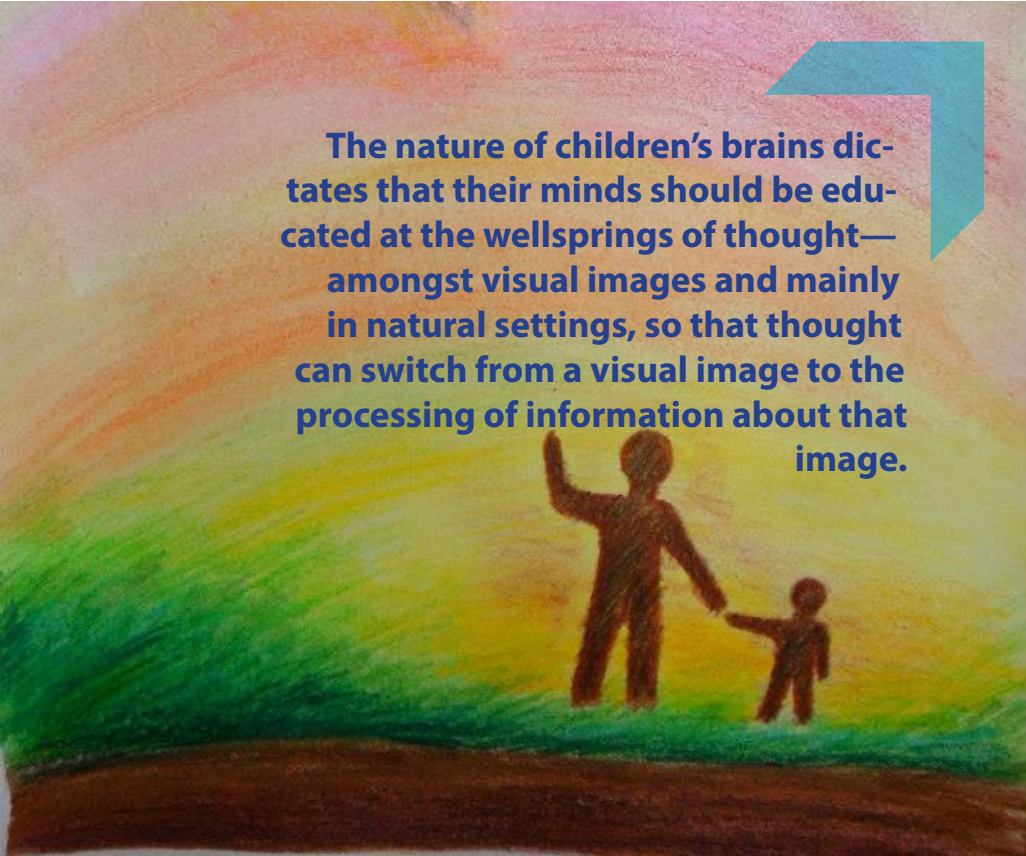


Sukhomlinsky News



The nature of children's brains dictates that their minds should be educated at the wellsprings of thought—amongst visual images and mainly in natural settings, so that thought can switch from a visual image to the processing of information about that image.



Nature and a child's brain

Thank you for showing an interest in the educational legacy of Vasily Sukhomlinsky. The aim of this newsletter is to make Sukhomlinsky's name better known amongst English-speaking educators, so I hope you will forward it on to anyone who you think may be interested.

The main article in this month's issue is about the role of nature in providing a stimulating environment for developing language and thought, and the importance of cultivating children's imaginations.

In the first part of *My Heart I Give to Children*, Sukhomlinsky describes his work with a group of preschool children in the 'School of Joy'.

Sukhomlinsky suggests that when working with young children, we need to take account of how their brains function. In order to facilitate the development of children's thought processes, we should always relate language to concrete experiences. Nature affords us an inexhaustible supply of fascinating phenomena to observe and to think about.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Lessons in Nature

*The following article is an extract from Sukhomlinsky's **My Heart I Give to Children**, which we intend to publish later this year.*

The life of our school developed from an idea that had inspired me: children by their very nature are inquisitive researchers, explorers of the world. So let a world of wonder reveal itself to them in living colours, in clear and vibrant sounds, in stories and games, in their own creativity, in beauty that uplifts the heart, in the urge to do good for others. Through stories, imagination and play, through children's unique creativity: that was the sure way to a child's heart. I would introduce the little ones to the surrounding world in such a way that every day they discovered something new in it, so that every step led us on a journey to the wellsprings of thought and speech, to the wondrous beauty of nature. I would take care that each of my pupils grew up to become a wise thinker and researcher, that each step on the path to knowledge enriched the heart and tempered the will.

