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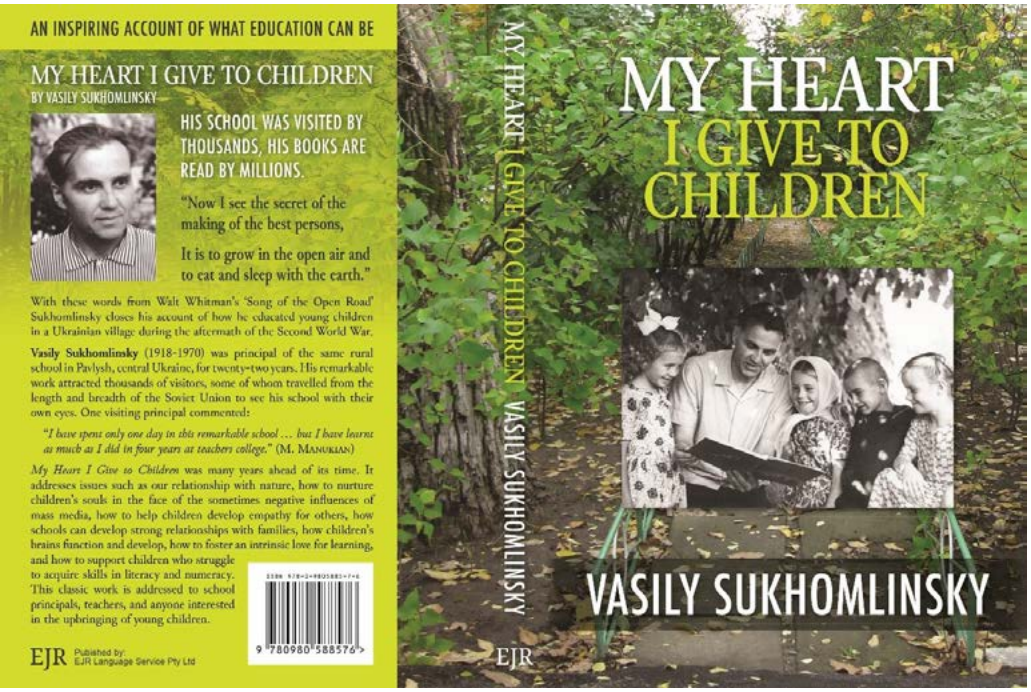
Sukhomlinsky News



My Heart I Give to Children now in print

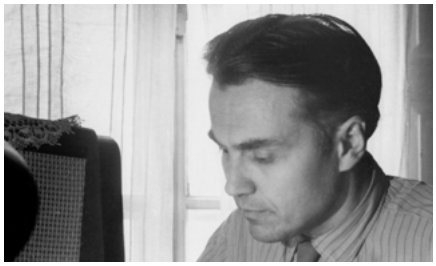
'Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons,
It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.'

With these words from Walt Whitman's 'Song of the Open Road' Sukhomlinsky closes his account of how he educated young children in a Ukrainian village in the aftermath of the Second World War. Now readers in English speaking countries have access to this inspiring work, in a version that is very close to Sukhomlinsky's original intent.

Vasily Sukhomlinsky's *My Heart I Give to Children* is an educational classic that has sold millions of copies in 30 languages. It describes Sukhomlinsky's ground-breaking work with thirty-one students in rural Ukraine, during an experimental preschool year and the subsequent four years of the students' primary schooling.

The work was many years ahead of its time. It addresses issues such as our relationship with nature, how to nurture children's souls in the face of the sometimes negative influences of mass media, how to help children develop empathy for others, how schools can develop strong relationships with families, how children's brains function and develop, how to foster an intrinsic love for learning, and how to support children who struggle to acquire skills in literacy and numeracy. The work is addressed to school principals and teachers, and anyone interested in the upbringing of young children.

The work was first published in Germany in 1968, but this new translation is based on a 2012 edition prepared by Sukhomlinsky's daughter on the basis of a 1966 manuscript. It is closer to Sukhomlinsky's original intent than previous editions.



New Book about to launch!

