true to say that the more knowledge students acquire, the easier it is for them to study.

[Continued on page 2.]

*I have just signed a contract assigning the Korean translation rights for Each One Must Shine to a publisher in South Korea. The translation should be produced and published over the next two years. This was a surprising new development, and one that I find quite exciting.*

*The publication of an article about Sukhomlinsky in the journal AEU News, written by Seth Unmack, has been delayed somewhat. The first issue of the journal for this year will now come out in March.*

*In this issue of our newsletter I am continuing my translation of Sukhomlinsky's One Hundred Pieces of Advice for Teachers with the eleventh and twelfth chapters, which discuss the nature of knowledge acquisition.*

*I have also translated some more of Sukhomlinsky's little tales for children.*

*Best wishes,*

*Alan Cockerill*

## The acquisition of knowledge (cont.)

In practice, unfortunately, the opposite is often true: with each year students find it more and more difficult to study. What practical advice flows from these observations?

Try to ensure that students' knowledge is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, so that knowledge does not become a dead weight, but comes alive in students' intellectual work, in the spiritual life of each class, in the relationships between students, in that vital and ongoing exchange of spiritual values without which it is impossible to imagine worthwhile intellectual, moral, emotional and aesthetic development.

How can we do this in practice? In the primary school, from the very first steps that are taken in study, the most important element of knowledge is language, or more precisely, the real world surrounding the child, as expressed in language, which now reveals itself in a completely new light, compared to the way children have experienced language before entering school. The first, and, in my view, the biggest steps that students take to climb the staircase of knowledge, are those that they take when they come to know the world through language. How important it is that this language should be vibrant and alive in a child's consciousness, so that it may become a means of acquiring knowledge. If you do not want knowledge to become a dead weight, make language one of your most important creative tools.

In the practical work of experienced teachers this educational and pedagogical focus is expressed in the fact that the most important ingredient in students' intellectual work is not swatting, not the memorisation of others' thoughts, but students' own reflection as a creative process: the discovery of the objects and phenomena of the surrounding world mediated by language, and the associated discovery of the subtlest shades

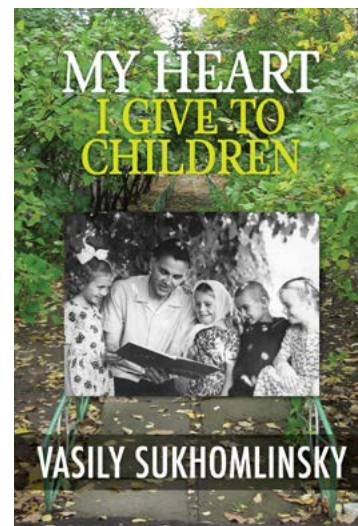
of language itself.

I take the children into an orchard in autumn. It is a bright, sunny day during an 'Indian summer'. The warm rays of the sun caress the earth and the motionless trees. The branches of the apple, pear and cherry trees are decked out in autumn splendour. I tell the children about the golden autumn, and of how everything in nature is preparing for the long, cold winter: the trees, the seeds which have fallen to earth, the birds and insects that winter in our region. When I am convinced that the children are experiencing and feeling the rich meaning and emotional colouring of words and phrases, I invite the little ones to describe what they are seeing and feeling. Before my eyes I witness the birth of amazingly subtle and clear thoughts about the surrounding natural environment: 'A flock of white swans has melted into the blue sky...'; 'A woodpecker is hammering on the bark of a tree, and the tree is ringing...'; 'A lonely camomile flowers by the road...'; 'A stork is standing in its nest and gazing far, far away...'; 'A butterfly has settled on a chrysanthemum, and is warming itself in the sun...'. The children do not repeat my words, but express themselves in their own words. Their thoughts are rich and alive, and the children develop an ability to think. They experience the incomparable joy of thought, the delight that comes with discovery. They experience themselves as thinkers.

