

Sukhomlynsky News



Tell people about Sukhomlynsky

Dear reader,

I hope you are well.

In this month's newsletter we are continuing the publication of an article by education journalist Simon Soloveichik.

The article was written during a visit to Sukhomlynsky's school in Pavlysh, not long after Sukhomlynsky died in 1970. Greatly impressed by what he witnessed at the school, Soloveichik sat up through the night to write the article.

The article will be concluded in next month's newsletter.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Tell People about Sukhomlynsky

article by Simon Soloveichik

[continued from previous issue]

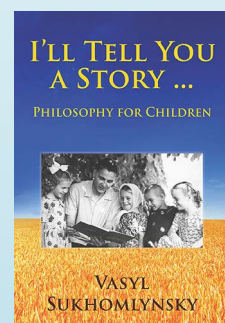
To see in front of you not a student, but a human being: that is the essence of Sukhomlynsky's pedagogy, and is a mandatory requirement for anyone who wants to educate every child. Do not judge a child by their knowledge, judge them according to their effort, according to their moral qualities. Address your efforts not just to the mind, but first and foremost to the heart of the child. Sukhomlynsky's logic is as follows: teach children humanity; then they will love work, and loving work, they will apply themselves and will study better, for effort sharpens the mind.

Never before had educators' dreams of combining instruction with character development found their realisation as fully as in Sukhomlynsky's pedagogy. For him nothing is an end in itself: he develops character, in order to arouse a desire to study, and he conducts studies in such a way as to awaken an aspiration to be a good person.

This holistic view of the school, of the child, of the teacher and of the family, explains the diversity of Sukhomlynsky's pedagogical interests. There is not a single burning issue in all the various areas of pedagogy to which he has not turned his attention and given his own answer. In our age of narrow specialization (which has had an impact on education as well) such an encyclopaedic approach is an extraordinary phenomenon.

One tends to accept Sukhomlynsky educational views immediately. There is an inner conviction about them.

[continued overleaf]



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Tell People about Sukhomlynsky (continued)

Sukhomlynsky did not follow fads. He did not play around with 'definitions' ('I consider "collectivism" to be...; 'In this work we take "personality" to refer to...'), he did not identify any new 'component parts'. He did not dress up his books with specialist jargon (and for that reason some do not consider him a serious scholar). He understood that pedagogical writing has always overlapped with polemical writing and with literature, that pedagogy, unlike other sciences, cannot be written about on two levels: scientific and popular. It has to be both scientific and popular, because it is a science for millions.

Understanding these things, Sukhomlynsky followed a tried-and-true method. He examined his school, his children, his teachers and parents, and tested out his intuitions in his school. He measured his suppositions against the norms of folk pedagogy and expressed himself in the simplest possible words: love children, teach children to love their families, their school, the people they meet, to love work and knowledge, to love everything that lives and is beautiful, to love their homeland... Address your words to a child's heart, seeing in each one not a student, but a child. Learn to take away children's grief with a careful approach, and give them the joy of work, success, victory, friendship and humanity. Then you will be able to educate every child, and to develop the capabilities that are essential in order to receive a good education.

Practically no-one had to repeat a year. He did not send any slow learners to special schools. They sat next to normal children and tried hard to study like everyone else. He learnt to teach everyone.

If Sukhomlynsky's ideas could be accepted by every teacher and put into practice, more of our children would go to school with joy, develop their capabilities and grow up to be good, hard-working people. There would be fewer tears about bad marks and arguments with teachers, and less unhappiness in families because children are not studying properly.

Utopia? A dream? Still, Sukhomlynsky did so much to make this dream a reality that we should do our best to follow his lead. 'Do not allow your soul to be lazy...' was Sukhomlynsky's favourite line of poetry. Do you remember Zabolotsky's verse?

Do not allow the soul to be lazy!
For your efforts to be fruitful,
The soul must labour
Day and night, day and night.

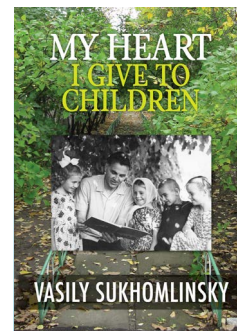
Vasyl Oleksandrovykh Sukhomlynsky was born in 1918 not far from Pavlysh, in the family of a farm worker, the first chairman of the collective farm. There were four children and they all became teachers. Vasyl Oleksandrovykh worked as a teacher from the age of seventeen, completing a course at the Poltava Pedagogical Institute by correspondence. Then came the war, serving on the front, serious wounds and hospital. At the age of twenty-four Sukhomlynsky was appointed principal of a school in Uva, in Udmurtia, where he was convalescing from his wounds. At twenty-six, when his native district of Onufriivka was liberated from German occupation, he was put in charge of the district office of education there. At twenty-nine years of age he was appointed principal of Pavlysh Secondary School, where he served until his death just short of his fifty-second birthday ...

