

Sukhomlinsky News

No. 24

June 2017



'Faith in human beings is the most precious thing'

This month I am continuing to translate the first chapter from Sukhomlinsky's 1969 book Pavlysh Secondary School.

Sukhomlinsky took on the leadership of the combined primary and secondary school in Pavlysh in the aftermath of the Second World War, and his students were all influenced by the trauma of the German occupation. This meant that teachers needed special qualities and a special approach to the education of the children in their care. Teachers needed a lot of faith in the power of education, in the potential of their students, and in their own capacity to make a difference. It is in this context that we should read Sukhomlinsky's words.

I have also included in this newsletter two of Sukhomlinsky's little stories for children.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

A teacher's personal account

Sukhomlinsky's books are always personal accounts of his own experience, augmented by the experiences of the other teachers he worked with. This month we are continuing to present our translation of the first chapter in Sukhomlinsky's Pavlysh Secondary School, in which he talks about his early experiences and his most important convictions.

My first years of teaching (before I was appointed as a principal) were years of happy (and sometimes of sad and difficult) discovery, of seeing into those secret corners of a child's soul, in which are hidden joy, limitless faith in adults, a trusting readiness to open up to an adult, but sometimes also the opposite—guardedness, mistrust, pain, hurt, anger, deliberate opposition, stubbornness. I was amazed by the multi-faceted, sometimes completely unexpected refraction of grief, and not infrequently of anger, in children's hearts. I became convinced that the most frightening thing in life, and the thing most in need of love, affection, care, attention, kindness—is the crippled, disfigured heart of a child. I encountered several children, about each of whom a book could have been written: Kolya G., who had witnessed a murder; Oksana Kh., who never knew her mother or father, and who was raised by a distant relative who not only treated her as a servant, but also inculcated in her inhuman attitudes towards life; Vitya K., who grew up in the family of a kulak, and imbibing misanthropic values; Nadya Z., who belonged to "no-one", an abandoned child who defended herself from ridicule with anger and mistrust...

[continued on next page]

From Pavlysh Secondary School [cont.]

I was drawn to these children, and to others, equally unfortunate, by simple human compassion, and many such difficult children became my friends during the first years of my work in schools.

And so, when I was appointed a school principal, I was already deeply convinced that education only becomes an effective force when it is founded on faith in the child. Without faith in a child, without trust, all pedagogical wisdom, all educational methods and procedures, will come tumbling down like a house of cards. Moreover, if children are to believe in their own powers, and to become accustomed never to retreat in the face of difficulty, they must believe in their teachers, and see in them not only models, but also a source of help and support.

Teachers' communication with children during lessons is only one part of their educational work. The education of children, their personal development, the formation of moral character—all of this depends in no small part on the work which is carried on during leisure time, unregulated by timetables and routines. Teachers only become educators when they are organisers and leaders of those groups in which children's personal development takes place, and in which their moral relationships with each other are manifested. In those early years life showed me that the Pioneer and Communist Youth League collectives provide a very powerful avenue for educating active citizens.

[Translator's note: The Pioneer Organisation was organised in a similar way to the Boy Scout and Girl Guide organisations, except that it was coeducational, and each 'troop' was based on a school class. It also served to inculcate communist values. When the children reached the age of about 15, in the senior classes of high school, they graduated from the Pioneers to the Communist Youth

League.]

The Communist Youth League organization in the class that I was responsible for in 1938 took on the challenge of growing a hectare of wheat with a yield three times higher than was usual on the collective farm. This work had a clearly expressed civic significance. We were not just working, we were demonstrating through our work that science can help people achieve heightened labour productivity. Our success (the young communists achieved a yield of 3.8 tonnes per hectare) elevated us in our own eyes; we felt ourselves to be participants in socialist construction.

