

# Sukhomlinsky News

## Schooling and Nature (cont.)

*(This is the final instalment of our translation of Sukhomlinsky's article about the role of Nature in education.)*

### Nature as a source of educated refinement

Nature itself does not educate. It would be a vain attempt to leave a person in the midst of nature and expect that under its influence they would become intelligent, morally beautiful, kind and implacable in the face of evil. It is only a person's dynamic interaction with nature that educates.

The fact that a person loves nature is also not by itself an indicator of educated refinement. We should not exaggerate the role of nature in moral education, idealising it, or viewing it without considering its connection to a person's spiritual world. The educational role of nature depends on what a person lives for, where they perceive good and evil to reside, what they strive for and what their ideals are. The role of nature as an educator in the final analysis is defined by a person's interaction with nature. But interaction is a very complex and subtle thing. It is already present when a child sees and understands nature. 'Joy in looking and comprehending is nature's most perfect gift.' There is a deep meaning in these words of Albert Einstein, but I do not believe they should be understood to mean that a child comes to school with the gift of being able to see the world already fully developed, as if implanted in a human being in the womb. The gift of being able to see and understand needs to be educated, and this requires great labour. The meaning of this labour is found in awakening a dynamic interaction with nature.

Our students live amid nature. One hundred paces from the school is a collective farm field where wheat ripens, sunflowers bloom, beetroot swells with sweet juice and buckwheat flowers. Amber bunches of grapes literally peep into our classroom windows. All of this could be taken for granted and not excite the children, if they were not involved in it. We consider it an important educational goal to ensure that interaction with nature becomes a part of all our students' lives, entering their spiritual worlds as the meaning and purpose of their existence, and, very importantly, that such interaction is interpreted in the context of the values espoused by working people. We live amid nature, but that would not mean anything if we did not also live in a nation of working people and were not a part of it. The significance of our interaction with nature is that we strive to be the most sensitive, the most receptive part of the working nation. We teach our children to see and feel the beauty of nature, we educate the intellect and nurture a vision of sacred mysteries, we teach children to speak clearly, precisely and beautifully. We do all this not for the purpose of calm contemplation, but so that today's little children will become concerned, careful, restless guardians of nature. A true guardian's joys always involve a lot of effort, and their pleasures are hard-won, because they are attained through work, sweat and calluses.

We educate our pupils to view nature as a national inheritance, passed on from generation to generation, the value of which cannot be compared with any other wealth. Our staff consider it exceptionally important that, from their earliest years, children relate to the fertile black soil over which they walk, and to which they may not pay attention, as a submariner relates to the walls of his submarine. He will continue to live so long as those walls are strong and intact. [Continued on the following page]



## Recent and future events

*Dear readers,*

*I hope you are keeping well.*

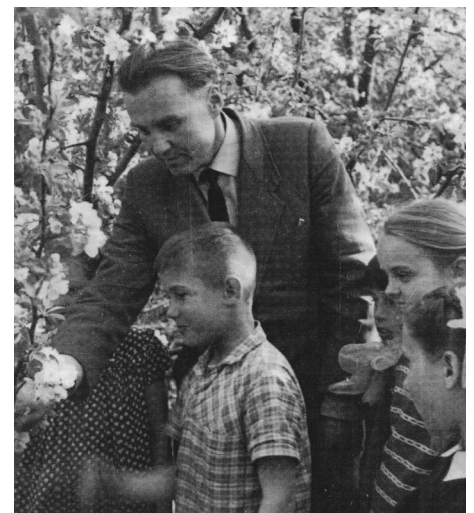
*The climate change conference in Glasgow is about to commence, and this month we conclude the publication of Sukhomlinsky's article about the role of nature in schooling. I hope you have found the article thought provoking.*

*This month's newsletter also features six of Sukhomlinsky's little descriptions of natural phenomena translated by Nataliya Bezsalova.*

*We are on track to publish our new translation of Sukhomlinsky's 'Pavlysh Secondary School' in December. The book launch will be held at the Avid Reader bookshop in Brisbane on 20 December. (More details in next month's newsletter.)*