Have you ever observed, or heard from other teachers, that a child is indifferent to a teacher's words? You are describing something interesting, but he is staring vacantly, your words not reaching his heart. You have every reason to be concerned. This indifference, this non-responsiveness to language, is a major problem in study. If this problem becomes deeply rooted, it leads to alienation from study. Where does this problem come from? Where are its roots? Children become indifferent and unresponsive to language

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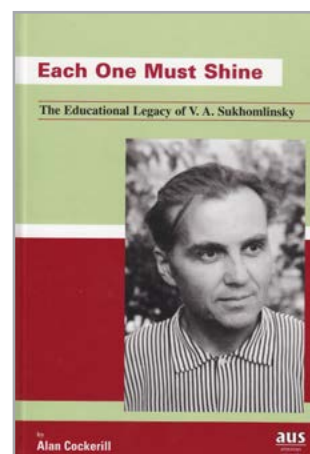
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if language does not live in their souls as a creative medium, if they only memorise others' thoughts, and do not create their own thoughts and express them in words. Beware that indifference and those vacant stares! Teach children to use language energetically and passionately!

## 12. On the acquisition of knowledge

People often speak of the need to make students' intellectual work an active process. But this activity can take many forms. A student responds brightly to a teacher's question, having memorised something they have read or that was told to them by the teacher. This is also a form of activity, but it is not likely to develop a student's intellectual ability. A teacher should strive to develop students' own active thought processes, and encourage them to develop their knowledge by applying it.

To teach in such a way that new knowledge is acquired with the help of prior knowledge: in my view this represents the highest level of mastery a teacher can aspire to. When I visit and analyse lessons, this aspect of students' intellectual work is the measure I use when assessing a teacher's pedagogical skill.

How do you reach a point where study is a thought process, the active acquisition of knowledge? What is the most important thing?

To acquire knowledge is to discover truth, to find an answer to a question. First you must lead your students to confront something incomprehensible, so that a question arises. If you have managed to achieve that, you are half way to success.

But to achieve that is not so simple. When preparing for a lesson, you must approach the material from that point of view. You must seek out those at first imperceptible focus points where cause and effect relationships intersect, giving rise to questions. The questions in turn give rise to a desire to learn.

I am looking at the material for a lesson on photosynthesis. I

have to explain to the students what occurs in the green leaf of a plant. I could give a scientifically correct exposition, which makes sense theoretically and didactically, but does not achieve the aim of stimulating the intellectual activity of the students. I immerse myself in the material. What is the main focus point, where all the cause and effect relationships intersect? There it is: the conversion of inorganic material into organic material. We are presented with an astonishing picture: a plant takes inorganic substances from the soil and the air, and within its complex organism it converts them into organic substances. What is this process of building organic material? What takes place in the plant organism, this incomprehensibly complex laboratory? How is it able, in the presence of sunlight, to convert lifeless material fertilizers into the juicy flesh of a tomato or the sweet-smelling flower of a rose?

My exposition leads students to an awareness of this intriguing question, so that each is struck by it: how could it be that this has been going on under my eyes, and I have not thought deeply about it?

How do we lead students to such a question?

We need to know what to say, and what to leave unsaid. It is as if what is left unsaid 'primes' the students thinking. There are no recipes here that will suit every situation. Everything depends on the content of the material to be studied, and on the students' prior knowledge. In one class you need to leave one thing unsaid, and in another class something else, even when dealing with the same material.

So now a question has arisen in the students' minds. My next step is to extract, from all the knowledge acquired by students in previous biology lessons, in work activities, and in their reading, those elements that are essential for finding an answer to the question. This application of prior knowledge to address a question is what I mean by the acquisition of knowledge. Here

it is not essential to question each student one after another, and listen to what they say, so as to arrive at a common answer by combining their individual responses. Such an approach provided the appearance of engagement, but it is not always the case that every student is actively engaged in the thought process. Some students are recalling and answering, others are only listening. I need every student to harness their intellectual resources and to think. Consequently, more often than not, once I have led the students to a question I explain the material myself, without summoning individual students to answer separate, isolated ('small') questions.

