

Sukhomlinsky News

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Anniversary approaching: 28 September

This month I am once again indebted to Berta Karaim, who has translated some interesting passages and stories from Sukhomlinsky's Let me tell you a story... Philosophy for children. Sukhomlinsky's moral philosophy is greatly influenced by Ukrainian folk culture, and this is expressed in some of the sayings that are sprinkled through his writings.

It is now less than a month until the 100th anniversary of Sukhomlinsky's birth. If you have not already done so, please consider sending a brief email to proposals@google.com, suggesting that they produce a Google doodle to commemorate the 100th anniversary on 28th September.

Please also send me an email if you have any plans to mark the 100th anniversary, in case I can support you. My email is ejr.cockerill@gmail.com.

During the past month I have prepared a video presentation (in Russian) to send to a conference in Ukraine, which is being held in Kropyvnytskyi to mark the 100th anniversary. I may prepare an English language version to share with you.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill



The child in the world and the world in the child

This month Berta Karaim is continuing her translation of passages from the 2016 publication Let me tell you a story... Philosophy for children. As these passages reveal, Sukhomlinsky was interested in developing the voice of conscience, so children became autonomous moral agents, rather than in just enforcing a standard of behaviour.

On the Happiness of Being

Whether a small child becomes a thinker, who understands and experiences the great human right to life, happiness, joy, personal freedom and safety, largely depends on us – the mothers, fathers, and educators, who at every step come into contact with the sensitive, open heart of that child. This sphere of inner life requires great tact and deep respect for the human right to happiness. All who are involved in the upbringing of a child must wisely lead the child by the hand into the human world, without closing the child's eyes to either joy or suffering. (See the story: 'How the Sun Sets', on the back page of this newsletter.)

To reach the source of a child's thoughts, from which new questions stream relentlessly, - that is what I think about each time my soul is troubled by the question: 'How can I nurture that subtle human ability – the ability to treasure the happiness of being?'

Teach children to observe, to think, to discover and to wonder. Let the child in your care understand the truth that a person is born, grows, develops, matures, ages and that every day of this life lived well enriches the person with wisdom, adding another precious grain to the incomparable value of a human being. (Continued on next page.)

The child in the world (continued)

Where did the Little Boy Go?

Once little Peter and his grandfather went to the pond to fish. They sat on the bank and cast their fishing lines. The grandfather told little Peter:

'When I was a little boy, like you, the pond was very, very deep here. There were carp as big as this...'

'Grandpa were you really a little boy?', little Peter asked incredulously.

'Yes, I was. I swam here, fished here.' 'Where did the little boy go?' little Peter wondered.

The earlier children ask the question 'Where do little children disappear to?'; the more they will treasure human values and the happiness they find in living and working, thinking and experiencing. We should not protect children from things they will inevitably encounter in life, which should awaken within them thoughts about their own existence.

On our perception of our Surroundings

One of the responsibilities of an educator is to teach a child to perceive the consequences of each action that they undertake. And in order to perceive, one must think. Thought gives the conscience eyes. When educating, we teach children to reflect on that which surrounds them and that which is within them, to put themselves in another's shoes. By leading the children in their care into the complex human world, a true educator takes care to develop the keen sight of that which I refer to as 'the eyes of conscience.'

You are returning from the forest. It is a hot July day. You are nearing a well under a tall oak tree. Everyone is thirsty. The nearer the well, the more unbearable the thirst becomes. From the other direction, a grandfather is approaching the

well. He has come from afar, and is clearly exhausted. He too is thirsty. The children see the grandfather, but they do not think about him. The eyes see, but not the mind or the heart. Both the children and the grandfather reach the well almost simultaneously. At the edge of the well stands a bucket with cold water. In a moment, the children reach the well, encircle the bucket and, overwhelmed by a single desire – to quench their thirst, they shove aside the grandfather. No-one even remembers he is there.

A human being is a frightening and ugly creature, when instinct overpowers the human dignity that has been carefully nurtured through reason and thought. We must be able to prevent this! Do not give in to instinct, awaken in the children in your care noble human thought, do not miss this valuable opportunity to critically reflect on our intentions.

With a quiet, but firm and decisive word: 'Stop!' – you compel the children to look around. They see the grandfather, grey, weakened by the heat, with reddened eyes. His face wears a guilty smile. The thought of quenching their thirst no longer blazes in the children's minds like a house on fire; it burns weakly somewhere in a corner. Their minds are now engulfed by a new thought: the grandfather approached the well at the same time as we did, from the opposite direction. We saw him. Why did we not think about him? How did this happen?

