

Sukhomlinsky News

The role of fairy tales in the life of a child

This month we have a guest translator, Berta Karaim, a student from Melbourne. She reads both Russian and Ukrainian, and has translated an extract from the Ukrainian language publication, *Let me tell you a story: Philosophy for children*.

Childhood is the most important period of human life, not a preparation for the future, but a real, bright, true and unrepeatable period of life in its own right. And depending on what one's childhood was like, who led one by the hand during their childhood days, what passed into one's mind and heart from the surrounding world – on that largely depends, what kind of a person today's child will become. During the pre-school and early school years, the character, the thinking, and the speech of a person are formed. It is possible that everything that comes into a child's mind and heart from books, textbooks and lessons, comes only because alongside books exists the surrounding world – nature, the fields, the blue sky and the mist on the horizon, the song of a lark, as well as the whisper of a cold winter wind at night and the strange patterns on windows drawn by frost, the blooming wildflowers and the aroma of awakened leaves; and because a child observes good and evil in the surrounding world, the world in which the child takes his first, uneasy steps on the long road from birth until the day he can open a book and read it for himself.

Why is it that a fairy tale develops a child's speech and thinking more strongly than anything else? Because fairy tales are brightly coloured with emotions. The words of fairy tales live in a child's consciousness. A child's heart stops when he hears or speaks words that create a fantasy image.

I cannot imagine teaching at school without not only listening to, but also creating fairy tales.

Once we had an incident. A teacher took the first graders to the forest. The children sat on the lawn. The trees of the forest rustled quietly in the wind and somewhere a wild pigeon sang – tur... tur... A brook could be heard clearly.

The teacher opened a book and read a fairy tale. The fairy tale told that in a land far, far away, on a very high mountain, underneath a blue stone, a Little White Cloud was born, tiny and tender, like a baby bird. In the morning, a light wind flew in, touched the wings of the Little White Cloud and the Little Cloud flew off into the sky...

The children sat completely still, listening, holding their breath; the sparks of a daydream could be seen in the children's eyes. Once he finished reading, the teacher spoke:

'This is a fairy tale. In reality, nothing like this could happen. A cloud is not a bird – it does not have wings. The wind cannot be fond of a cloud, as the fairy tale said. A cloud is a drop of water. Like the morning mist – you know? Grey, unpleasant...'

[continued on the next page]



Introducing Berta Karaim

All the material in this month's newsletter has been translated by Berta Karaim, a student from Melbourne, who reads both Russian and Ukrainian. I will let her introduce herself in her own words:

'I am currently a second-year Arts and Education student at Monash University. I firmly believe that education is a powerful catalyst for change. For that reason, I am passionate about working with children from underprivileged backgrounds. I believe that Sukhomlinsky's work is highly relevant in the context of contemporary Australian education, as Sukhomlinsky worked with children who had experienced trauma and lived in an isolated location - the kind of children whom research today identifies as being at risk of disengaging with education and suffering the life-long consequences of that.'

I am very grateful for Berta's help, and full of admiration for her ability, her generosity, and her work ethic.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

From *Let me tell you a story...* [cont.]

The light in the children's eyes was extinguished.

My little daughter Olya came home crying.

'Why are you crying, Olya? Has someone hurt you?'

Olya explained her misfortune. How joyful it was to believe that a little cloud is a fairytale bird with tiny wings, but it turned out that there was no mountain, no magical blue stone, no wings, no loving wind, only cold grey fog.

'Let the Little Cloud live with wings,' said Olya quietly. Then I understood what the matter was. I told Olya my own fairy tale about the faraway mountain, the magical blue stone, and a girl named Olya.

'Is it true?' asked Olya with excitement.

'Yes, it is true, Olya...'

Joy bloomed in the child's eyes like a wildflower.

I bring up this incident, because it highlights the nuances of influence on a children's collective. We live in the age of knowledge. Every phenomenon has its own source and its own purpose. Everything is becoming understandable, recognisable, logical. But it must not be forgotten that besides the unbreakable logic of the surrounding world exists the world of childhood. Children discover the world and their peers, their teachers and their parents in their own way. Their thoughts are directed into the world of reality on the wings of a fairy tale. And so when a white cloud becomes just a cluster of grey drops of moisture, the world of childhood is dimmed and a child's thinking is punished. When we impoverish the world of childhood, we close children's eyes to people, thus making their entry into society more difficult.

