

Sukhomlinsky News

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Worthy of a human being

This month I am again indebted to Berta Karaim for her translations of extracts from Sukhomlinsky's book Tell me a story...Philosophy for children.

This month's reflections and stories show the high expectations Sukhomlinsky had of his students, and the strength of character that he tried to develop in young people.

Sukhomlinsky writes of nine things that he wanted students to see as 'unworthy' of a human being, or 'unacceptable'. (When you read the words 'unworthy' and 'unacceptable' in the translation, they stand for the same Russian word: 'недостойно' [nedostoino].)

In the Soviet Union criticism of the existing order was not generally encouraged, or was tolerated within fairly strict limits, and it is interesting that Sukhomlinsky writes:

'It is unacceptable for a genuine human being not only to lie, to be a hypocrite, to grovel, or be subservient to someone else's will, but also to not have their own views or to lose their identity.'

Sukhomlinsky's suggestion that we have to allow students to take risks in order to develop courage is also interesting in the light of current practices.

I hope you find this month's offerings thought provoking.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Worthy of a human being

The following extract from *Tell Me a Story... Philosophy for Children* has been translated by Berta Karaim.

Worthy or Unworthy of a human being

One of the most important educational tasks, I believe, is to instil in each individual (I emphasise, human dignity is a deeply individual sphere) a distinctive worldview, which incorporates attitudes towards what is worthy and what is unworthy of a human being.

Such convictions provide a most precious moral immunity, which does not permit a person to debase themselves, to give up their human dignity, conscience, honour or moral courage.

During the many years of our school's educational work we have developed moral guidelines around *Nine Unacceptable Things* that debase a human being. We consolidate in the minds of the children the unacceptable nature of these lowly actions. This feeling for what is unacceptable must be based on thought and conviction. The confluence of thought and feeling consolidates a valuable moral characteristic - aversion to the unacceptable in one's own behaviour; an active longing to conduct oneself in a dignified way, which uplifts a person; readiness, no matter what, to act in accordance with one's convictions about what is acceptable and unacceptable.

The *Nine Unacceptable Things*, an understanding of which provides a foundation for convictions and for the emotional world of a morally decent and spiritually beautiful person, are as follows:

It is unacceptable to acquire one's own affluence, happiness, enjoyment and peace at the expense of the oppression, unsettling, embarrassment or disturbance of another person.

[Continued on the following page]

Worthy of a human being (continued)

Do not allow yourself to be hurt, but also do not hurt others. In order to develop this conviction, we have a number of educational narratives and tales, which lead children to contemplate the harmony of human relationships. To each generation of schoolchildren, I narrate the story *Love with Closed Eyes*.

It is unacceptable to abandon a friend in trouble or in danger, to indifferently walk past another's grief, sadness and suffering. Moral deafness and blindness, the hardening of the heart - this is one of the most dangerous vices. The experience of another's pain and the understanding that it is unacceptable to be a passive bystander - that is one of the most important aims of all educational work. I have several vivid tales which are accessible to the consciences and emotional worlds of children, in which the unacceptable and dishonest nature of indifference to another's suffering is revealed.

The nurturing of acceptable behaviour with regard to the suffering of others plays a significant role in school life, because a great cause of suffering in education is the failure to master knowledge. It is very important that children view a classmate's lagging behind as a misfortune, that they empathise with their classmate, that they are not indifferent to the fact that some students struggle to succeed in the classroom.

It is unacceptable to benefit from the work of another, to hide behind someone else's back. This is a subtle area of spiritual relations, connected with both education and the whole life of both the collective and the individual. To be a worker is an honour; to be a freeloader is a disgrace. We believe that the nurturing of such an attitude provides a basis for the convictions that give rise to

good citizenship. It is paramount that the first marvel, the first discovery which a person experiences when they stand on their own two feet is the thought: I achieved this through my own efforts; I achieved this with my own intelligence.

It is unacceptable to be timid and weak; it is shameful to express indecision, to retreat in the face of danger, to whine.

Obedience to this rule requires certain conditions under which the implementation of courageous actions is possible. To find these conditions in life or to create them is a very subtle process, as a teacher also bears responsibility for the students' health and safety.

In all courageous deeds there is always a risk, but without wise risk parenting is not possible. The art of touching a young heart lies, it appears, in finding just one moment in a lifetime, when, inspired by the prospect of a courageous deed, Little Ivan or Little Nicholas expresses strength of soul. Life is so rich and complex that there are many such moments; it is only necessary to notice them and not shy away from testing fate.

