

Sukhomlinsky News

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From moral understanding to moral conviction

In this issue we have translated another extract on moral education from the fourth chapter of *Pavlysh Secondary School*.

The acquisition of knowledge about nature and society, learning to make sense of the phenomena and the laws governing the surrounding world, these are only the beginning of education. Beyond that is the long, complex process of forming personal moral convictions. Personal moral convictions are the ultimate result of moral education, the main indicator characterising the spiritual makeup of a person, the unity of thought and action in their behaviour, of words and deeds.

We may speak of moral conviction when knowledge of a truth or concept is interpreted at a deep level in a person's spiritual world, and becomes their personal view, awakening deep feelings, merging with their will and manifesting in their actions, in their conduct, in their relationships with others and with themselves. A moral conviction is an active force of the personality, an ardent aspiration to defend the correctness, to prove the truth of one's point of view, a preparedness to accept any privations to do so. Convictions are not only what a person knows, but more importantly how that knowledge is transformed into action.

We seek to ensure that from a child's first day at school they form personal views, and that these views become sacred to them, as dear as their own honour. We strive to ensure that the whole life of our school community, the many-faceted relationships and interests of our students, should all have a philosophical and civic meaning, should awaken a deeply personal attitude to what each person sees, learns and does. Any event, though at first it may appear to have little direct relationship to them personally, is experienced by a student as a deeply personal matter: the violation of a moral principle causes personal concern

[Continued on the following page]

Moral habit and moral consciousness

This month I am again translating an extract from the fourth chapter of Pavlysh secondary school, which is about moral education.

In this month's extract Sukhomlinsky writes about the importance of inculcating moral habits in early childhood, and of associating these habits with 'moral consciousness', by which he means the positive thoughts and emotions associated with moral habit.

Sukhomlinsky suggests that we should not wait until adolescence to give young people responsibility for caring for their environment and for the people around them, but should commence at an early age.

Taking care of physical things like trees and flowers, tools and books, means showing respect for the labour that has gone into creating those things, and this in turn means showing respect for the people who performed that labour. It also means appreciating beauty and protecting it.

According to Sukhomlinsky, 'the attainment of more complex objectives of moral education in late adolescence and early adulthood ... is only possible because in childhood and early adolescence more elementary habits of moral culture were acquired.'

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Moral convictions (continued)

A moral conviction is an ideal, a high point in one's moral development, and the path that leads to it is through a combination of moral habit and moral consciousness. Practical experience has convinced us that a firm foundation for moral conviction is laid in childhood and early adolescence, when good and evil, honour and dishonour, justice and injustice, are only accessible to a child's understanding if the moral significance of what they see and do is visible and obvious. We try to ensure that goodness, honour and justice bring children personal joy, and that evil, dishonour and injustice bring disappointment, concern and even personal grief.

Feelings are the flesh and blood, the heart of moral conviction, principled behaviour and strength of spirit. Without feeling, morality becomes just dry, colourless words, capable of educating hypocrites. That is why, figuratively speaking, the path from moral understanding to moral conviction begins with actions, with habits, that are accompanied by deep feelings, by a personal attitude to what the child does and what they see around them. If an evil deed that someone does brings no harm to me personally, it will only prompt a personal reaction from me if I have often experienced the joy of doing good to someone else, with no expectation of reward, but feeling satisfaction purely from the knowledge that I have done good. This is the principle that governs our practical educational work, as we seek to bring behaviour in line with awareness.

The life of our students (this is especially important for small children) is conducted in an atmosphere generated by moral conduct that becomes habitual. We teach little children to perform actions whose moral essence leads them to have a personal attitude towards civic duty: an aspiration to

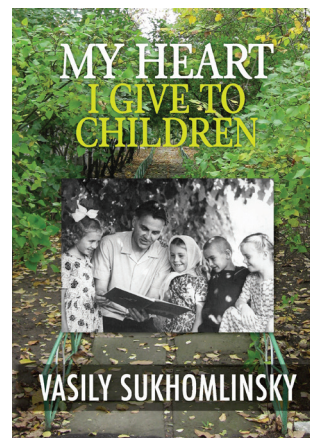
act in the interests of society, and to oppose evil.