Children who have crossed the threshold of the school are drawn towards school and their peers,

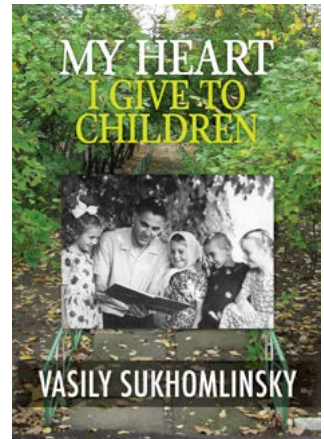
because they want to collectively experience the incomparable emotions that a fairytale evokes. They are also drawn towards their teacher because it is thanks to the teacher they can experience the fairytale as they listen to it with bated breath. Teachers are remembered for the rest of a child's life when they enter the spiritual life of a child first and foremost as storytellers. For a children's collective, exciting memories are made when the children, having come to school on a quiet evening, sit close to each other, listening to a fairy tale, while outside the window is the January sunshine or a quiet June night.

Fairy tales, games, imagination – these are the life-giving well of children's thinking, noble feelings and emotions. ... Through fairytale imagery, language, with all its subtle nuances, enters a child's consciousness; language becomes a part of a child's spiritual life, a method of expressing their thoughts and feelings. Without fairy tales – ones that are bright and alive, ones that capture a child's consciousness and emotions – it is impossible to perceive children's thinking and children's speech as a concrete step towards human thinking and speech.

Fairy tales are an inseparable part of beauty, which fosters the development of aesthetic sensibilities, without which, in turn, nobility of the soul, as well as empathy, are impossible. Through fairy tales children discover the world, not only with their reason, but also with their hearts. And not only discover, but respond to the events and phenomena of the surrounding world and develop their own opinions of good and evil. From fairy tales children derive their first ideas of justice.

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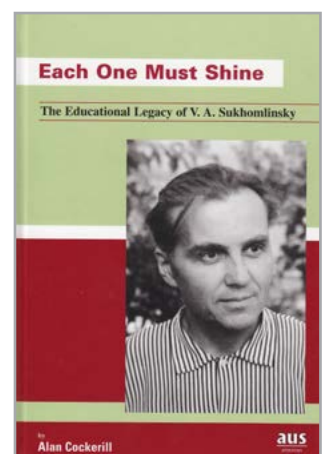
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Dear friend, educator! Do not deprive children of seeing the world reflected in the magical mirror of fairy tales. If you wish for your students to become reasonable, curious and intelligent, if your aim is to instil in their souls sensitivity to the subtlest shades of thought and emotions of other people – train, awaken and inspire their minds with the beauty of words and thoughts, the beauty of their native language, whose magical power is first and foremost revealed in fairy tales. Fairy tales are the cradle of thought. Structure children's education in such a way that they treasure the exciting memories of this cradle for the rest of their lives. The beauty of our native language – its emotional colours and shades – comes to children, exciting them, giving rise to a sense of their own worth, when one heart connects with another, when one mind connects with another. The poetic sounds of our native language become music to a child when children take the instrument into their own hands, create music themselves and watch and feel how their music influences other people. Underneath the *kalina* bush [Ukrainian national flower, an evergreen bush with red fruit] we narrated the same tale hundreds of time just to feel the magic of the words *gusi-lebedi*, *lis-pralis*, *zorya-zoryanicya* [phrases describing birds, the forest and a star (respectively) in a rhyming manner characteristic of Slavic storytelling]. As a singer longs to test his strength in a new song, we longed to sing these words.

Learn to reveal to a child something from the surrounding world, a single thing, but reveal it in such a way that a piece of life is seen with all the colours of the rainbow. Always leave something untold, so that children will long to return to that which they have discovered.

Whenever I am asked how I compose fairy tales with children, I am reminded of my Grandma Maria. When I think of my childhood, I see her black eyes and feel the magic of her fairy tales. At the time, it appeared to me that grandma was witnessing the fairy tale unfold: her gaze was directed into the faraway steppe or the dense leaves of the orchard, into the evening twilight or the snow blizzard. I dreamt that tomorrow, finally, I would glimpse that place where grandma watches the fairy tale unfold, and would learn myself to see that which is miraculous, fairytale, extraordinary.