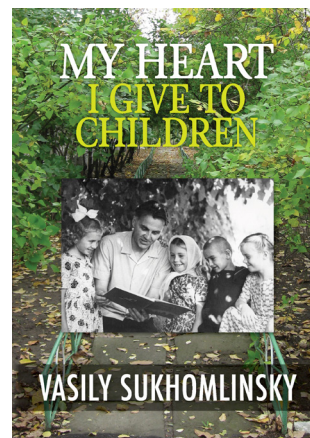
It is unacceptable to give free rein to needs and desires, as though they were freed from the control of the human spirit.

In satisfying your needs, you are obliged to express nobility, restraint and endurance. This is not just modesty and humility. This is something higher and more significant. In having power over your needs and desires, you are refining your spiritual essence.

After a difficult trek in the scorching hot steppe we enter a forest. We can hear a spring babbling. Everyone is thirsty. But the Teacher is teaching the children restraint. The children sit down and rest. No one approaches the water. This is not just because everyone is sweating

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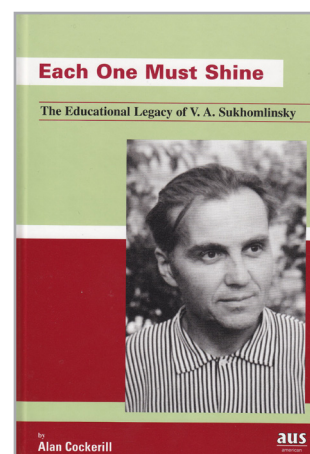
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and so it would be ill-advised to drink icy cold water. The teacher explains: 'Imagine, you have all descended upon the water... It could even happen that you hit each other's foreheads. That is humiliating for a person. The water will not disappear anywhere. Let the girls drink first.' The girls drink some water, one after the other. Then the boys drink some water. But for some reason tall grey-eyed Tolya does not get a drink of water. 'You are not thirsty?' asks the teacher. Tolya answers: 'Yes, but not very. I also want to be a good person.' The teacher smiles. (See also *One Sip for the Weakest Ones.*)

In nurturing restraint, generosity and endurance, a teacher consolidates in young souls a precious moral quality - intelligence, self-discipline, refined relationships. The children learn to concede to one another.

It is unacceptable to be silent when your word is honour, nobility and courage, and your silence is the result of faint-heartedness and meanness. It is unacceptable to speak when your silence is honour, nobility and courage, and your words result from faint-heartedness.

Amongst the most subtle challenges in nurturing morality is the challenge of nurturing the voice of conscience. I aim to educate people who, when they have committed a bad deed, will experience pangs of conscience, so that their thoughtlessness weighs heavily on them, and release from those pangs is experienced as a great relief.

It is unacceptable for a genuine human being not only to lie, to be a hypocrite, to grovel, or be subservient to someone else's will, but also to not have their own views or to lose their identity.

In order to nurture courage in speech and courage in silence, it is necessary for the teacher themselves to be noble and courageous. It is necessary to respect

the individual views and convictions of young people, especially adolescents, even when not everything in their behaviour appears sensible or justified.

It is unacceptable to thoughtlessly throw words around, to make promises that cannot be fulfilled.

For this reason, it is necessary to nurture in the young something that I refer to as nobility of will. From a young age it is necessary to teach a person to set themselves challenges, to direct them towards self-education and self-betterment. The initial goal may be insignificant, but a person cannot live in vain; it is necessary for a person to be driven by aspirations. Let the attainment of a goal bring them joy and pride. One of the most subtle and most significant things in the difficult field of education is encouraging children's aspirations. Aspirations are not the same as wishes. Wishes arise even in a lazy soul, and the more of a child's wishes that adults satisfy without the exertion of the child's spiritual efforts, the less nobility of will there will be in the life of the child. And wishes are interconnected with a person forcing themselves, promising themselves, placing a demand before themselves. Perceiving aspirations as their own will, a person arrives at a most important truth: correct human speech is always difficult, because it is impossible without the soul's work.

Consider it your task to bring this truth to the conscience of each little person. Only then does a person value their word, understanding that to throw it to the wind is to break a promise they made to themselves.

It is unacceptable to have excessive pity for oneself, in the same way that a ruthless and indifferent attitude towards the suffering of another is also unacceptable. Excessive exaggeration of personal injuries, offences, misfor-

tures and suffering is also unacceptable.