In order for students to acquire knowledge through their own thought processes, the teacher needs to have a thorough understanding of their current level of knowledge. Some will remember very well what has been studied previously, while others will have forgotten some of it. Here I need to conduct the intellectual work in such a way that each student listening to my explanation follows their own path, extracting from their memories what is stored there. If the storehouses of those memories are vacant in places, if someone's train of thought is broken, I have to fill those vacant places with supplementary explanations, and restore the train of thought. This is a skilful art in itself. I try to conduct these repeat explanations of material already covered in such a way that even the strongest student will find something new in what I say. If there are no such gaps in the students' knowledge, I content myself with an abbreviated explanation. Here there is no mere appearance of engagement. The students are silent, not responding to questions, not supplementing each other's answers, but they are acquiring knowledge. I call this form of knowledge acquisition an excursion into the student's own thoughts, a form of 'research' into their own store of knowledge.



## Stories for Children

### Cucumbers around the well

In our village lives a man named Matthew. He has two children who come to our school: one in grade one and one in grade three. Many years ago, someone, possibly Matthew's grandfather, dug a well in the middle of their yard. The water from that well tasted so good that everyone in the street came to use Matthew's well. But Matthew began to be bothered by the fact that so many were coming into his yard, opening and shutting the gate, and carting water. He wanted to forbid people to come into his yard, but he was afraid that people would abuse him. And then he had an idea. As soon as the winter snows melted, Matthew dug up the soil around the well and planted cucumbers there. The cucumbers sprang up, and spread their juicy stalks in a carpet that covered the ground. When Matthew's neighbours came for water, they saw the green stalks, and turned back. They did not feel comfortable crushing the plants. And so people stopped coming to Matthew's yard. It became peaceful and quiet outside. But then one day his children came home from school and they had been crying. 'Why have you been crying? What happened?' asked their mother. 'They're laughing at us. They're saying...'

'What are they saying?'

'They're saying our father is inhuman.'

Their mother sighed, sat by the window, and looked at the green cucumbers for a long time.

### Why?

Seryozha was away from school for three weeks, because he was sick. He really missed his friends and his teacher. When he came back to school he was excited and happy. There was his desk and there were his friends. He thought he would see joy in his friends eyes, that they would be really happy to see him. But their eyes were calm and indifferent. His desk partner just asked, 'Have you done today's homework?' 'I've done it,' said Seryozha quietly, and burst into tears.

### Ingratitude

Grandpa Andrei invited Grandpa Matvei to visit him. Grandpa Matvei came to Grandpa Andrei's house. Grandpa Andrei laid the table and put out a big bowl of honey and some white bagels. 'Help yourself to some honey, Matvei,' he invited his guest. 'If you want, you can eat it with a spoon; if you want, you can dip the bagels in it.' Grandpa Matvei ate the honey with a spoon, and then he dipped the bagels in it. He ate so much, he could hardly breathe. Grandpa Andrei waited for Grandpa Matvei to say thank you, but Grandpa Matvei just asked:

'What sort of honey is that, lime tree or buckwheat?'

'Why?' asked Grandpa Andrei in amazement. 'I treated you to buckwheat honey.'

'I still think lime tree honey is tastier,' said Matvei, and he took his hat and went home.

### The lilac bush

A lilac bush grew by a pond. In spring it was covered in lilac blue flowers. Whenever anyone came to that pond they admired the lilac colour and smiled. It was as if a piece of blue sky had fallen to the earth—that was the colour of the lilac flowers. Then one day a gloomy man came to the pond. He broke off some of the lilac branches and took them somewhere. Some young hikers came to the pond, washed themselves, and rested. As they left they broke many of the flowering branches. The lilac bush no longer flowered by the pond, and it seemed as if there was a little less blue sky. People no longer smile when they come to that pond. There are fewer smiles in the world.