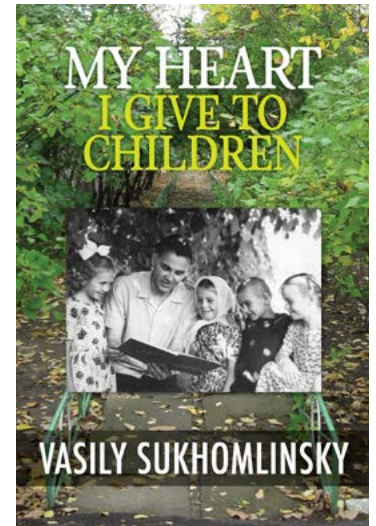
Every child is a unique world of thoughts, views, feelings, experiences, interests, joys and sorrows, griefs and worries. A teacher should be aware of this inner world of his students. But he should not approach them as objects for research. Teachers should become children's friends, take their interests to heart, experience their joys and sorrows, forgetting that they are teachers. Then children will open up to them. A school is only a centre of education when it has become a centre of joy for children, a centre of interest, inviting them to taste knowledge and learning.

When I was appointed a school principal I was overjoyed that I would have the opportunity to put my convictions into practice together with the rest of the staff, that each pupil would become my student. That was on the eve of the Great Patriotic War, I had five years teaching experience behind me, and my whole life in front of me, which I could not imagine without children.

The Soviet school of that time—the pre-war years—had created a cultural wealth which played a huge role in the fate of our motherland. That wealth was made up of the younger generation's love for their Motherland, their

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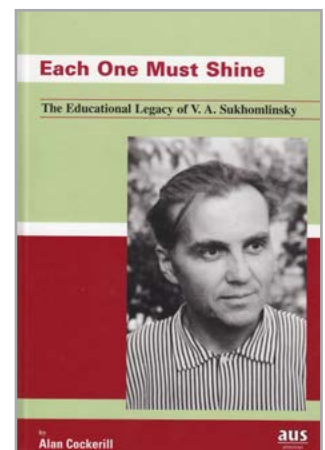
Tales from Pavlysh
a World of Beauty



Vasily Sukhomlinsky

Translated by Alan Cockerill. Illustrated by Students from Ukraine and Belarus.

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readiness to give their lives for it, their faith in the communist ideal, their industriousness and their deep interest in learning. The best teachers have always considered correctly organised work to be a great educator. In our school, even before the war, every class had its own garden plot where young fruit trees were propagated, young technicians and designers worked away in our workshop and practical classrooms, and senior students worked in the summer holidays operating tractors and combine harvesters.

The moral potential of the younger generation, educated in Soviet schools, manifested itself for all to see in during the years of the Great Patriotic War. Of the 147 young men and women who graduated from our school during the 6 years before the war, 42 gave their lives fighting for the freedom and independence of their Motherland. The young women who remained in territory occupied by the fascists took part in antifascist underground organisations for young people. One of them, Vera Povsha, led such a group, compiling and distributing leaflets among the population. The young woman was arrested and bestially tortured. Covered in blood, Vera still found the strength to cry out during the last moments of her life: "Long live the motherland!" I went to the front at the very beginning of the war, taking part in battles near Smolensk and Moscow, and then on the Kalinin front. In 1942 I was seriously wounded near Rzhev, and lay for several months in a hospital in the settlement of Uva, in Udmurtia. When I was released from hospital and demobilized as an invalid, I took up a position as principal of the Uvinsk Secondary School. It was a difficult time, but a year and a half at the school left me with happy memories. The staff and student formed a closely knit community in which each child was cared for. As soon as our village was freed from occupation I returned to my own school. Twenty-nine months

of occupation had left a terrible mark not only on the economy, but on our spiritual life. Everything that we had created with such love during the pre-war years—laboratories, library, a flourishing orchard—everything was destroyed. Even the desks were burnt. Together with the senior students, the teachers with great effort prepared the classrooms and laboratories for lessons, and enrolled all the children of school age.

The war had brought children terrible suffering—the loss of their parents. Without genuine friendship between teacher and child, without giving school instruction a deeply moral foundation, it was impossible even to consider requiring all children to attend school. The spiritual world of many children had been deformed, not only by the horrors of the occupation, but also by the heartless atmosphere of apathy and indifference to the fates of others that had arisen in some families. Several children whose parentage was unknown appeared in the village. They lived in pitiful circumstances. The state was not yet able to accommodate all those in need in its children's homes.

