

Sukhomlynsky News



Painting by Taras Shevchenko, Ukrainian poet and painter

The Everlasting Spring [continued]

*... Tell me how beyond the hill
The dear sun goes down;
How a rainbow over the Dnipro
Borrows water for its colours;
How a spreading poplar
Has stretched out its branches ...
While above the quiet water
A willow bows its head. (Shevchenko)*

Those words have entered my soul forever. Heard from my mother's lips, they revealed something at once mysteriously enchanting and yet astonishingly clear, almost painfully comprehensible. I felt—and that feeling has remained with me throughout my life—that poetic language embodies a kind of miracle. It enchants us; it reveals the beauty of the world. And when one feels oneself in the presence of that miracle, one longs to become beautiful and inwardly pure. Now, when the sun of my own life has passed its zenith, I often ask myself quietly: wherein lies the power of this miracle? What is it that gives poetry its power to enchant and ennoble? For me, delighting in the beauty and poetic music of language has always been like standing before a woman of extraordinary beauty. She is like the sun, illuminating your every feature. You see yourself as though for the first time, and you long to become more beautiful yourself. Your soul burns with shame at the mere thought that there might be anything within you unworthy of a human being.



The Everlasting Spring

Dear reader,

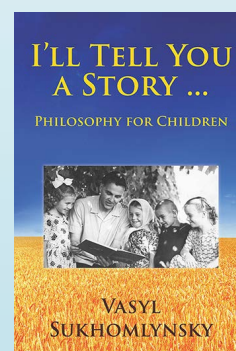
I hope you are well.

This month's newsletter presents the second instalment of Sukhomlynsky's 1970 article 'The Everlasting Spring', which was recently republished in a 2025 compilation of Sukhomlynsky's correspondence.

The article is a song in praise of the Ukrainian language, but it also prompts us to question how language is taught more generally, to reflect on the role of direct experience in inspiring language, and to ponder the sources of poetic inspiration.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill



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The Everlasting Spring [continued]

Whenever I read or hear the word 'Homeland', I hear once again my mother's voice reciting those beautiful lines by our poet Taras Shevchenko about the dear sun, the rainbow, and the spreading poplar. I even remember that quiet hour before sunset when I sat in my mother's arms. I remember the brightly coloured butterfly trembling upon the crimson hollyhock beneath the window; the leaves whispering in the poplar tree; the rooster with its scarlet comb standing on the green lawn beneath it; the little white cloud drifting across the blue sky. The sun was setting, and a cool breeze floated from the pond. My mother began to sing: 'Oh, I'll go across the meadow, down the valley ...' The song was so beautiful that it seemed even the leaves of the poplar had fallen silent to listen to her voice. That moment, too, has remained with me throughout my life. I remember everything: the western sky glowing red like embers in a stove, even the fragrance of the flowers. It seems as though it all happened only a moment ago. I close my eyes, and I can still feel my mother's breath. Perhaps it was in that wondrous moment that my own life in the fairy-tale world of language began.

My dear friend, I am firmly convinced that every child must possess such a deeply personal life in the world of words. The richer that inner life becomes, the happier are the years we spend walking the furrows of joy and sorrow, happiness and grief. I regard it as one of the most delicate tasks of education to ensure that every child experiences days—or hours, though more often only fleeting moments—when, figuratively speaking, time itself seems to stand still; when the scenes and images of the surrounding world are engraved forever upon the memory; when an everlasting flame is kindled along the pathway of life.

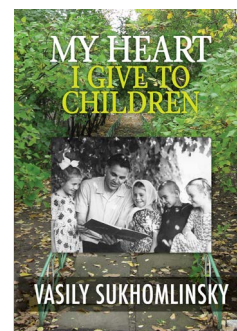
You write that your pupils are indifferent to language. You read them the magnificent pages of *Intermezzo* [a celebrated prose poem by Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky], where every word is a unique melody in the many-stringed harp of life, beauty, thought, and feeling. Yet they yawn with boredom, amuse themselves by folding scraps of paper, or doodle little devils in the margins of their exercise books. You wonder why. Ask yourself instead: what has remained in each child's memory from those earliest years of life? Was there one unique, unforgettable moment when time itself seemed to stop? Does your pupil remember the slender poplar beside the road, the green meadow sprinkled with golden dandelions, the wedge of cranes crossing the blue sky, or the delicate petals of cherry blossom? Can your pupil, with eyes closed, still hear the distant songs drifting across the meadow—the songs of harvesters and Cossacks, the songs of ripening rye, the songs of the wind sweeping over the open steppe? Can the child still smell the fragrance of apple orchards in autumn and the scent of snowdrops in spring?