Pedagogy keeps suffering terrible losses. Ushinsky died aged forty-seven, Makarenko aged fifty-one. But an educator is not a poet. He

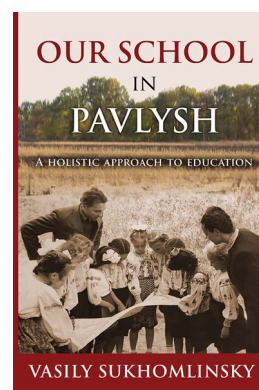
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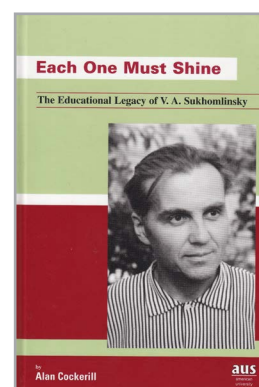
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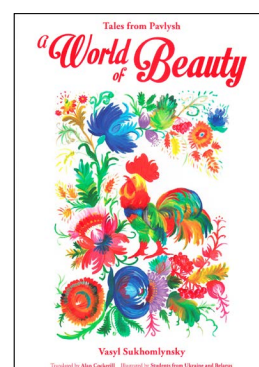
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cannot express his wisdom at a young age. He needs decades to accumulate life experience and arrive at pedagogical convictions. Sukhomlynsky needed those decades.

In his youth he wrote (and even published) poetry. In his books he even refers to the fact that he wrote novellas. Like Makarenko, for a certain period of his life he wavered, choosing his path in life. Nothing in life came to him easily. Many years passed before he accumulated his library of 18,000 books, and the knowledge that came with those books. He had many friends, who staunchly supported his work and his quest, but a man of such boldness could not help attracting opponents. Sukhomlynsky never wrote about the battles he had to fight. His books were criticised for the lack of conflict in them, and indeed it does seem as if everything he did went smoothly, without any obstacles. But you need to understand the exceptional quality of this man: he never complained to anybody about anything and was physically incapable of writing about his difficulties. If his manuscript was not accepted for publication he stored it away and began a new work. He was happy and laughed like a child. Nobody ever saw him gloomy or in a bad mood, and none of his colleagues knew of the tragedy that he carried with him all his life.

Every person has a visible life and an invisible life, a spiritual life that is manifested in their creativity, their character and their battles. Sukhomlynsky also had another life, hidden in the depths of his soul, and so well hidden from the world that it is amazing that he was able to hold himself together.

It is difficult to write about this. I will cite a few pages (abridged) from his unpublished work 'Letters to my Son'. They relate to the difficult days when *The Teacher's Newspaper* published an article entitled 'We need a campaign, and not a sermon', in which Sukhomlynsky was accused of introducing into educational thought 'a hazy concept called "humaneness"'. This article was responded to appropriately by the journal *National Education*, and the polemic gradually settled down...

'I was in a serious condition [in hospital] when I was brought several newspapers, including the issue of *The Teacher's Newspaper* containing that memorable article. Having read it from beginning to end I tried to take myself in hand, to tell myself that nothing had happened, but I did not have the strength of will.

... I cannot agree that a child must be loved circumspectly, that there is a danger in humaneness, sensitivity, affection and warmth... I am a teacher, and educator of children, I continue to live in my pupils. I love them unconditionally and without circumspection. I am convinced that it is only through humaneness, affection and kindness—yes, simple

human kindness—that one can educate a genuine human being... A third of a century working in schools has convinced me that a normal education, an absolutely normal education—perhaps for now an ideal—is an education without punishment, without tirades or threats, without raising your voice. I want to clarify this, in order to avoid misunderstanding: not simply education without punishment, but education without the need for punishment. I firmly believe that a time will come when people will not know what it is to hit another person or to insult them. I educate children in accord with my pedagogical faith...

I began my educational work in 1935. In 1940 I was married. A year later, in the spring of 1941, my wife Vera Petrovna graduated from teachers' college. We were planning to work in the same school. We were young and full of hope for the future.

The war shattered out hopes. As soon as it started I went to the front. No-one at that time could have suspected that within six weeks the fascists would reach the banks of the Dnieper. I thought I would soon return to celebrate victory. As we parted we dreamt of the son or daughter we were to have. But things turned out very differently. The village on the Dnieper, where Vera was staying with her parents, was taken by fascists. My wife and two of her friends were distributing leaflets... A traitor informed on them. Vera and her two friends were arrested by the Gestapo...

