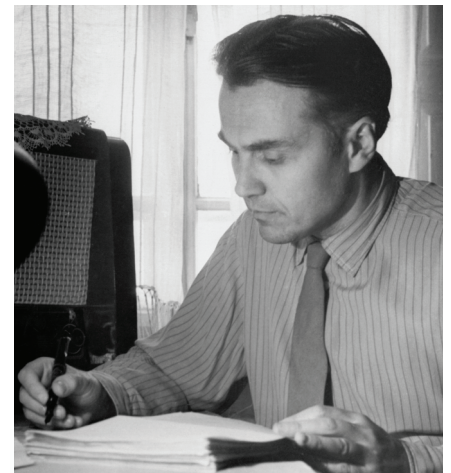
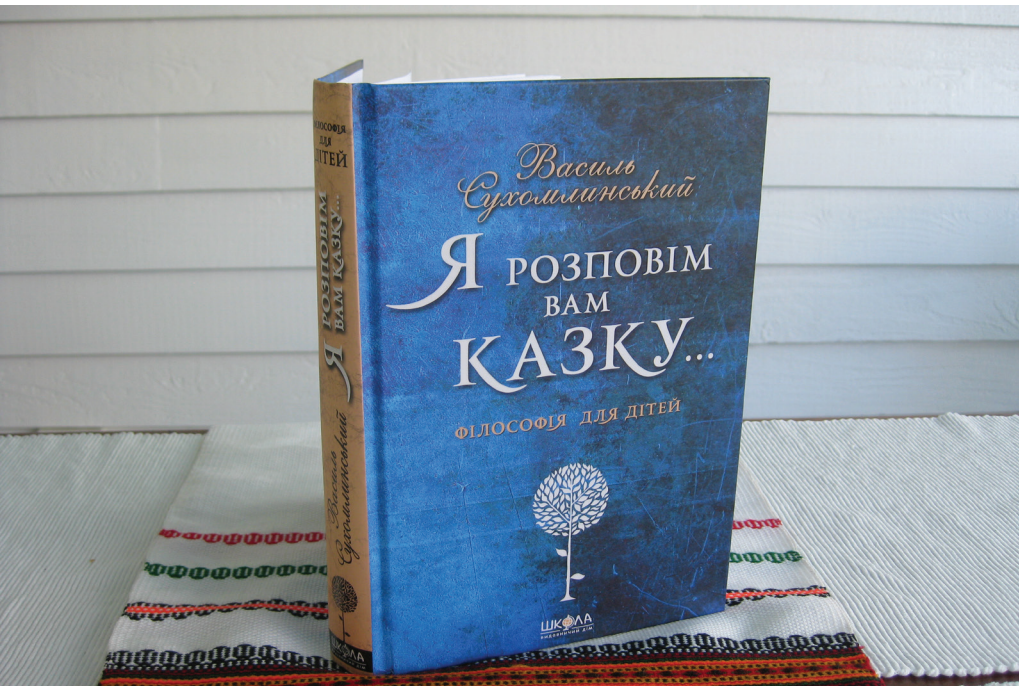


Sukhomlinsky News



Eternal Beauty

Sometimes Sukhomlinsky's little stories for children contain deep meaning. One of the things that most attracts me to Sukhomlinsky's work is his deep response to the eternal beauty of nature. This finds expression in the story 'Beauty, Inspiration, Joy and Mystery', which is included in this month's newsletter.

Also in this issue I am reporting on a new publication that I have just received from Ukraine, that relates Sukhomlinsky's ethical discussions and stories for children to current attempts to introduce courses in 'Philosophy for Children'.

Finally, I am including an extract from My Heart I Give to Children, in which Sukhomlinsky discusses the need to adopt methods of instruction that do not place excessive strain on children's nervous systems. The concept of 'psychological equilibrium' as a trait of a school community is an interesting one to reflect upon.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Philosophy for children: a new Ukrainian language publication

A significant new publication has appeared in Ukraine, prepared by Sukhomlinsky's daughter, Professor Olga Sukhomlyns'ka. It is based on two of Sukhomlinsky's works: *How to Educate a True Human Being*, and *An Ethics Anthology*. The new publication is entitled *Ya rozpovim vam kazku: filosofiya dlya ditei* [I will tell you a story: Philosophy for children].