On the second day the children came to school in the evening. A quiet September day was fading. We left the village and found a place to sit high on an ancient burial mound. Spread out in front of us was a wonderful view of a wide meadow that seemed to glow in the evening sunlight, of tall, slender poplars, and, on the horizon, distant burial mounds. We had come to the very wellsprings of thought and words. Stories and fantasy—these provide a key to unlock those springs, and life-giving streams will bubble from them. I remembered how, on the day before, Katya had said, 'The sun is scattering sparks ...' Twelve years later, when graduating from school, Katya wrote

Before opening a book, before sounding out their first word, I wanted the children to read the pages of the most wonderful book in the world—the book of nature.

an essay about her native land and repeated that image when expressing her love for nature. Such is the power of a fairy tale image to influence a child's thought. A thousand times I have been convinced that when they populate the world with fantastic images and when they create these images, children discover not only beauty, but truth. Without stories, without the play of imagination, a child cannot live. Without stories the surrounding world is just a beautiful picture painted on a canvas. Stories bring that picture to life.

Figuratively speaking, a story is a fresh wind fanning the fire of a child's thought and speech. Children not only love to hear stories, they create them. When I showed the children the world though the leaves of a grapevine, I knew I would tell them a story, but did not know exactly which one. Katya's words—the sun is scattering sparks—provided a stimulus for my flight of fancy. What truthful, precise, artistically expressive images children create; how striking and colourful their language is. We must not hide the surrounding world from them with a classroom's walls, a blackboard and the pages of a textbook.

Before opening a book, before sounding out their first word, I wanted the children to read the pages of the most wonderful book in the world—the book of nature.

Here, in the midst of nature, it was particularly clear to me that, as teachers, we are dealing with the most tender, most delicate, most sensitive thing in nature—a child's brain. When you think of a child's brain, you must imagine a tender rose on which a drop of dew is quivering. How much care and tenderness is needed to pick the rose without spilling the drop of dew. That is how much care we need each minute of the day, as we touch the most delicate thing in nature—the thinking matter of a growing organism.

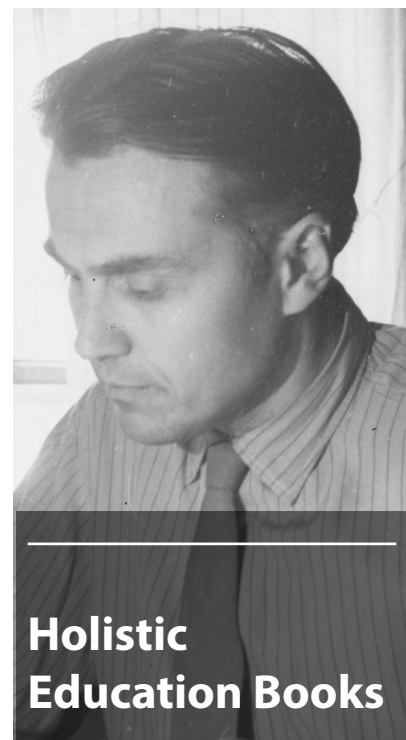
Children think in images. This means, for example, that while listening to a teacher's story about the journey of a drop of water, in their imaginations they paint silver waves of morning mist, a dark storm cloud, peals of thunder, and a spring shower. The clearer these pictures are in their imaginations, the more deeply they comprehend the laws

of nature. The tender, sensitive neurons of their brains have not yet reached their full strength: they need to be developed and strengthened. For this to happen, children's thinking processes must be in accord with the natural demands of their brains. Most importantly, children must be taught to think in the midst of nature, at that life-giving wellspring of thought from which streams of living water constantly flow.

Children think ... That means that a certain group of neurons in the cortex of their brains perceives images (pictures, objects, phenomena, words) from the surrounding world, and that signals pass through the sensitive nerve cells, as if through communication channels. The neurons 'process' this information—catalogue it, group it, juxtapose it, compare it—all while continuing to receive new information, which in turn must be taken in and processed. In order to cope with the volume of constantly arriving images, and with processing the information, the nervous energy of the neurons constantly switches between perceiving images and processing them.

This astonishingly rapid switching of the nervous energy of neurons is the phenomenon we call thought—a child is thinking... Children's brain cells are so delicate and react so sensitively to the objects of perception that they can only function normally when the object of perception they are making sense of is an image they can see, hear and touch. This switching of thought, which is the essence of the thinking process, is only possible when children are presented with either a real, visual image, or a verbal image that is created so vividly they are able to see, hear and sense what is being described. That is why children love stories so much.