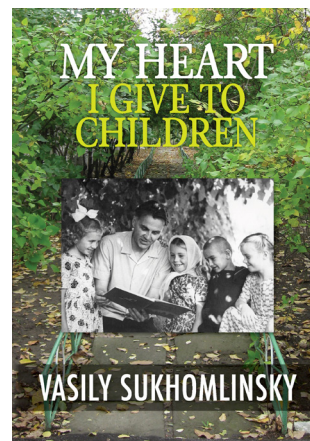
'Sit down, dear children, let's rest...'; you tell the children quietly. The children sit next to you beneath the oak.

'Please forgive us, grandfather,' you say, turning to the grandfather, 'We nearly took over the bucket. Please, drink, and we will drink after you.'

'Please forgive us, grandfather,'

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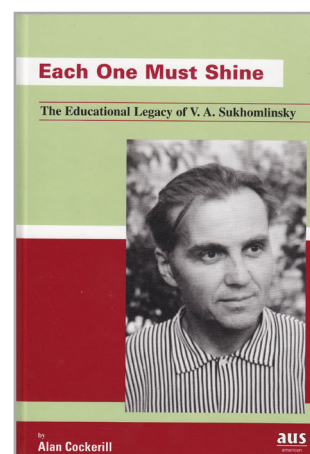
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repeat the children one by one.

They look at the grandfather, whose hands and feet are trembling with exhaustion. They become embarrassed and the word **'forgive'** becomes something more than a mere formality on their lips; it becomes a sincere expression of emotion. At this moment, in the children's mind arises a new image. What if they had drunk the entire bucket? There would not have been a drop left in the bucket, and – heaven forbid! – the grandfather would have had to lift a bucket of water from the deep well.

'Don't worry about me, dear children,' replies the grandfather to the children. 'I should not be drinking at all... It is hot, I will sweat, my heart is weak. I only wanted to wash my eyes and rinse my mouth...'

The shocked children watch: the grandfather, having rinsed his mouth and washed his eyes, sets off again on his journey. They feel sorry that the grandfather cannot sit down and rest: 'If I sit down and rest, it will be difficult to get back up again.' When the grandfather leaves, the children stand up too and wish him good health.

A wonderful vision of human life is revealed to the children. Your responsibility, as their educator, is to ensure that this vision is ingrained in their minds and hearts for the rest of their lives. The grandfather has left, but none of the children run to the bucket of water. You help the children in your care to clearly understand that which is still in a formative stage in their consciousness. You are awakening thought, which is one of the most complex elements of education. In the light of thought, emotions are deepened – compassion for the elderly, the guilt of knowing that you have wronged them.

On a sense of duty

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this pedagogical and human wisdom: the ability

to talk with children about duty. It is important to talk about duty often; a teacher's words are indispensable here. To nurture a sense of duty means first of all to teach children how to observe life, to observe people, to observe everything that surrounds you, to understand that everything around you, in one way or another, affects you, and not only to understand that, but to feel it with your heart, and to reject indifference, closed hearts, and boorishness.

Whether the little children and I are walking in the school orchard, walking through the main street of the village, or catching a train to the warm sea, always and everywhere we find ourselves in a world of human relationships, and always and everywhere, I see my educational mission in conversing with the children about what it means to be dutiful, in teaching little people how to behave dutifully.

In the orchard we see the broken branch of an apple tree. The wind has damaged the tree. No-one is to blame, but we cannot simply turn away. Especially when it seems that everything is happening by itself, it is important to feel responsibility. The children could have seen the broken branch and walked on – that would have been a lesson in indifference, and the more lessons like that a child witnesses in their childhood, the greater the risk of egoism. We stop and tie the branch, and the children experience both joy and concern – not everything that they will meet in the world will be good. And that is a lesson in responsibility. And it is like this at every step. We walk through the main street of the village and see a crying grandmother near the shop. To walk past her would be a lesson in indifference. We stop and ask her what is the matter, and help her. (The grandmother has lost her wallet; she came to buy bread, but

she has no money.) We have 10 kopecks each – we were going to go to the cinema. We hand the money over to the grandmother and she kisses the children.