In a child's tears is a narrative without words, as well as memory of the suffering they have just survived. A child expects you to lovingly and gently touch their soul. Do not be indifferent towards this expectation, this hope; fear indifference as a great personal misfortune. When I speak about excessive self-pity being unacceptable, I speak of the long-term process of developing endurance and perseverance. When a child approaches you, hoping that you will share their pain, it is necessary to share that pain, and wisely comfort the child, but also to draw a lesson from the experience, so that self-pity does not sweep over all of the spiritual efforts of the child, does not transform the child into a cry-baby and a sissy. The tendency to pity oneself excessively should be wisely countered by redirecting that pity towards others.

When a person is crying, we are dealing with secrets of the individual spiritual world that have not yet been comprehended by science. I would consider myself as not having reached the depths, the innermost corners of my student's heart, if I have not once seen their tears in the ten years spent at school. Tears express the spiritual struggle of an individual, their sensitivity to the world.



Stories for Children

Loved with closed eyes

A young mother is sitting next to an open window. On her face is a happy smile. Her five-year-old son walks out of the house and stands on the lawn. Oh, how beautiful he is, how intelligent!

Two boys approach Little Victor - Little Nicholas and Little Boris. They are also five years old, just like Little Victor. But, thinks Little Victor's mother, they are nothing compared to her son: he is smarter and more agile, while the other children are rather dull.

The mother is watching the children, smiling. Now they are arguing, waving their hands around, as if they are cockroaches. Suddenly, Little Victor has formed a fist... and is hitting Little Nicholas. Little Nicholas backs away and stares at Little Victor in confusion.

The mother closes her eyes... 'There is nothing wrong with this,' the mother thinks, 'This is not a fight, just a game. If Little Victor hit Little Nicholas, then that means that Little Victor is right, because he is never wrong.'

The mother opens her eyes a little and sees: Little Boris has formed a fist and is hitting Little Victor. Immediately, Little Victor begins to cry loudly.

Out of fear, the mother's eyes open even more widely. She runs out of the house, yelling: 'How dare you torment a defenceless child! How are you not ashamed of yourself? You can see that he won't stick up for himself!'

She runs towards the children and grabs her son by his arm. Her son begins to cry even more loudly than before and draws himself closer towards his mother. Tears appear in his mother's eyes too.

On a nearby bench sits an old man. He says quietly: 'Love with closed eyes is the same as hate. And untruth with closed eyes is worse than hate.'

One sip for the weakest ones

On a warm June day the children went to the forest. It so happened that the only person who brought water along was Little Michael. No one else did.

It was hot in the forest. Everyone was thirsty. The teacher said:

'We must save the water. There is no well or stream nearby. We will give one sip, but only for the weakest ones. The strong ones can wait.'

They put the bottle of water into the grass beneath an oak. The children walked around the forest for a long time, searching for a flower that

the teacher had told them about. That flower had blue petals, just like the sky in spring, and in its centre - a golden drop, just like a drop of dew coloured by the sun. They found just one tiny little flower; it was a shame to pick it.

They gathered on the lawn, listening to the teacher's fairy tale, and then everyone told their own fairy tale. The more time passed, the thirstier everyone became, but would anyone walk up to the bottle of water? After all, the others would think - that's the weakest one! Everyone waited, enduring. No-one mentioned the water.

The sun set behind the forest. A cold breeze blew from the ravine. It was time to go home.

Little Michael carried the bottle of water. He asked:

'Who would like a drink of water?'

Everyone was silent.

A person's conscience must be clean

When the Kremenchuk hydroelectric power station was being built, a settlement near the Dnieper River found itself in the area that was going to be flooded. The people moved to new places, leaving behind their family homes. One old man brought the entirety of the household's property with him. He even took apart his house and reconstructed it in the new settlement, brick-by-brick. Nothing was left in the old settlement. Then this head of an old family instructed all of his relatives:

'Get ready! We're off to do the most important task!'

Everyone got into the back of the truck - the wife, two sons, daughters-in-law, daughter and grandchildren. They came back to the old settlement. Everyone wondered: 'What are we going to do here?'

The old man brought twelve brooms and handed out one to each family member. 'Sweep,' he instructed. Everyone began to sweep the old yard, not leaving behind even a single dry pine needle or a scrap of paper. The eldest son asked his father:

'Why are we doing this? This is all going to be at the bottom of a deep, deep sea anyway... And we're loading our car with waste...'

The old man became angry, gave everyone the sign to stop what they were doing and said: 'A person's conscience must be clean. That's why we are sweeping the old yard and taking away the waste. We are not exerting ourselves for the fish, but for ourselves: so that we do not feel guilty looking into our own consciences. When we die, we go to the earth, but we still wear a white shirt for the occasion - remember that, my dear grandsons.'