The nature of children's brains dictates that their minds should be educated at the wellsprings of thought—amongst visual images and mainly in natural settings, so that thought can switch from a visual image to the processing of information about that image. If children are isolated from nature, if all that a child is exposed to from the first days of school is words, the brain cells are quickly exhausted and cannot cope with the work set by the teacher. These cells need to be allowed



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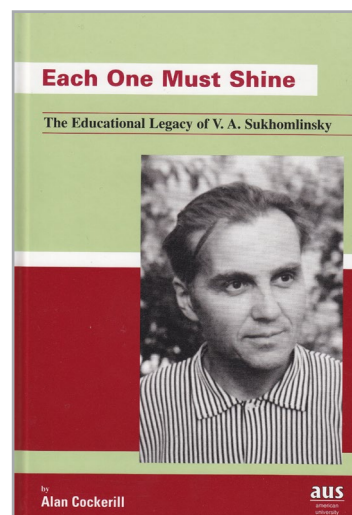
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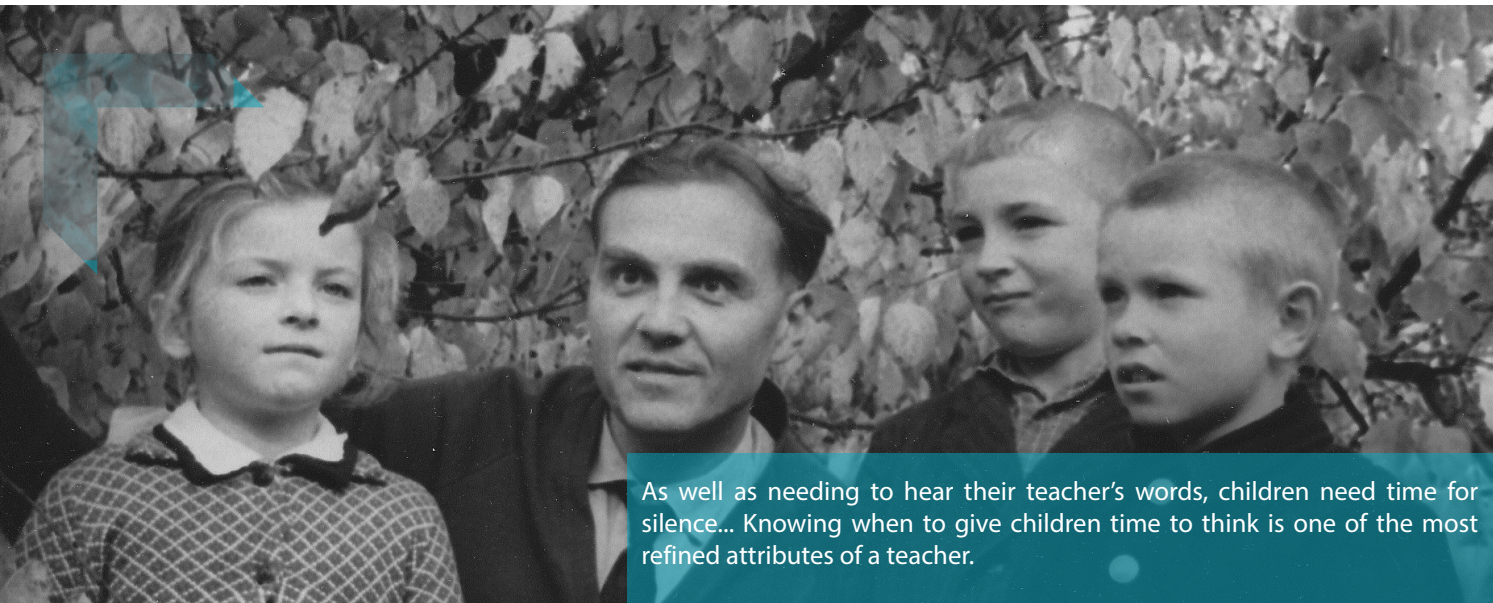
Vasyl Sukhomlinsky

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

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As well as needing to hear their teacher's words, children need time for silence... Knowing when to give children time to think is one of the most refined attributes of a teacher.

to develop, to get stronger, to gather energy. Here we find an explanation for a phenomenon that many teachers encounter in primary classes: children are sitting quietly, looking you in the eyes, apparently listening attentively, but not understanding a single word, because the teacher talks and talks, because they have to understand rules, to solve problems, to follow examples. Without living images there is too much abstraction and generalisation, and the brain gets tired ... That is why children fall behind. That is why it is necessary to develop children's thinking, to increase their mental capacity in the

midst of nature—this is dictated by the natural laws governing a child's development. That is why every excursion into nature is a lesson in thought, a lesson in developing the mind.

