

Sukhomlinsky News

No. 44
March 2019



Nurturing curiosity

*This month's translations, from Sukhomlinsky's book **Tell me a story... Philosophy for children**, have been carried out jointly by Berta Karaim and myself. They focus on curiosity and the nurturing of talent and a capacity for hard work.*

Some teachers in Australia have been exposed to a school improvement program called 'Curiosity and Powerful Learning', developed by David Hopkins and Wayne Craig. This program also recognises the central role of curiosity in learning, as Sukhomlinsky did.

Another key idea in Sukhomlinsky's approach is the idea that every child has some unique talent. Sukhomlinsky has also referred to it as the 'golden vein' within every child. Sukhomlinsky believed that it was of crucial importance to identify the talent in every child, as it could provide a foundation for their self-esteem, and a source of 'life, work and creativity'.

*Next month, I plan to return to translating extracts from **Pavlysh Secondary School**. In past issues I have translated passages from chapters one and two, about the staff and the school environment. In the next issue, I will translate material from chapter three, which focuses on student health as a foundation for all other development.*

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Curiosity and learning

The following extracts from *Tell Me a Story... Philosophy for Children* has been translated by Berta Karaim.

On curiosity

In the brain of every psychologically healthy child is placed the potential for broad development of creative abilities. Nature places in every normal brain the roots that are essential and adequate for each individual to become a creator. What abilities are awakened within a child depends on their activity in their early childhood. In this process the child's own attitude towards their activity is of great significance, as well as the elements of maturity of thought and soul that we, as adults, are able to awaken and establish in the child's consciousness.

The need for activity, which is essential to the development of creative capabilities in childhood, (I emphasise, creative capabilities, not just the ability to follow instructions) is not satisfied by pure busyness, movement and physical exertion. The required activity must engage the mind, demanding resourcefulness and imagination. In other words: the hands are working, while the mind is solving problems; the hands become a means of developing thought; the hands are teaching the mind.

The activity that most strongly fosters the development of the aforementioned abilities includes observation, research and the discovery of the most diverse aspects, features and characteristics of objects and phenomena: observation and research in which the child is personally interested: they are discovering the world in order to enrich their own activity. Active observation gives rise to curiosity. That is the very essence of nurturing abilities. The earlier curiosity is nurtured, the broader the spectrum of abilities that blossom within an individual.

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Curiosity and learning (continued)

In the very notion of curiosity is hidden a deep meaning: it is a growing, ever intensifying need to know, to find out, to explain. The more actively [young] people interact with the surrounding world, the more they see connections between things, facts, nuances, characteristics and the peculiar features of things, facts and phenomena, and the more they are filled with wonder and amazement. They discover many incomprehensible things, thousands of riddles that they must solve, no matter what. In this appearance of riddles and their solution is the essence of curiosity. Our task is to ensure that in early childhood all children become little thinkers, that their activity should lead to an irresistible avalanche of discovery. The only way to achieve this is through work, in the broadest sense of the word. Children's work does not mean giving them a shovel and letting them dig till they are exhausted. Curiosity is a very delicate personal quality, and it is very easy to destroy it, awakening an aversion to work, if that work is beyond a child's strength or is too monotonous. I am talking about the work of a thinker. Children's work is an active vision of the world, a vision through which children become active participants in natural processes, and custodians of nature.

For two years before they join the compulsory school program, I work with little children in a preparatory group. I would call this period a school in curiosity. This is first and foremost an educator making contact with a child's brain, which is so plastic and responsive during the pre-school years. The main method employed in making this contact is to inspire children with wonder and amazement. The main instrument is a teacher's words, and the main form of activity is excursions

to the source of thought and language, in the midst of the inexhaustible richness of nature. My aim is that a growing curiosity should become an autonomous force, governing the interests and aspirations of children.

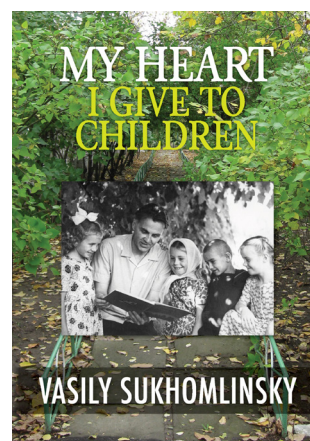
I consider it extremely important that when little children start school, their activity should not be to just follow instructions. This is a terrible threat to intellectual development. With the beginning of formal studies, when there is a lot of monotonous work at desks that involves passive memorisation (this is necessary and inescapable), there is a growing role for special activity that feeds, so to speak, the avalanche of curiosity. I spoke about investigative activity (lessons in thought) in an earlier section. I would like to add a note about the adult-like nature of our work in our workshops, school gardens, and orchards. Everywhere children must be accompanied by a feeling that things are real. Creative, attractive, joyful work during the childhood years is an indispensable lifegiving source of thought and of intellectual development.