This book contains about 800 of Sukhomlinsky's little stories for children, as well as significant discussions of ethical values that are both traditional and future oriented. In her introduction to the work, Professor Sukhomlyns'ka refers to the work of Matthew Lipman, recognised for his role in bringing philosophy into schools, and suggests that Sukhomlinsky's philosophical reflections and parables may provide suitable material for educators attempting to bring philosophy to children.

The discussions and stories are grouped under the following thematic headings: The Foundations of Children's Development; Beauty—The Joy of Life; Children in the World, and the World in Children; Parents and Children—The Harmony of Love and Will; How to Develop Moral Values; Schools as Centres of Living Thought and Children as Thinkers; and Our Homeland in our Hearts.

Sukhomlinsky considers the school to have a lofty mission: 'A school does not only teach how to read, write, think, to get to know the surrounding world and the riches of science and art. ... In school we learn how to live. A school is the spiritual cradle of a nation. Without school a nation has no future. The more wisdom there is, the brighter is its future.'

Extract from *My Heart I Give to Children*

The following extract is taken from a chapter entitled 'Study is a part of our spiritual life.' It focuses on the need to take into account the nature of a child's developing nervous system when organising instruction in the early years.

It is not easy for a child to learn to work with attention and concentration. Experienced teachers engage children's attention to their story, explanation or exposition with the content of the lesson, and not with any special techniques for influencing the students. Skill in organising the intellectual work in the early years consists of getting children to listen to the teacher attentively, to memorise and think without noticing that they are making an effort, without forcing themselves to listen attentively, to memorise or think.

If a teacher can do this, the pupil will remember everything that caught their interest and especially those things that inspired wonder. Why did the children remember their letters so easily and learn to read and write? Because they were never expected to do so. Because every letter was an embodiment of a vivid image that had inspired feelings of admiration and delight. If every day I had given the little preschoolers a 'portion of knowledge'—shown them a letter and demanded they memorise it—I would have gotten nowhere. That does not mean, of course, that you have to hide your goals from children. You need to teach in such a way that children are not thinking about the goals—that is what lightens intellectual work. All this is not as simple as it may first seem. We are talking about a particular stage in the intellectual development of children, about a stage that Professor VL Ryzhov calls 'the infancy of the human nervous system'. During this developmental stage—during the early years, and especially during the first year of school—children simply do not have the ability to concentrate. The teacher must engage the children's attention by awakening what in psychology is called involuntary attention.

The attention of a little child is a fickle creature. To me it seems like a timid little bird that flies further away from its nest as soon as you try to get close to it. If you do manage at last to catch the little bird, you can only keep it by holding it in your hands or putting it in a cage. Do not expect any songs from the bird if it feels itself to be a prisoner. It is the same with the attention of a little child: if you hold it captive like an imprisoned bird, it

will be of little help to you.

There are some teachers who are proud of the fact that they can create an 'environment of constant intellectual exertion' during their lessons. More often than not this is achieved through external factors that act as a bridle, restraining the attention of the child: frequent reminders ('listen carefully'); rapid rotations from one form of work to another; the prospect of knowledge being checked immediately after an explanation is given (more precisely, the threat of receiving a failing grade if you do not listen to what I am saying); the requirement to carry out some form of practical work as soon as a theoretical proposition has been explained.