We sit on the ancient burial mound while a chorus of grasshoppers rings out harmoniously all around and the scent of steppe grasses hangs in the air. We are silent. You do not have to say a lot to children or to cram their heads with stories. Words are not an idle pursuit, and overconsumption of words is one of the most harmful forms of overconsumption. As well as needing to hear their teacher's

words, children need time for silence. During such moments they think and make sense of what they have seen and heard. It is very important for teachers to show restraint when explaining things to children. We must not turn children into passive receptors of words. In order to make sense of each bright image—visual or verbal—time and nervous energy are required. Knowing when to give children time to think is one of the most refined attributes of a teacher. In the midst of nature children must be given the chance to listen, to see and to feel ...

My Heart I Give to Children

My Heart I Give to Children, from which this week's article is taken, is Sukhomlinsky's best known work, and has been read by millions of teachers around the world. The

translation I am currently preparing for publication is based on a 1966 manuscript that was published by Sukhomlinsky's daughter, Professor Olga Sukhomlinskaya, in 2012.

My intention is to publish a paperback version and an eBook version by the end of this year.

Readers interested in previewing my manuscript should email me at: ejr.cockerill@gmail.com .





Bread, Work and Song

Far from the village, in a field camp, lived some tractor drivers. Three times a day their cook, Natalia Ivanovna, prepared a meal for them. She was a quite a master chef. She baked soft, aromatic bread, and her borsch was so delicious, that the tractor drivers could not praise it enough. They begged Natalia Ivanovna to bake fresh bread every day.

But the cook began to notice that when they had eaten their full, the tractor drivers became gloomy and didn't want to talk. Something was missing in their lives.

And then one day after supper Natalia Ivanovna began to sing a song. She had a voice of exquisite beauty. She sang a song about a young soldier who had gone into battle across that very field, who had fallen to an enemy bullet here under this oak tree, and who was buried here, in this grave...

The tractor drivers raised their heads, and their eyes shone with deep and troubling thoughts.

From that day, after breakfast, the tractor drivers asked Natalia Ivanovna to sing a song. And she sang: about the wide steppes, about mothers, about happiness and grief, about the willow by the camp, about a high burial mound in the steppes, about a grave under an oak tree, about a young woman's eyes. And sometimes she sang before breakfast, at dawn.

The tractor drivers began to wake up before dawn, in case Natalia Ivanovna sang a song before breakfast.

People need song, as well as work and bread.

Stories for Children

Ashamed in Front of the Nightingale

Two little girls, Olya and Lida, went into the forest. After a tiring walk they sat down on the grass to rest and have lunch.

They took bread, butter and an egg from their bag. When they had finished lunch a nightingale started singing not far away. Enchanted by its beautiful song, Olya and Lida sat very still, afraid of disturbing it.

The nightingale stopped singing.

Olya collected her leftovers, and some scraps of paper, and threw them under a bush.

Lida wrapped her egg shell and bread crumbs in newspaper and put them in her bag.

"Why are you taking rubbish with you?" asked Olya. "Throw it under the bush. We're in the forest. No-one will see you."

"I'm ashamed ... in front of the nightingale," said Lida quietly.

A Blizzard

First grader Tolya left home in the morning. A blizzard raged outside. The trees shrieked threateningly.

The boy was frightened. He stood under a poplar and thought: "I won't go to school. It's scary..."

Then he saw Alex, standing under a lime tree. Alex lived next door. He was also heading off for school, and he was frightened, too.

The boys saw each other. They were really pleased. They ran to each other, held hands and walked to school together.

The blizzard whistled and howled, but it was not scary any more.

Peter, the Dog and the Cat

Little Peter was walking along the garden path. He saw a hairy black dog running towards him.

Peter was frightened and wanted to run. But suddenly a little kitten came and huddled against his legs. It was running from the dog, and was begging Peter, 'Defend me, boy, from that terrifying beast.'

Peter stood, looking at the kitten, while it raised its little head and miaowed pitifully.

The kitten made Peter feel ashamed. He took it into his arms and walked towards the dog.

The dog stopped, looked at Peter with fear and hid in the bushes.