Vera gave birth to our son while being detained and tortured. Hypocritically promising to spare her life, the fascists committed a terrible crime. Twenty-five years later my heart still burns when I for an instant imagine what happened then. A fascist officer took our son, only a few days old, to my wife and said, 'If you do not give us the names of the leaders of your organisation we will kill your child.' And they killed him.

...Then they hung Vera. That happened at the very time when I was seriously wounded, fighting on the frontline. I was shot through the chest. Several fragments of metal are still sitting in my lungs.

Now, my son, I have told you my secret. Your mother has known it since we first met. She asked me to tell you about it once you had become an adult.

... I returned to work in a school. Work, work and more work; in it I sought to forget my grief. All day I was with children. But at night I woke at two or three and could not get back to sleep... Even now I wait every morning for the children: with them I find happiness. I am often asked how I have managed to write so much. Yes, it probably is a lot: 320 scholarly works, including 33 books. I am inspired by two feelings: love and hate. Love for children, and hatred for fascism ...

[continued overleaf]

In my heart an eternal rage burns, and at the same time I want to embrace and show affection to all the children in our country. I want them all to be spared grief and suffering... Every day, every hour, I awaken humaneness in children's hearts—the subtle capacity to feel the complex movements of another person's heart and soul.

... Nobody can force me to renounce the conviction that the most important subject in Soviet schools must be the study of human nature.

... Now I have given you a full account of myself, my son.

Your father, V. O. Sukhomlynsky

Hero of Socialist Labour

Honoured School Teacher, Ukraine

Corresponding member of the

USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences

Why did Vasyl Oleksandrovysh put his name and titles after the words 'your father'? He never did that ... He wanted to emphasise that everything written here is not just literature; it is the truth. Even now, after Sukhomlynsky's death, it would have been difficult to publish these pages, had they not been already included in a work intended for publication.

I beg the readers' forgiveness. I have omitted from this letter descriptions of the horrific torture to which the mother and child were subjected. ... Sukhomlynsky was 25 years old when he learnt of the death of Vera Poshva, his beloved. They say she was the most beautiful girl in the district, half Ukrainian and half gypsy. For more than 25 years his soul was tormented by a vision that he could not forget.

... What did this man go through? What did he see in every child that he embraced? What guilt did this blameless man suffer? I was told that after the war he nearly suffered a break-down, and even spent time in hospital. Then he gathered all his courage and controlled the feelings in his heart. He poured an ocean of love for children into this world, raised a son and daughter, raised a thousand children, but could not silence the pain he had suffered.

Great educators appear when children most need them. Makarenko's pedagogy saved millions of orphans after the civil war. Sukhomlynsky's pedagogical ideas took shape in response to the Second World War, when millions of children lost their fathers, and experienced trauma too great for a child's psyche to bear. In Sukhomlynsky's personal tragedy, and the tragedies of so many families, we find the source of his special relationship with children. Gorky wrote of Makarenko that he was

consumed 'with a fire of practical love for children'. These words apply equally to Sukhomlynsky.

He was critically ill for many years, but nobody heard a word of complaint from him. Sometimes, during a conversation, he would suddenly turn pale, stand, and stagger to the door of his office. 'What's the matter?' people would ask in fear. 'Not a word. Not a word!' And he would leave the room. Then he would return and continue the conversation. He tried to overcome everything, the pain and the grief, and not to give way to the burden of suffering or to the burden of fame, and simply to work. Every day for decades Vasily Sukhomlynsky rose at four in the morning, crossed the corridor into his office, and sat down to work until eight, when he left his office to greet the children. Four hours a day for decades. He wrote a great deal. He wrote almost without corrections, not thinking of the many editions his works would go through. He was not writing books; he was pouring out his soul, patiently building the framework of his pedagogy. Do not look for stylistic niceties in his work. Pay no attention to the repetition, the long sentences or the preponderance of examples. Listen to his heart and learn from his wisdom. He did not need to economise with his material or his ideas; he sowed his seeds generously, wherever they might fall. He hastened, knowing that his days were numbered.

Doctors warned him that he would die, and tried to convince him to take a year off to recuperate. He would not leave the school and his work.

His final operation lasted only fifteen minutes. Doctors were horrified at his condition and realised there was nothing they could do to help him. He was mortally wounded during the war, but his strength of spirit allowed him to live for another thirty years, and to live as fully as any living man can. He died on 2 September, 1970, at the very beginning of the school year, but he will live for many more years, not only in people's memories, but as if he were still living and working today. It will take many years to publish all the books that were found among his manuscripts after he died. They will appear, year after year, as if he were still alive, once again prolonging his life...

He knew that he was condemned, but consciously chose death, preferring it to life without school.

[to be concluded next month]