Sensitivity, friendship, collectivism—every teacher must bring these characteristics into the spiritual life of the school. I considered that my primary mission at that time was to see that all the staff shared my educational convictions. Before the beginning of the school year, and during the days that followed, I tried to impress upon them that many of our difficulties could only be overcome with genuine humanity. Many of the children who were coming to us had never known care and affection. They were wary and untrusting, some were embittered. The only teachers who would be able to educate these children well would be those who believed that they were essentially beautiful children, that the goodness in them was sure to triumph, as long as they received the help they

needed. I advised my colleagues not to alienate the children with mistrust, suspicion and doubts about their honesty and good motivation. I advised them not to interrogate children about their past lives, so as not to open up old wounds, but to definitely find out as much as they could about each child, especially about those who had known grief at a young age. We should find out the sources of that grief, but in such a way that the child was not aware of our inquisitiveness.

The advice I gave then has remained a statement of my educational convictions throughout my life. Faith in human beings is the most precious thing for me. I jealously guarded it and still guard it from defilement by mistrust or indifference.

In difficult situations an educator's honesty, decency and openness are especially important. I advised teachers: if you have doubts about something, say so directly, do not harbour those doubts in your soul, especially doubts about a child—that is a harmful burden for an educator. If I saw in a teacher's actions or words a lack of faith in a child, or in the power of education, I endeavoured to convince them of their error, and I still do this. And I do mean to convince, and not to take the administrative approach of forcing or coercing. Again and again during those years life convinced me of the enormous educational force of the collective. Our Communist Youth League organisation 'adopted' a young student who was not constantly supervised at home. The young people created an independent Pioneer camp during the summer.





Stories for Children

Mariika's thoughts

Some little children were playing hide and seek. This is a game where everyone hides, and one child seeks. The one who is seeking must find everyone else.

Little blue-eyed Mariika hid under a tall willow tree and waited. A little boy named Kolya had to find everyone.

First he found Larisa. Larisa squealed, laughed and ran away. Then he found Petya, who also squealed, laughed and ran away... The children were running and laughing, but no-one was looking for Mariika.

'Why has everyone forgotten about me?' wondered Mariika, and she felt upset.

Mariika was hurt. She thought, 'I will stand under this willow tree all summer, I will stand here through the autumn, and I will still be here in winter. I will fall asleep, and the snow will cover me, and when I wake up in the spring, I will be a little willow tree. Mum and dad will look for me, and Kolya will look for me, and Larisa and Petya. Nobody will be able to find me and they will all be sad.'

That is what Mariika thought, and because of those thoughts two tears trickled from her eyes and fell on the grass. But as soon as those tears settled on the grass, someone touched the girl's hand. It was Kolya. He had been looking for Mariika and had found her. Mariika squealed with joy, and at that very moment a black bird took off from the willow tree and flew far, far away. That was Mariika's sad thoughts flying away.

On grandma's bed

Little Svetlana's dearest friend was her grandma. Nobody could understand her and take pity on her like grandma.

Mum and dad loved Svetlana, but they did not always let her do what she really wanted to. Sometimes Svetlana would do something wrong, and her mother would not get angry, but she would be sad. It was painful for the little girl to see how sad her mother was, and she would go to her grandma's bed for comfort. She would snuggle up to her grandma's cheek, and her grandma would stroke her head. Then her heart felt so warm and peaceful, that she wanted to go up to her mother and say, 'Mummy I will never do that again...'

But now Svetlana does not have a grandma. Grandma died. All that is left is grandma's bed, with its dark blue blanket and its snow-white pillow. Her mother said, 'Grandma's bed can stay there always.' From time to time she took grandma's bed out into the sunlight, and washed and ironed the covers and sheets.

One day Svetlana went out into the orchard and picked some green apples and ate them. Her mother saw her, and did not say anything, just shook her head and was sad. For a whole day she was sad and quiet. And Svetlana thought, 'It would be better if you got angry with me, mummy, instead of being sad.' Svetlana wanted someone to feel sorry for her. She lay down on grandma's bed and snuggled her face up to the pillow. And it seemed to her that the pillow was still warm, and held the warmth from her grandma's cheek.

Svetlana began to breathe more easily, and she went to her mother and said, 'Mummy, I won't do things to make you sad anymore.'