In our school grounds are hundreds of fruit trees. From their first days at school we teach the children: if you see that the branch of a fruit tree is broken, carefully tie it up and put some dressing on the wound; if it is done skilfully and in time, the branch will mend and the tree will heal itself. We teach them how to do this, but that is only one part of the lesson. The main thing is that the child's heart should feel pain when he sees an injured tree. We achieve this by educating in the children a burning desire to affirm beauty in life, and to fight against destruction and against living a vegetative existence. And if we then observe that children, when they notice a broken branch, run to the classroom or to their home to get some string, or, if they are not confident to do it themselves, run with concern to tell an adult or older friend that the wind has broken a branch on a tree, we consider our goal has been achieved. For the children the tree is viewed as a living creature that needs to be cared for.

Gradually these actions become habitual. The adolescent, young man or woman, no longer thinks about whether it is necessary to bind a broken branch, to cover the exposed roots of a tree with soil after heavy rain, to help an old woman carrying a heavy suitcase; they simply cannot remain unconcerned and walk past without paying attention. They cannot help making an effort when it concerns another human being or society at large. The repeated experience of joy accompanying good deeds in childhood is transformed over time into that voice of conscience which bears witness to a high level of moral consciousness. They cannot help doing good, not because they want to hear praise (giving encouragement in moral educa-

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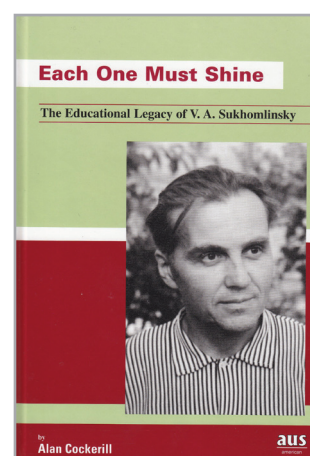
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tion is a very subtle thing and not without some danger), but because if they walked past and ignored the situation it would make them feel ill at heart.

The first actions that we teach to provide a foundation for the formation of moral habits frequently relate to material objects, but human labour is personified in these objects. They are incarnations of skill, hard work, and consequently of human virtue. An emotional attitude towards the work inherent in material objects, and to people and society via that work, these are exceptionally important pre-conditions for the formation of moral habit. From their first days at school we teach children how to behave in the following situations:

If you see dry, cracked soil around a rose bush or peach tree, around a recently planted apple tree or grape vine, rake the soil and in the evening water the bush or tree.

Pick up off the road any bit of metal that has been thrown away or accidentally dropped, bring it to the school grounds, and put it in the special place reserved for that. Every bit of metal is a small part of a machine.

If you see some paper dropped outside, in the corridor or the classroom, pick it up and put it in the rubbish bin.

When you are returning a tool in the workshop (a cutting tool, a chisel, a knife, a plane) have a look and see if it needs sharpening. If it does, sharpen it. Remember that any tool you return (or equipment like a spade, rake or watering can) should be returned in a better condition than it was when you received it.

A book that you return to the library should be in better condition than when you borrowed it. Remember that it takes the work of many people to make a book.

If you notice that any machine that has been entrusted to you, or that you are working on, is not working properly, immediately

seek help from someone older and ask them to fix it. If you can, fix it yourself.

The moral significance of these actions is that they express a respect for work, and in turn for the creative people who carried out that work. These are not simply routine expectations, but lessons in life, giving rise to the conviction that it is immoral to expect others to carry out your work and take on your responsibilities. This thought is acknowledged by the child every time they act in line with societal expectations. But it is not the frequent repetition of such actions that leads from knowledge to moral conviction. Human consciousness is not the same as the memory of an electronic machine. Knowledge only becomes conviction when such actions are accompanied by a feeling that one is doing the right thing, when they excite children, when in their souls they feel joy, energy and spiritual upliftment.

The process of forming convictions presupposes a child's conscious attitude towards their desires and the management of those desires. It is no coincidence that we have many flowering rose bushes in our school grounds. Children sometimes want to pick a flower, but they are restrained by the thought that in doing so they will harm others. Gradually they forget this thought, but they retain the aversion to evil. The children no longer wonder whether or not they should pick a flower. The thought does not enter their head. This is the essence of moral habit, that a person's conduct is governed by the voice of conscience, and the main note in that voice belongs to feeling. Some words I read written by the Frenchman Édouard Herriot are engraved forever in my memory: 'That which remains after all else is forgotten is culture.' Indeed, moral culture is not an accumulation of knowledge to be preserved in one's memory, but that which

is distilled in the human soul from knowledge that has been deeply processed and experienced.