*Best wishes,*

*Alan Cockerill*



## Schooling and Nature (continued)

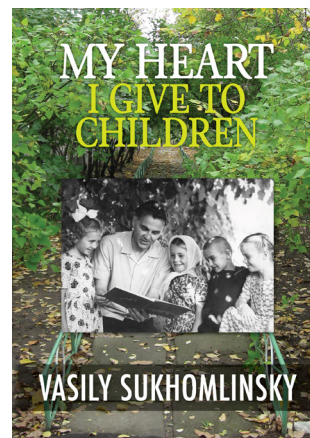
This is one of the main themes that stands out in our system of moral, civic and patriotic education. And if we talk of protecting the natural environment, then in a country school, where nature is not only the environment in which people lead their lives, but also one of the most important factors in their daily work, protection of nature means first and foremost the preservation of fertile soil.

A person can only have a firm moral core when everything they do and strive for is measured against certain prime values, and these prime values are our native earth, our socialist way of life, and the wealth that is carefully preserved and handed on from generation to generation. It is important to convince little people that losses in the sphere of these values are irreversible. In our school corridor hang two pictures. The first picture shows a wide level field with a crop of ripening wheat. On the horizon is a high ancient Scythian burial mound. The caption reads: 'This is what it was like sixty years ago.' The second picture shows a ravine cutting through the field like a deep wound. The edges of the ravine are threatening to collapse. Where the soil has washed away are clay and sand... It is hard to believe that this is the same field that was photographed sixty years earlier. Only the burial mound on the horizon shows it to be so. Erosion has eaten more than ten hectares of fertile soil. Under the picture is the caption: 'This is now. Those ten hectares are lost forever. Reflect on this children, adolescents and young men and women: wheat will never ripen here again. But if we silently observe this tragedy, the elements will consume many more hectares. We must stop this destruction! We must save our fertile soil. This is the wealth of the nation: our wealth.'

We, as teachers, were most concerned to ensure that children did not relate to natural wealth, especially the soil (the source of all other wealth) as belonging to someone else. On the contrary, each one must see in the national wealth their own wealth, directly affecting themselves and their families. We must teach children to live in such a way that they keep the fate of our national wealth close to heart, as something deeply personal. A child's personal concerns, worries and disappointments should involve work for others. I am firmly convinced that a person's moral core generally depends on what place in a child's and adolescent's world is taken by concerns, worries, disappointments, desires and aspirations flowing not from narrow self-interest, but from consideration of the interests of other people, and of society.

Natural resources are not infinite and inexhaustible. We managed to rouse the whole school community with this thought. We went to the ravine shown in the picture that the children had seen and began a long and difficult battle against the destructive elements. Of course, a significant proportion of the work was carried out by adults, machine operators from the collective farm and teachers, but nonetheless a decisive role was played by the work of the students. By their very nature many of the tasks were especially suited for children: preparing holes for seedlings and raking the soil around them.

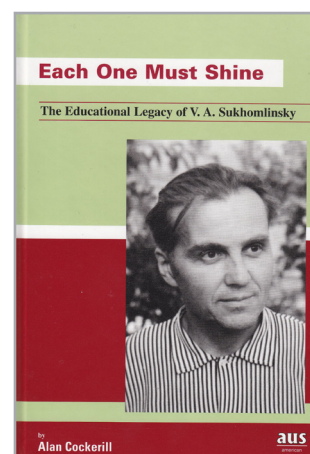
The educational value of this work is in the fact that it is difficult and continuous. You will not see the results tomorrow of what you did yesterday. In spring you can barely discern the contours of what was done in autumn. But interaction with nature, if it is to be undertaken, requires continuous effort. Nature is not in a hurry, but any kind efforts invested in her bear fruit. For several years the ravine seemed the same as always. When we came in the spring to the edge of the village and gazed from afar, it stood out as a dark wound. But then one spring we saw the ravine had changed: it was surrounded by a green ribbon. The moments spent contemplating this beauty gave the children, adolescents and young men and women a special joy. Difficult work had become a part of their lives: that is the true meaning of dynamic interaction with nature.