On intellectual labour

Formal schooling by its very definition creates the conditions under which learning is compared and evaluated daily: my work is badly done, while my friend's is outstanding. At every step there is praise and disapproval. However, the effort that a student exerted in order to earn the praise is not always taken into account. It often occurs that the subject of the praise is not a student's work, but the gifts lavished upon the student by nature, while the subject of disapproval is the limited abilities of an individual student, with negligence not being differentiated from lack of comprehension, as an inability to work or to concentrate. This is a great

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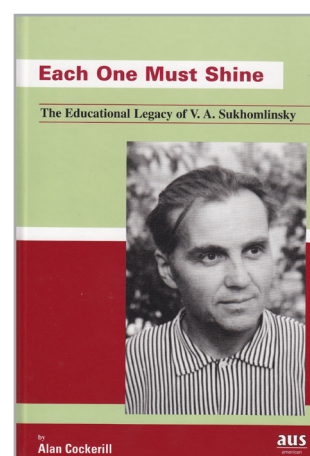
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challenge for the whole education process. We must ensure that every student works hard and that their personal strengths and potential are fully developed, as an indispensable precondition for the development of humility and perseverance.

The primitive views of some educators on work and the nurturing of a work ethic are astonishing. Some believe that work begins when an individual takes up a spade or a broom. However, work is not only the spade and the plough, but also thought. How important it is that our students realise (based on their own experience) that thought is hard work, that its very complexity and difficulty bring an individual great joy... It is through the harmony of intellectual and physical labour that it is possible to nurture and educate children and adolescents, young men and young women, who long to be intelligent, enlightened and cultured.

If a student learns only with the aid of a textbook, if that is the extent of their learning, then their intellectual life will be very limited. Beware as a great misfortune the day when an adolescent's intellectual efforts are used only for memorisation and rote-learning. Authentic intellectual life is only possible when an individual reads without a focus on memorisation. An adolescent's urge to find food for thought should drive him to read two or three times more than he is set to learn from the text book: this is the conclusion to which many years of experience have led me. To read in search of food for thought, without a focus on memorisation - that is the most important condition for the development of intellectual abilities, for the formation of a creative mind. It is in reading out of the need to think, discover and wonder at the greatness and power of intellect that the meaning of an individual's intellectual life is

found. Without such reading, sitting over a textbook inevitably becomes rote-learning, which in turn numbs the mind and transforms learning into an onerous obligation. Where there is no reading out of a need to think and discover, conquering the content of a textbook becomes an impossible task. An aversion to study appears in the absence of a rich and fulfilling intellectual life. This is a concerning occurrence, which, having understood its origins, should prompt us, as educators, to seek the one sure way of preventing the most serious vices in school life: laziness, indolence and wasting time. That way is found by awakening a student's interest in thought, books and reading. The compulsory content found within the pages of a textbook is mastered effortlessly when a student reads out of the need to think and discover.

On talent

When each generation of young boys and girls completes the first grade, I narrate to them the *Legend of the Golden Grain of Truth*, as well as *Happiness and Work*. The idea contained within these stories should excite the young children. Discussion about moral freedom should not begin when the first signs of a moustache appear, but rather when a correct understanding of the term *free* evokes excitement and compels children to look at themselves. A spirit of moral freedom reigns within the walls of a school when the efforts of every individual are directed to the achievement of something difficult.

The essence of this spirit of moral freedom reigns is that every student has higher and higher expectations of themselves. Today they dream of more than they did yesterday; they strive towards grander goals than they considered possible before. The authentic human essence of each student should be expressed in some

particular facet that is unique to them. This facet, discovered and polished by the educator, should sparkle and shine.

An individual may struggle to achieve an 'acceptable' standard in the basic subjects of the curriculum, but there must be something in which their unique facet can sparkle and shine forever. I know a fourteen-year-old boy who barely manages to master the essential content from his school subjects. But in horticulture he is a master of both work and thought, a true creator. He can so masterfully graft the crown of a fruit tree on to root stock that elderly masters are in awe of his work; of his work they say: 'Beautiful!' and of him they say: 'What talent!' Our holy mission as educators is to reach that vein within each individual where their unique talent originates. This vein is found within literally every person; however, if, in spite of all efforts, it is not possible to locate it, then this signifies that, most unfortunately, the opportunity has been missed and now the vein has disappeared never to reappear again and the individual is condemned to a grey and average existence.