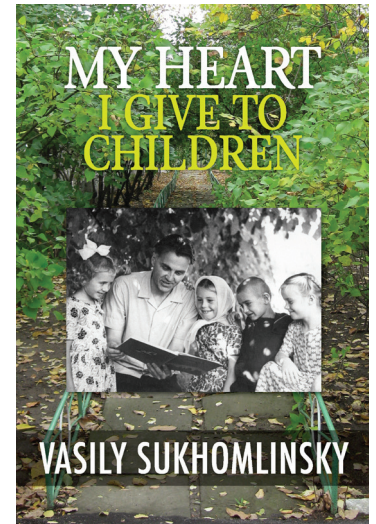
All these methods create an initial appearance of active intellectual work: the work activities rotate like a kaleidoscope; the children, concentrating, listen to the teacher's every word; and there is a tense silence in the classroom. But what is the cost of achieving this, and what results does it lead to? Constant straining to be attentive and not to miss anything (and students at this age cannot force themselves to be attentive) overstrains and exhausts the nervous system. Not to lose a single minute during a lesson, not to go for one moment without active intellectual work—what could be more stupid in the subtle business of educating a human being? Such a direction in a teacher's work means, in effect, to squeeze everything out of children that they can give. After such 'effective' lessons children go home tired. They are easily irritated and upset. They need to have a really good rest, but they still have homework to do and one look at that schoolbag with its textbooks and exercise books is enough to make children feel sick.

It is no accident that there are many discipline problems in schools that lead to conflicts, with students being rude to the teacher and to each other and cheekily answering back when they are reprimanded. During the lesson children's nerves are stretched to the limit, and the teachers themselves are not electronic machines. Just try holding the attention of a class for the duration of a lesson with an emphasis

Holistic Education Books

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CURRENT PUBLICATIONS

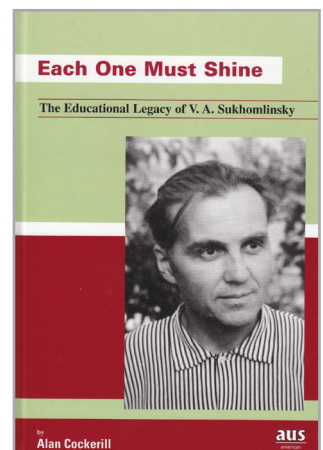


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Translated by Alan Cockerill. Illustrated by Students from Ukraine and Belarus.

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on 'high effectiveness' and with work activities rotating like a kaleidoscope. It is no accident that children often come home from lessons gloomy, not wanting to talk, indifferent to everything, or sometimes just the opposite—abnormally irritable.

No, we should not seek children's attentiveness, concentration and intellectual activity at such a cost. Student's intellectual strength and nervous energy, especially at a young age, is not a bottomless well from which one can draw endlessly. We must take from that well with wisdom, and very circumspectly, and most importantly we must constantly replenish the child's sources of nervous energy. The sources of this replenishment are to be found in observation of the objects and phenomena of the surrounding world, in life in the midst of nature, in reading (but in reading which is motivated by interest, by the desire to learn something, and not from a fear of being questioned), and in journeys to the source of living thought and language.

In the life of a school community there is an attribute that is hard to put your finger on, which might be called psychological equilibrium. What I mean by this term is that the children feel the fullness of life, think clearly, have confidence in their abilities, and faith in their capacity to overcome difficulties. Characteristic features of psychological equilibrium are a calm environment with purposeful work; even-tempered, friendly relationships and the absence of irritability. It is impossible to work normally without

psychological equilibrium. The life of a school community becomes a living hell when this equilibrium is disturbed: the students insult and annoy each other, and nervousness and irritability reign throughout the school. How can we establish and, most importantly, maintain psychological equilibrium? The experience of the best teachers has convinced me that the most important thing in this very subtle area of education is constant thinking activity—without overtaxing, without sudden bursts of activity, without rushing or straining the mental faculties.

Psychological equilibrium is characterised by an atmosphere of goodwill, mutual support, and an alignment between each student's intellectual ability and the work assigned to them, which should be of an appropriate level of difficulty. The primary school teachers VP Novitskaya, EM Zhalenko and AA Nesterenko were true masters of psychological equilibrium, and I studied their work very closely. I tried to understand the secret behind that wisest, and at the same time most natural thing: all their children were studying to the best of their ability. There was no child who was capable of excellence but only working at a satisfactory level. Those who were just studying at a satisfactory level and being awarded a grade of three did not consider themselves to be failures or cursed by fate, and their friends did not look down on them with condescending pity.