After two years of work, our new translation of Sukhomlinsky's* My Heart I Give to Children *is in print, and ready to launch. The book is already available from our online bookstore, Holistic Education Books, and Australian subscribers are invited to purchase it there. Overseas subscribers are advised to wait until the book appears on Amazon or other international online bookstores, some time after 3 April, in order to reduce the cost of postage. Subscribers to this newsletter will be advised when the book is listed on Amazon.

Several people have contributed to the creation of this new book. Professor Olga Sukhomlyns'ka went carefully through archival manuscripts to identify the version that was closest to her father's original intent, producing the landmark 2012 edition. I completed the translation. Editor Lisa Hill went through the text meticulously during the middle part of 2015. Paul Howson has advised me on all stages of the book production, and is responsible for the internal design. Julia Peddie produced the attractive cover design.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Extract from *My Heart I Give to Children*

The following extract is taken from a chapter entitled 'A thousand problems from the maths book of life.' The remainder of the chapter describes his ongoing work over a period of years, and the success he enjoyed with some of his 'slow thinkers'.

One of a school's main objectives is to educate people with inquisitive, creative minds. I see the childhood years as a school in thought and the teacher as someone who nurtures the spiritual world of his pupils during the formative years. To care for the development and strengthening of a child's brain, to ensure that this mirror reflecting the world always remains sensitive and receptive, is one of the main responsibilities of an educator. Just as the muscles develop and strengthen from physical exercise in the process of overcoming difficulty, so work and exercise are essential for the formation and development of the brain.

A child's brain develops and strengthens as a result of a complex internal process of excitement of the cells, which occurs simultaneously with the establishment of multiple connections between various objects and phenomena in the surrounding world—cause and effect, temporal and functional connections. When students ponder, seek understanding, and try to make sense of connections that are not yet understood, it is as if microscopic muscles in the cells of the cortex are exerting themselves, developing the strength which will become the intellect. I considered it my role to help the children understand the connections between the phenomena of the surrounding world so that those 'microscopic muscles' gained new energy each time they were exercised. This complex phenomenon is what happens during the formation, strengthening and development of the brain and of its most important quality—an inquisitive, sharp, observant mind.

The functioning of the human brain is discrete (discontinuous, interrupted). The excitement stimulated by the flow of information from the surrounding world occurs now in one group of cells of the cerebral cortex, now in another. Thought instantly switches between the objects of cognition, and this switching back and forth is an important characteristic of the process of thought. The ability to quickly switch thought—and this switching corresponds to the transmission of an impulse from one group of cells to another—is the main precondition for good intellectual ability. A child can think—this means that in the course of a given interval of time (for example a second) thought switches from one object to another many times—so quickly that the person thinking is not aware of the switching. It seems to them that they are simultaneously thinking of the area of a swimming pool and of two taps from which water is flowing at different rates into the pool. In other words, the student is simultaneously holding in their mind various objects and phenomena, analysing and comparing them. Our task is to see that this crucial ability of the brain is developed in every child.

Problems whose solutions require quick-wittedness are a form of exercise that arouses the internal energies of the brain, stimulating the play of the 'intellectual muscles'. Such problems are to be found in the objects and phenomena of the surrounding world. I would direct children's attention to some phenomenon or other and try to get them to see hidden connections that they had not yet grasped, so as to awaken an urge to understand the essence of those connections, to understand the truth. The key to understanding a problem is always found in activity and work. Making an intellectual effort, striving to establish connections between objects and phenomena, the children carry out certain work. In the surrounding world there are thousands of problems. They are part of our folk culture and take the form of interesting stories and riddles. Here is one of the first problems that the children solved during their leisure time:

'You have to transport a wolf, a goat and a cabbage from one side of a river to the other. You must not leave together or take at the same time the wolf and the goat, or the goat and the cabbage. You can only take the wolf with the cabbage or each "passenger" by itself. You can make as many trips as you like. How is it possible to take the wolf, the goat and the cabbage across the river, without any mishaps?'

Folk pedagogy knows hundreds of

such riddles. Little children show a lot of interest in these problems. So all the boys and girls started thinking about how to take the 'passengers' across in such a way that the wolf does not eat the goat and the goat does not eat the cabbage. We were sitting on the bank of a pond. The children drew the river in the sand, and found little pebbles. Perhaps not all the children would be able to solve the problem, but the fact that the children were thinking intensely meant they were developing their mental powers.