It is during that tender, receptive age, when a child first discovers not only the beauty of the world but also their first awareness of the joy of being alive, their first understanding of the happiness of seeing the sun and the blue sky, that I lead my little pupils into the fields,

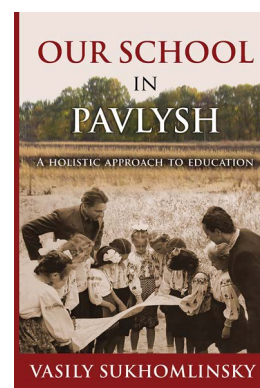
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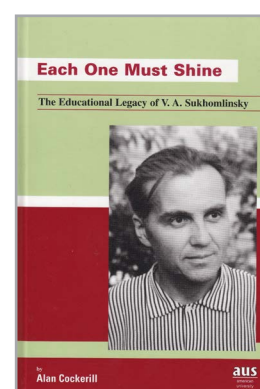
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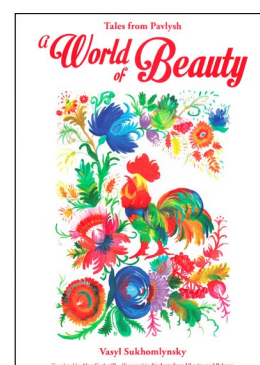
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to the pond, into the orchard. I lead them there to wonder. I lead them there so that the images and scenes embodying the poetry of language may become forever engraved upon their memories. These are our journeys in search of words from our native language.

On the edge of the village, not far from the last cottage, stands a poplar. As long as I can remember, it has stood there like a watchman, softly whispering with its leaves. A woman comes out of the cottage. The children and I ask her, 'Who planted this poplar? How long has it stood here?'

She replies, 'I don't know. It has always been here. As long as I can remember, the poplar has stood beside the road.'

Then an old man comes out of the house—very old indeed, his hair as white as a pigeon's wing. He is not the woman's father but her grandfather. We ask him, 'Grandpa, who planted this poplar? How long has it been growing here?'

Smiling, he answers, 'I don't know. It has always grown here. As long as I can remember, the poplar has stood beside the road. When I was a little boy, I asked my own Grandpa Prokop exactly the same question you're asking me now—who planted it, and how long had it been there? And my grandfather answered just as I have answered you: "I don't know. It has always stood here."'

Then I say to the children, 'My dear children, perhaps this is not a poplar at all. Perhaps it is a fairy tale that came to the edge of our village long ago, at the dawn of time, and has remained here ever since. Perhaps this poplar is eternal. Perhaps that is what it is.'

Filled with quiet joy, I watch the children's eyes begin to shine—dark blue, light blue, green, hazel, reddish brown. Thought itself flashes into life in every colour of the rainbow. That moment is engraved forever upon their memory. Not only with their minds but also with their hearts they begin to understand the poetic meaning of the word 'eternal' and to feel the poetic soul of those simple, song-like words: 'beside the road', 'the branches of the poplar'.

My dear friend, what I did was to lead these little children onto the pathway of their native language. In my programme of education there are one hundred such journeys along this cherished path. One hundred landscapes, one hundred flowers, one hundred moments engraved forever upon heart and memory—this is the delicate, demanding

labour through which love for our native Ukrainian language is born. By means of this labour we lay the foundations of what I would call the **childhood of our native language**. Yes, if you wish to inspire the mind and soul of the human being whom we are helping to shape with an unfading, enduring, steadfast and tender love and reverence for the words of our native language, then create this childhood of the native language. It lies in these hundred journeys, in these thousands of vivid words and fairy-tale images whose poetic resonance can be discovered only where a word does more than denote an object—where it amazes, delights, compels us to look more closely and to listen more deeply.