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Nature becomes a powerful educational factor only when a little person, after three or four years studying in school, realises with amazement: the world around me has become richer and more beautiful, and this change in the world is my work, it is me. Decades passed. The ravine, cutting through the earth like a dark wound, became an oak grove. It appeared to narrow, was less visible, and the fertile meadows around it were no longer threatened. Now new generations of students seek new fields of endeavour, entering into battle with destructive elements, passing through a school of civic values, learning to appreciate the value of natural resources and of work.

The proximity of nature in a country school provides very favourable conditions that allow young people to begin their working lives as early as possible. This is more significant than episodic completion of work assignments or practical activities prescribed by the curriculum. A working life entails the organic combination in a person (in childhood and early adolescence) of the roles of thinker, creator, intellectual worker and ploughman, sower, shepherd and machine operator, deeply in love with their work, expressing themselves in what they have created with their own hands. I want to emphasise that if a child from an early age has not become an intellectual worker, if they have not been convinced by their own experience that to observe, to learn, to discover the truth, is just as difficult as digging the soil, and that to dig the soil and sow grains, to harvest crops and collect each fallen grain, is work just as wonderfully beautiful as thinking and reading a book, then it is meaningless to speak of work education.

We strive to ensure that our students' lives are filled with creation in the world of nature. We cannot imagine a decent education in which each of our students during their years of schooling has not turned several dozen square metres of lifeless clay, of barren land, into fertile soil. This is difficult, but essential work. Thanks to such work little people, who may still not understand many things, begin to understand the most important idea underpinning a socialist way of life: that a person discovers true joy when they think of the welfare of other people. There is no other way of conveying this idea to the minds of little people. Our task is to ensure that children extract from the reality that surrounds them not only knowledge, but also moral ideals. These ideals are understood and adopted as personal convictions only with a little person's participation, when they actively strive and personally desire to do not only that which is necessary and beautiful, but that which is difficult. Active participation gives rise to conviction when difficult things become desirable and are achieved through applying effort and overcoming obstacles. If difficult things do not become desirable, you cannot educate conviction. Concern for nature demands work over a considerable period: both work carried out directly on the ground, and our educational work as teachers.

The preservation and increasing of natural wealth in

a country school environment is a central, governing aspect of the working life of our community and of each person within it. Indeed, the establishment of a sense of community in each class begins with the children being united by a concern for living nature. According to a school tradition, each class of grade one students sets up a little nursery, and cares for fruit trees planted during the first year of school. During their first year at school they also begin to look after tree plantings that protect fields from erosion, and that play such an important role in southern regions with little forestation. By the time they are ten or eleven years old, the children experience their first feelings of civic pride, seeing the valuable things they have created with their own hands. The seedlings they planted have become shady trees, and fruit trees and grapes begin to bear fruit. Collective thought, the collective conviction that thanks to our work the world is becoming better, richer, more beautiful than it was: this is a mighty ideological force, uniting the children into a strong community. Many years of experience has convinced me that it is only when there is such an ideological unity that the class group becomes an important nurturer of a working life. Only those who take pride in the fruits of their work for society, for their nation, can deeply experience the meaning of the moral concept of 'duty'.

One of the educational goals of a secondary school is to ensure that work in a village, in natural surroundings, has become attractive by the time young people reach adolescence and youth, that it is seen as interesting, and as offering the promise of a full and spiritually rich life. I believe teachers are mistaken if they think that agricultural work is just something that is picked up: that young people will acquire the habit of working the land from their parents... Nowadays a school is not a school unless there reigns a spirit of thought that attracts adolescents and young men and women with the prospect of living not by bread alone. The thought and intellectual interests of the students must extend to the earth, to the plants and animals, to work that since time immemorial we have become accustomed to referring to as 'simple'. To a young person who appreciates culture and art, this work should not be envisaged as simple. Study and education should encourage curious, inquisitive young people to view work that involves nature as a field for an engaging and interesting intellectual life. The decision to remain in a village should be based on the conviction that the land provides much food for thought, and that life on the land will be just as full and interesting as life in a laboratory, or working as a doctor, teacher or engineer.