Solving such riddles is similar to the intellectual effort involved in playing chess. In both activities you have to remember several planned moves. I gave this problem to the children when they were seven years old, soon after they started their first year at school. In ten minutes three of the children had solved it: Shura, Seryozha and Yura. With these children a rapid chain of thoughts, racing ahead, was combined with a keen, retentive memory. After fifteen minutes nearly all the children had solved the riddle, but again Valya, Nina, Petrik and Slava got nowhere. I saw that their train of thought seemed to break midstream. The little ones understood the meaning of the problem and had a clear conception of the objects and phenomena, but as soon as they made their first assumptions the concepts that had been so clear in their minds began to fade; in other words, the children forgot what they had remembered only a moment earlier.

From the rich treasure house of our folk pedagogy I chose more and more problems, mostly in the hope that my slow thinkers would develop interest in the content and storylines of these riddles. A few days later I set the following folk riddle:

'A small detachment of soldiers came to a river that they had to cross. The bridge was broken and the river was deep. What could they do? Suddenly the officer noticed two boys playing in a boat near the river bank. But the boat was so small that it would hold only one soldier or the two boys, and no more. However, all the soldiers crossed in that boat. How?'

Again I observed the children thinking. Again they drew in the sand, trying to hold several 'chess moves' in their memory. Again I noticed that Nina, Slava and Petrik looked despondent. Valya's eyes were shining with joy: she had solved the problem.

I began to work separately with the slow thinkers. I gave them simpler folk riddles aimed at developing understanding of a sequence of natural numbers, and at establishing the interrelationships between numbers. Here are five such riddles:

1. Falcons and Oaks. Some falcons flew down and settled in some oak trees. If one falcon sits in each oak tree, there will be a falcon left over. If two falcons sit in each oak tree, there will be an oak tree left over. How many falcons are there and how many oak trees?

2. In the Pasture. Two boys were grazing some sheep. If the first boy gave the second boy one sheep, they would have the same number. If the second boy gave the first boy one sheep, the first boy would have twice as many sheep as the second boy. How many sheep did each shepherd have?

3. How many Geese? A flock of geese is flying and a lone goose flies to meet them. 'Hello a hundred geese', says the lone goose. 'No, there are not a hundred of us', say the geese. 'If there were as many as there are, and as many again, and half as many again, and a quarter as many again, plus you goose, only then would there be a hundred.' How many geese were flying altogether?

4. Heads and feet: In the yard hens are strutting and rabbits are hopping: ten heads and twenty-four feet altogether. How many rabbits and how many hens?

5. How many balls? In a bag are ten yellow balls, ten red balls, five green balls and five black balls. With your eyes closed, how many balls do you need to take before you can be sure you have seven balls the same colour?

These riddles are an indispensable means for training the mind. To solve each of them you need to remember between two and four previous and subsequent 'chess moves'. Half a year after beginning this work Valya and Slava were able to solve riddles like these. Petrik and Nina still could not. They could not hold in their memories the information they needed to make the next 'chess move'.

How can we explain this phenomenon? It would appear that some children have not yet mastered the ability to switch their thought from one object to another, which is experienced subjectively as the ability to hold in one's memory all the component elements of a problem, to mentally grasp several 'chess moves'. Why this capacity of the cells of the cerebral cortex has not been developed is another question. It is certainly not always the case that this is determined by some inherited characteristics of the grey matter, but we should not ignore this as a possible cause. Observations confirm: if the train of thought is suddenly broken, if a child cannot simultaneously pay attention to things they are picturing now and things pictured several moments ago, they do not have the ability to think and it is difficult for them to establish connections between various objects and phenomena.