I was always very concerned about

the psychosis of pursuing only excellent grades. This psychosis begins in the family and takes hold of educators, laying a heavy burden on the young souls of students and crippling them. At that time a child does not have the capacity to earn an excellent grade, but the parents demand nothing less than a five, or at the very least a four, and the poor student receiving a three feels like a criminal. This never happened in the classes of VP Novitskaya, EM Zhalenko or AA Nesterenko. The ones who received excellent grades did not feel especially fortunate and the ones who received satisfactory grades were not afflicted with feelings of inadequacy. I tried to learn the art of intelligent, concentrated intellectual work from these master teachers.

I noticed what seemed to me to be a very subtle characteristic of their educational artistry: the ability to kindle a feeling of joy in learning in children's hearts and minds. For each and every child, every little success in learning was accompanied by joyful enthusiasm, associated with the uncovering of some truth, with research and discovery. Generalising from the precious experience of these master teachers, I tried to ensure that children did not work in order to receive a grade, but from an urge to experience intellectual excitement. I was very glad that there was no unhealthy pursuit of excellent grades in our class, nor the equally harmful unhealthy reaction to satisfactory grades.





Stories for Children

Beauty, Inspiration, Joy and Mystery

A little boy set off for the forest. He met an old man coming from the forest. The old man looked tired, but was smiling with joy.

'Why are you smiling, grandpa?' asked the boy. 'There must be something wonderful in the forest?'

'Yes, my boy, in the forest there is Beauty, Inspiration, Joy and Mystery. I saw these things, and now I feel like living for many more years.'

The boy ran into the forest.

He looked around. Everything was beautiful: the mighty oak, the elegant fir tree, the weeping willow and the silver birch. But the boy thought the most beautiful of all was the violet. I raised its deep blue head with a violet eye from the grass and looked with wonder at the boy.

'This is Beauty,' whispered the boy to himself.

The boy listened and heard far off in the distance the quiet cooing of a wild pigeon: coo... coo ... And in that instant the boy remembered something kind and loving. He remembered his mother's hands. He wanted to sing his own song about his mother.

'This is Inspiration,' he whispered to himself.

The boy concentrated even harder on his surroundings. The sun was shining brightly, birds were flying high up in the blue sky, and waves of green forest stretched as far as the eye could see.

'How good it is, that I can see and feel all of this,' thought the boy. 'The world is made of Joy and to live is a Joy.'

But where was the Mystery? For a very long time the boy looked and listened, but he could not find it.

The boy went back to the forest the next day. Again he met the old man, walking from the forest. The boy told him how he had encountered Beauty, Inspiration and Joy, but how he had been unable to find the Mystery.

'Grandpa, where is the Mystery?'

The old man smiled enigmatically and answered, 'When you have grey hair like me, you will see what the Mystery is.'

Many years passed. The boy grew up and became an adult. He married, raised a family, and his children grew up. He became a grey-haired old man.

One day he went to the forest. Many years had passed since he had heard about Beauty, Inspiration, Joy and Mystery as a little boy. And now he recalled the words of the old man. The first thing that caught his eye in the forest was an amazingly beautiful violet in the midst of the green grass.

'That is the same flower I saw so many years ago,' thought the old man. 'Does it live forever?'

The old man listened. The grass was whispering in just the same way, and the leaves were rustling. He raised his head and saw white clouds floating, and a formation of cranes flying in the blue sky.

'So that is the Mystery,' realised the old man. 'Beauty is eternal.'

The wolf's teeth

Once upon a time there was a wolf, as wicked as could be. His jaws were fitted with terrible teeth like knives. He would grab a sheep and rip it to shreds. Everyone feared the wolf, but when it had eaten its fill, the ram, passing by, bowed low to it. He wanted to flatter the wolf and said:

'Oh mighty wolf, how strong and wise you are! I admire you.'

Several times the ram drove lambs to the wolf for its supper.

But after some time the wolf grew old. All its teeth fell out, and it could not even eat a chicken. The wolf began to hunt frogs.

The ram realised that there was no need to fear the wolf any more, and came to him one day and laughed at him.

'Oh mighty wolf, I do not fear you anymore. I hate you. You are a pitiful wreck. The amazed wolf answered:

'So it was not me you were praising, but my teeth.'