As I reveal to children the poetic dimension of language, I strive to ensure that words become, figuratively speaking, the eyes through which we perceive beauty. The childhood of the native language—what a profoundly difficult and deeply responsible undertaking it is, my friend. Above all, the child must be joyfully moved, captivated, enchanted by the poetic power of words. The emotions awakened in a young soul should resemble those of a traveller who, in a waterless desert, has searched again and again for the hidden spring beneath the dry sand and, at last, broken through to it, whereupon the little spring begins to murmur with life. I shall never forget the joy and wonder on my children's faces when, one spring day, we walked to the river to witness the meaning of the Ukrainian word *skresaty* [used to describe the breaking up of ice during the spring thaw]. Our little river was shedding its ice; torrents foamed and surged between the drifting floes. The word lived there beside us. It entered the children's souls. They came to know it as both the beauty of the world and the beauty of human thought. It awakened within them pride in our Ukrainian people, whose spiritual strength, imagination, and creative genius had given birth to so beautiful a word.

[Continued overleaf]



At those moments, when the beauty and poetic power of language help me engrave forever the unforgettable moments that make up the childhood of the native language, something comes into being within the souls of my pupils that is the very reason I cross the threshold of the school each morning, the reason I lead children along the demanding path of discovering, uncovering, and comprehending beauty. What comes into being is that from each child's heart thousands of threads seek out a connection to all that is great and eternal: the people themselves; their age-old language; their culture; their fairy tales; their poetry; their literature; their school; their family; the glory of the generations resting in the village cemeteries; and the future of those yet to be born. Through the medium of language, a child becomes a son or daughter of the nation. Therein lies our lofty mission as educators, my dear friend. That is why I have called the childhood of the native language so grave a responsibility. Behind each little school desk, a nation is being formed. Let us never forget that, my fellow teachers of language and literature. Those children, whose eyes flash dark blue, light blue, green, hazel and reddish brown with the light of awakening thought—and only we, the teachers, the guides of thought, will and spirit, can strike those sparks—are the tenderest, most delicate branches of that ancient tree whose name is the nation. Let us never forget that branches reach towards the sun only so that the trunk may grow stronger and the roots sink ever deeper into the earth.

Let us therefore create the childhood of the native language, my friend. From the very moment a child first learns to stand, let them come to love their native language for the rest of their life. Let them fall in love with it. Let them feel its unique shades of meaning and its fragrance. People cherish most dearly that into which they have poured a part of their own lives—a fragment of their hearts, a drop of their blood. Words—I repeat once again—are the eyes through which we perceive beauty. Only after a child has truly come to know words, only after they have entered their soul and become part of its riches, is that child capable of cherishing language.

Let us then, my young friend, become master

craftsmen—magicians—who know how to connect an unbreakable thread from every human heart to that which is great and eternal: to the great folios of our dictionaries resting upon library shelves; to the thousands of pages of the immortal works of our poets, where every line, polished by tireless labour, shines like a precious jewel. Our mission is to bring all these treasures to life—to make them glow with marvellous colours, to let them sing like the skylark, to make them tremble like a drop of dew upon a cluster of guelder-rose berries. All this must become the spiritual inheritance of every human heart. Every one of our pupils must learn to discover—and to discover for themselves—their own words.

Here, my friend, we come to what is, in my opinion—or at least what ought to be—the most delicate and most difficult task in the whole of education. It is the life of words. Words must live—that is the whole secret. They must live in children's creativity, in the relationships between children, adolescents and young people. They must become the most sensitive string of the human soul. A child must long to express themselves through language—to entrust their innermost thoughts and feelings to a friend, to the one they love, to their father and mother. That, my friend, is our mission. Even in adolescence a young person should experience the agony of searching for the right word. For the life of the word is no easy matter. It is extraordinarily difficult, within the immeasurable treasury of our language, to find that one precious jewel which alone, among thousands of others, must be touched by the ray of thought before it begins to shine.

The life of words is, I am deeply convinced, the very essence of the culture of school life. Whenever I wish to understand—even in the broadest sense—what kind of life fills a school, I listen to the words spoken by its pupils. I ponder what they say and how they say it.

[To be continued in the next issue.]