I studied children's thought, especially that of the slow thinkers like Valya, Petrik and Nina, not for theoretical purposes, but in order to lighten their intellectual load and teach them how to study. My observations confirmed that first of all we need to teach children to picture a series of objects, phenomena or events and work out the connections between them. A child must gradually progress from a deepened awareness of the essence and internal properties of a single object to an awareness of a series of objects, as if seeing them from a distance. Studying the thought processes of the slow thinkers, I became more and more convinced that the inability to comprehend a problem, for example, is the result of an inability to think abstractly, to abstract oneself from the concrete. We have to teach children to think using abstract concepts. It would be better if Valya was not constructing a concrete image of the wolf in her imagination, if her thought was not distracted by the image of the goat reaching for the cabbage. For her these images should be abstract concepts. But the way to the abstract is through a deep understanding of the concrete. We have to imagine what is going on in children's heads when they are thinking. We have to educate the ability to think; otherwise children will strain their memories and cram, which will blunt their thinking even more.

Stories for Children

The Singing Feather

There is a wonderful bird called the Little Bustard. It sings… But do you know how it sings, children? It sings with its wing. It has a special singing feather on its wing. During flight, when the Little Bustard wants to sing, it arranges its wings in such a way that the singing feather catches the wind and makes a singing sound. It gives out a unique, subtle, high pitched whistle. It is a little like the sound given out by the thinnest string on the violin, when a bow is drawn across it, or like the song of the wind in the reeds.

But one day a misfortune befell the bird. It lost its singing feather. It came out and fell to the ground… The bird wanted to sing, but it had no singing feather.

A little boy name Seryozha found the bird's singing feather. He picked it up and ran, and the feather started singing. The bird heard its feather singing, and flew to the boy and asked, 'Please, boy, give me back my singing feather. I cannot live without its song.'

The boy was amazed, and gave the bird back its singing feather.

Serezha grew into a man who lived for many years. Many times, remembering that bird, he thought, 'Every person has their own singing feather. I feel sorry for anyone who does not.'

The Woodpecker and the Little Girl

A woodpecker built a nest in an old maple tree. Next to its tree was a large apple orchard. In it were many young apple trees. The woodpecker noticed that a little girl often came to one of the little trees to water it.

One day the little girl came to the tree and burst into tears. The woodpecker was surprised.

'Why are you crying, little girl?' it asked.

'Of course I'm crying… The apple tree has dried out and died…

'But there are so many apple trees!' exclaimed the woodpecker, even more surprised. 'One dried out and died. It's no big deal.'

'But it was my apple tree,' said the little girl. 'I planted it and watered it.'

'What do you mean, it's yours?' asked the puzzled woodpecker. 'I don't understand.'

'You never will understand it. Nothing on earth belongs to you. You only have your baby chicks. They are the only thing you invest your heart and soul in. But people invest themselves in everything: in an apple tree, in a rose bush, in a bird-house, even in a sweet watermelon.'

'Could a person even invest themselves in me?'

'Yes, even in you.'

'How could they invest themselves in me?'

'By loving you. By making friends with you. By telling stories about you.'

The Swift's Song

A swift is a little grey bird. It lives deep in the forest. One late autumn day I was walking in the forest and saw a large bird of prey chasing a swift. The little swift crashed into a tree and could not fly.

I picked up the little bird. The swift lived with me all winter. It gradually got better and started to fly. It would take off and fly a little, and then settle on my shoulder.

In spring I took it out and set it free. It perched on a tree and sang me a song. Nobody else could have guessed what is was singing about, but I understood. It was saying to me, 'You are a good friend. I am very sad to have to say good-bye to you, but I love my freedom even more than I love you.'

The Fox and the Hedgehog

A fox caught a hedgehog and was taking it to its den. It was going to be a lot of bother getting the tasty meat from under its prickles.

The fox was trotting along, when suddenly it saw a dead mouse lying in its path. The fox wanted to pick up the mouse as well, but it already had the hedgehog in its mouth. The fox said, 'Hedgehog, you pick up the mouse with your teeth. When we get home, I will give you its tail.'

The hedgehog knew the fox was planning to eat both it and the mouse, and decided to trick the fox.

'My teeth are hurting, fox,' said the hedgehog. 'You take the mouse in your teeth, and I will hold on to your tail.'

Although the fox was cunning, it did not realise the hedgehog wanted to trick it, and the poor thing really wanted to eat that tasty mouse. It let go of the hedgehog, and picked up the mouse. The hedgehog, meanwhile, walked up to the foxes tail and gripped hold of its thinnest hair. When the fox started running, the hair was pulled out. The hedgehog ran into the bushes and escaped.