Within the four walls of a school, a student should take pride and joy in their work, rather than suffer and experience humiliation, and then perhaps spend the remainder of their life with a hardened heart. It is not possible to classify a psychologically sound human being as either wholly capable or wholly incapable. An individual may be capable at one task and incapable at another. Even a genius may be unsuited to particular forms of activity. A school's mission rests in finding the wellspring of creative abilities within each individual, to unearth in childhood the one and only happy source of life, work and creativity.



Stories for Children

The legend of the golden grain of truth

A father had two sons. When they were old enough to hold a spade in their hands, the father said to them: "Take these spades. Let's go and dig the field."

They dug and dug, but the work seemed hard and meaningless to the brothers.

"Why are we digging?" they asked. "Why are we even alive on this earth?"

The father answered his sons:

"Do you see that big mountain?" And he pointed to a huge mountain, its top covered in clouds.

"We see it," answered the sons.

"In that mountain is a Golden Grain of Truth, perhaps somewhere in its depths, perhaps on the surface—no-one knows. People say that whoever finds that grain of truth will understand why people live on this earth, what they labour for, why they dig the soil and sow crops, build houses and think about the stars: what human beings stand for. Go, my sons, and seek the Golden Grain of Truth.

The brothers walked up to the mountain, and it was huge and reached to the sky. You could not walk around it in a day, and it would take over three days to reach its summit. How would they ever find the Golden Grain of Truth?

They positioned themselves at the foot of the mountain, the older brother on one side, and the younger on the other. They began to dig over the mountain, sifting the soil handful by handful. There was no grain. The younger brother came to the older and said:

"I'm not going to dig any more. I don't want to be a slave to this mountain..."

The older answered:

"Even if I have to dig all my life, I'm going to find the Golden Grain of Truth, because I'm not a slave, but a free man. You're the slave, because you don't want to find out why we live on this earth, why we dig the soil and sow crops, build houses and think about the stars..."

The younger brother went and settled on the banks of a river, built himself a shelter, caught fish and made fish soup.

But the older brother dug and dug, sifting every handful of earth in the palm of his hand, seeking the Golden Grain of Truth.

The years passed. The older brother dug on that mountain for ten years without even a day's break. At last, in the eleventh year, when the whole mountain had been dug over and shifted to a new spot, on the very bottom of the mountain the older brother found the Golden Grain of Truth. It was as small as a poppy seed. The older brother held the grain in the palm of his hand, and the bright light of truth lit up the whole world.

The older brother found out why people live on this earth, dig the soil and sow crops, build houses and think about the stars.

The older brother travelled the earth, building happiness for all people, and becoming Powerful and Invincible. Because he was a Free Man.

But the younger brother lived in a pitiful shelter, his clothes were tatty, the bucket in which he boiled his fish soup wore out, and he ate raw fish and drank swamp water. Because he was a weak-willed slave, a slave to his own laziness, idleness and ignorance. Because true freedom lies in the ability to labour day and night to move a mountain, to build Happiness for people.

The singing feather

There is a strange bird called the Little Bustard, who sings with... what do you think, children? What does the Little Bustard sing with? He sings with his wing. There is a special singing feather in his wing. While flying, when the Little Bustard feels like singing, he will spread his wings in such a way that the singing feather sticks out and prepares itself to sing. Then a fine whistling begins to echo, which cannot be compared to anything. It is similar to the sound of the thinnest string when a bow is drawn over it, and to the song of the wind blowing through slender reed stalks.

Then one day a misfortune happened. The Little Bustard lost his singing feather. The singing feather fell and landed on the ground... The Little Bustard wanted to sing, but he did not have a singing feather.

Little Sergei found the Little Bustard's singing feather. He picked it up and ran - and the feather began to sing.

The Little Bustard heard the singing of the feather, flew to the boy and asked: 'Little Boy, please return the singing feather to me. I cannot live without its music.'

Little Sergei returned the singing feather to the Little Bustard.

Little Sergei grew into a man and lived for many years. Many times, remembering the Little Bustard, he thought: 'Each person has a singing feather. Oh how unfortunate is the person who does not have their singing feather!'