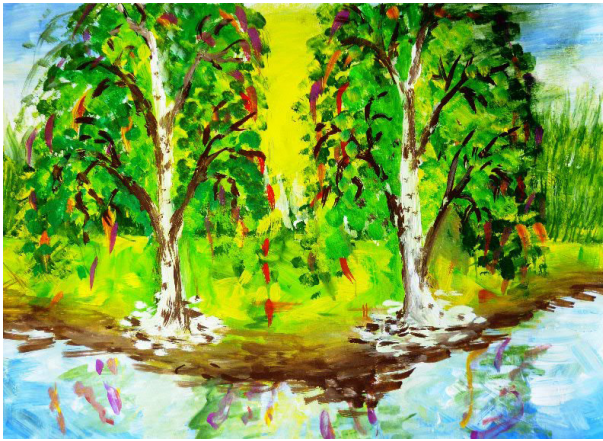
It is difficult to find a human happiness greater than the happiness of a duty fulfilled. The children experience great happiness, and it is not the happiness of consumerism...

With every generation of schoolchildren, we embark on a hike into a particular neglected corner of the steppe. On the slope of a dry creek bed the schoolchildren see a stunted shrub, behind the shrub a few oaks, and a little further on – a field. The dry creek turns into a barren field scorched by the sun, beyond is the village. It is here that I narrate a true story from the past. (See the story 'Don't forget about the spring', on the back page of this newsletter.)

There is nothing more terrible than egoism; there is nothing more destructive than justification of one's laziness: 'Why should I do more than others? My house is on the edge of the village.*' [In other words: It does not concern me.] The roots of egoism live in the people's consciousness for centuries.

* 'My house is on the edge of the village' is an old Slavic saying that means: It does not concern me. It is none of my business.





Stories for Children

Don't forget about the spring

The teacher asks the children: 'Do you see this bare wasteland in the valley, scorched by the sun?'

'Yes, we do,' answer the children.

'In that case, listen to this true story** from the past. Many, many years ago, here, where this bare wasteland now is, used to be a deep, deep pond. Many carp swam in the pond and willows grew on its banks. It was possible to paddle in a canoe to those oaks you see over there. There were many of them back in the day. What happened? Why did the pond disappear?

This is an ancient Cossack settlement. Many years ago, the Cossacks dug the pond out after a victory near the Yellow Waters and settled on its banks. Soon they noticed that the pond was becoming clogged with silt. The villagers called a meeting and decided: everyone who swims in the pond or even comes to its banks to simply enjoy its beauty, must take a bucket of silt, carry it over the hill and empty the bucket into the field.

People followed this arrangement. On the branches of the willow hung wooden buckets. For grown men – large ones, almost half the size of the barrels today, for women and teenagers – medium ones, and for children – little ones. Only those who were still babes in arms did not pay with work for beauty and enjoyment.

With each passing year, the pond became clearer and deeper, until a new family moved into the village – a mother, father, four sons and two daughters. They settled on the edge of the village*, not far from the pond. Both the adults and the children from that family swam in the pond, but they never used the buckets. At first, the villagers did not pay much attention. However, soon the villagers noticed that more and more teenagers were

doing the same: they swam in the pond but did not remove any silt.

The elders began to reprimand the young ones: 'What are you doing?'

But the teenagers answered: 'If they don't have to, then we don't have to either.'

The bad example prevailed. Many teenagers, and later even adults, began to come and swim in the lake after dusk, so that no one would see...

The elders were concerned, but there was nothing they could do. The wooden buckets that hung on the branches of the willow at first fell apart and then disappeared completely.

The ancient tradition had been forgotten. Everyone thought: 'There is enough for my lifetime.'***

The pond was neglected. Soon it turned into a swamp and became overgrown with weeds. There came a time when there was water only in spring.

Later there wasn't even that.

The pond disappeared.

Only the memory of it remained.

** In Ukrainian the word is *buval'shchina*, which refers to an oral legend that is based on past events.

*** Another folk saying. Sukhomlinsky's pedagogy is deeply influenced by folk culture.

How the sun sets

A teacher and a little boy liked to watch the sunset. Every night they would go to the edge of the village. From the top on an ancient burial mound they would watch the sun disappear behind the horizon.

For three days in a row the boy had observed the same thing: above the fiery disk of the sun a fluffy little cloud floated in the blue sky. The day before yesterday, yesterday, and now today...

'Teacher,' the boy asked, 'Can you please tell me: is that the same little cloud we have seen three days in a row?'

'No, it's not the same one. Yesterday it was not the same one as the day before and today it is not the same one as yesterday.'

The little boy thought. The fiery disk of the sun sank below the horizon. First it was reduced to a crimson smear, then just a little spark and finally even the spark disappeared. 'Teacher,' the little boy asked, 'Where did yesterday go? And what about the day before yesterday?'

The teacher hugged the boy and gently patted his head.