Our school sees its educational ideal in ensuring that its students will be faithful to true science, to their convictions, that they will be truly enlightened people. The future of school education is in bringing together work and thought.

The people we are educating aspire to an intellectually rich working life. The possibilities for such a life when interacting with nature are inexhaustible. Nature, work and thought: these are subjects for special research.



## Stories

### It is quiet in the forest in winter

It is so quiet in the forest in winter. Mighty trees wrapped in snowy hats and coats stand motionless, and only the sound of a woodpecker breaks the silence. He is tapping at the bark of an oak, looking for bugs. Suddenly, something whispers. A hare runs by, stops, sits under the oak, and looks around. He raises his paw and touches his ear. Somewhere the icy surface of a pond cracks, and something rings out like the note of a song. It is a snowflake falling onto a rosehip bush.

### The bullfinch carver

Where do such beautiful snowflakes come from? I will tell you where they come from.

Once upon a time, two bears rolled a huge block of clear, transparent ice to the top of a high mountain. A wonderful master craftsman lives there, the bullfinch carver. Using tiny knives and mallets, he carves beautiful white snowflakes from the ice and sprinkles them around. They fall to the ground and sparkle in the sunlight like tiny stars. And when the bullfinch carver gets tired, it stops snowing.

### The green field

One sunny autumn day we walked to a field. The green field stretched as far as the eye could see. All the way to the horizon you could see nothing but green, while in the dark blue sky a V-shaped formation of birds could be seen, flying to warmer lands.

It was so quiet in the field. You could not hear a bird's song or the sound of a tractor. At that moment, the whole wide world stretched boundless before me.

### First frost

In the evening the sky cleared and the stars shone brightly. During the night it turned cold. I woke at the break of dawn and went outside. How everything had changed during the night! The green blades of grass had all turned white. I looked closely at them: each blade was covered in tiny white needles. Father Frost had visited! That night, while everybody was asleep, he woke in his deep ravine and decided to stretch his

old bones. He strode across the fields, looking into every yard, and wherever he breathed, tiny needles of ice appeared.

I approached a small red rose. Yesterday it was the only one left, still smiling at the sun. Now it was all covered with white needles and looked like a tiny porcupine.

The sun rose. As soon as its rays touched the rose's icy dress, the needles turned into tiny drops of water, covering the flower with morning dew that glittered in the sunlight. But why did the rose look so sad? Why did it hang its head? Why did its petals wither? If only the dear sun would help the poor rose!

### The cherry tree in bloom

It flowered in spring next to our simple village house. Bees buzzed in its flowers, the sun shone, and birds sang joyfully in its branches.

I could not take my eyes off that cherry tree in bloom.

Now, when I look back on that distant time, it seems as if that cherry tree bloomed all through my childhood.

That cherry tree still blooms to this day, the bees still buzz, the sun still shines, and the birds sing just as joyfully. And it seems to me that nowhere is like home, and that our native land is the most beautiful in the world. For we were born here, and it has given us life and strength.

### Frost and the chamomile flower

One moonlit night Autumn Frost paid a visit. He approached a rose bush and breathed onto it. Its pink petals fell to the ground and its green leaves withered.

Frost strode across the meadow, and wherever he breathed and whatever he touched—whether it was the grass or the green leaves of the maple tree—everything turned yellow and withered. He stopped to rest under the rowan-tree and its leaves turned crimson, like the sky at sunset on a windy day.

Frost roamed wide through gardens and fields, but he missed a little Chamomile Flower. She still stood by the road, stretching her white petals to the sun. She looked at the poplar tree and was surprised. Why had its leaves turned yellow?

The sun rose, its warm rays gently caressing the chamomile flower, and the flower smiled joyfully back.