Fairy tales are the gracious well from which love for one's homeland, which cannot be replaced by anything else, can be nurtured. Patriotic ideas are found in the depth of the fairy tale. The fairytale images created by our people, images that have lived for thousands of years, bring to the child's heart and mind the industrious spirit of the working nation, the nation's world view, its ideals and dreams. Fairy tales nurture love towards one's homeland for the simple reason that they are a creation of the people. It appears that fairy tales are built on a 'household' scenario: grandpa and grandma planted a beetroot, or grandpa decided to fool the wolf by making a straw calf. Every word in those fairy tales is like the thinnest stroke on an immortal mural, in every word, in every image, there is the interplay of the energies of the people's spirit. Fairy tales are the spiritual wealth of the national culture, discovering which, children discover the life of the nation through their hearts.

It is a warm summer evening. In the blue sky the first star shines. Today the children are coming to me. Pre-schoolers, first-graders, second-graders... we sit under the hundred-year old oak. The village falls silent; the steppe

falls asleep; mysterious sounds come to us from the orchard; the lake is sleeping. The whole world around us is sleeping, except for the shining star in the sky and the chirping cricket in the field.

This is our School Beneath the Blue Sky. Children come into the world of fairy tales. On these beautiful summer evenings, we become poets – we compose fairy tales. Everything that we see appears to us in these magical hours as a fairy tale. Our School Beneath the Blue Sky is a source of living thinking and speaking, to which I bring you today, so that you can become people with big hearts, reasonable, compassionate, and wise thinkers.

For thirty-five years I have touched your hearts with words. Decades of work – not easy, but joyful – have convinced me that fairy tales and art are the finest and the most tender way of connecting with a child. Fairy tales are the thinking of childhood. They make the world of childhood bright and interesting.

We wrote thousands of fairy tales. Who is the author? That magical Ukrainian night, on which a couple of small children and I were all the creators of the fairy tales of the School Beneath the Blue Sky.

I tell you fairy tales. They are created right here. Every one of us – even I, even the children – becomes a poet in these magical hours. If the sparkling word I need cannot be found within me, the children help out. We have composed thousands of fairy tales. Our creativity is not something unique or extraordinary. It is accessible to every teacher and every student. After all, every child is a poet, if only the teacher leads him into the world of creativity.



Stories for Children

Whose relative is grandfather?

At the edge of the village lived Grandfather and Grandmother. In the years of the Great Patriotic War, Grandfather served in the army and bravely fought the Nazis. His portrait was hung in the house. In the portrait, his whole chest was covered in medals.

Grandfather passed away, and within in a year, so did Grandmother. A relative of the Grandmother came from far away – the house now belonged to him. He sold everything – the furniture, the crockery, the house itself too. New owners moved into the house – a father, a mother and a daughter. The house was entirely empty save for the Grandfather's portrait. The Grandmother's relative apologised and said: 'I'll take the portrait off and put it in the attic.'

'No, no, let it hang,' answered the mother. 'The portrait shall hang for as long as the house stands.'

'Is he a relative to you?' asked the man who had just sold the house.

'He is the relative of all honourable people,' answered the mother.



Grandfather Matthew's oak

In our village there lived Grandfather Matthew. He had turned eighty. His health began to fail him.

Spring came. Grandfather was sitting on a bench. Children were walking from school. They were carrying the seedlings of oaks.

'Please give me a seedling too,' asked Grandfather Matthew.

The children gave a seedling to the grandfather. As they were walking, the children thought, 'What will he do with a little oak? He is so elderly, so helpless!'

Grandfather Matthew gathered all of his strength and planted the oak seedling. He cared for it throughout the whole of summer. He watered it and fertilised the soil around it. The oak was turning green and reaching towards the sun.

In the autumn, Grandfather Matthew passed away.

The children who gave him the seedling continued to care for the oak.

Ten years have passed and the tree is still referred to as Grandfather Matthew's oak.

To think of others is a beautiful thing.

If everyone thought of bringing joy to others, no one would be miserable.

What does it mean to be tactless?

Near the school lived an elderly grandmother. Some of the schoolchildren decided to give the grandmother a gift. They picked some apples in the school orchard and brought them to the grandmother. The apples were hard and sour; they had not yet ripened. But even if they had ripened – how could the grandmother have eaten them, if she was missing all of her teeth? This kind of behaviour is called 'tactless'.

Although the schoolchildren intended to bring joy to the grandmother, their gift was not a joy for this elderly person, but a disappointment. After all, the children had not thought their gift through properly.

To be a kind, sincere person is a great art. It is necessary to think of the people who live next to us. To understand what they think of with pain and what they think of with pride.