Many years of educational work have convinced us that by the time young people reach late adolescence and young adulthood it is already late to teach them (and very hard to re-educate them) to look after trees and flowers and that this brings joy to people; to teach them to rake the soil under rose bushes without anyone telling them to; to repair the cover of a book before returning it to the library. They will understand the social requirement for these and other analogous actions, but they will not act in this way if they have not formed deep moral habits in childhood and early adolescence, if the thought, prompting them to act morally, has not been deeply experienced, and has not left a trace in their soul. The moral habits, reflecting the attitudes of our adolescents and young men and women towards objects, and through the objects, towards people, only strengthen in late adolescence and early adulthood. This is a very important prerequisite for successful moral education. The attainment of more complex objectives of moral education in late adolescence and early adulthood (the formation of convictions about an ideal in life, understanding significant elements of a scientific world view etc.) is only possible because in childhood and early adolescence more elementary habits of moral culture were acquired.





Stories

A smile

It was a quiet, sunny morning. In the green meadow that stretched from the edge of the village yellow dandelions were flowering, bees and bumblebees were buzzing, and a lark was sporting in the blue sky.

On this beautiful morning a little three-year-old girl came out of her house. She had light blue eyes and fair hair the colour of ripening wheat. Her name was Marinka. She set off through the green meadow. She smiled when she saw a many-coloured butterfly. At that minute she wanted the whole world to share her smile.

Still smiling, Marinka followed the butterfly. The butterfly flew slowly, as if it understood the little girl wanted to have a good look at it.

Suddenly Marinka saw an old man walking towards her. His gaze was stormy, his eyebrows frowning and his eyes full of malice. Marinka brought her smile with her as she walked towards the old man. She was hoping that the old man would smile back: how could anyone be gloomy and unfriendly on such a joyful day?

Already in the depth of the girl's soul a little wave of fear stirred, but she kept smiling, bringing her smile with her as she met the old man and appealing to him: you smile too, grandpa.

But the old man did not smile. His gaze remained dark, his eyebrows lowered and his eyes malevolent.

Marinka's heart was gripped by fear. The smile faded from her eyes. At that moment it seemed to her that the whole world had become dark and gloomy.

The green meadow turned grey, the dandelions turned from yellow suns into purple spots, the blue sky turned pale, and the silver song of the lark began to waver, like a stream that is running dry.

Marinka burst into tears. A minute later the old man was already far away. Now she could only see his back, but even his back seemed evil and unwelcoming.

The little girl kept walking through the meadow. Her heart beat faster when she saw that

someone else was walking towards her. It was an old lady with a staff.

Marinka warily and questioningly looked into the old lady's eyes. The old lady smiled. And it was such a kind and sincere smile, that the whole world came to life again around the little girl, playing, singing, overflowing with dozens of different colours and shades. The dandelions blazed like little suns, the sound of the bees and bumblebees resounded, the lark played melodies on its silver strings...

Marinka smiled, and again the many coloured wings of the butterfly fluttered before her. The old lady stopped on the path, looked back at the little girl and smiled again...

The same words

In summer grade five student Andrei went to work on the animal breeding farm. He was assigned to grandma Marina, the cook. Andrei helped grandma Marina, carting water, peeling potatoes, chopping wood, slicing bread.

It is a free and easy, fun life working in the steppe in summer. The sun warms you, the wind blows, the birds sing, and you can swim in the pond if grandma Marina lets you.

In the morning grandma Marina says to Andrei, 'Go and bring some water.'

An grandma Marina has such a quiet, kind, tender voice, that Andrei quickly takes the bucket and runs to the well. The well is some distance away, on the edge of the forest. Andrei draws a bucket of water and returns ten minutes later.

But then they sent another worker to the farm, grandpa Karp. He began to work there as the watchman.

No-one liked grandpa Karp, not grandma Marina and not Andrei. He was silent and frowned all the time. One day Andrei asked him, 'Grandpa, can you tell me a story?'

'You've got nothing to do, so you want a story... Go and bring some water.'

The words were so cold and heartless that Andrei was very reluctant to get the water. He drew a full bucket and then sat by the well for a long time. He did not want to go back to grandpa Karp.

Andrei returned with the water and immediately ran to grandma Marina.

In the morning the boy was up before the sun. He peeled some potatoes and waited impatiently for Grandma Marina to send him for water. At last he heard the quiet, tender words:

'Go and bring some water.'

Andrei ran to the well, quickly drew the water and brought it to the kitchen.