

# Sukhomlinsky News

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## Empathy

Dear readers,

*I hope 2020 has started well for you. If you are an educator, I hope this will be a good year for you and your students.*

*This month's newsletter continues to look at moral education. For Sukhomlinsky the foundation of moral development is the education of empathy and kindly feelings. He believed that the early childhood years are the ideal time to begin this work, as little children are already sensitive to the feelings of those around them, and, with explanation and encouragement, can be taught to respond to those in need with sincere words and actions.*

*In this month's extract from Pavlysh Secondary School Sukhomlinsky describes his students' interactions with a sick child, and with two grief stricken old men, and of the mutual benefits that flowed from these interactions.*

*The two stories I have translated from Sukhomlinsky's Ethics Anthology follow on from last months' stories, and are related to the themes of greed and miserliness.*

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

## Educating empathy

In this issue we continue our translation of the fourth chapter of *Pavlysh Secondary School*, on moral education, as Sukhomlinsky provides examples how he encouraged children to develop empathy for others and to care for those in need.

In moral education an important role is played by the formation of subtle moral feelings: a sense of duty, sensitivity, empathy. To put into practice the principal 'each human being is a friend, comrade and brother or sister'<sup>1</sup> requires that each child from an early age is sensitive and attentive to the spiritual world of each person they meet, and that the source of each child's personal happiness is found in the moral purity, beauty and nobility of deeply personal, intimate relationships.

The ABC of educating humaneness is that a child, in giving the warmth of their soul to others, finds personal joy. The most important thing in this subtle area of educational work, in our experience, is that the child should feel the sorrows, cares and suffering of another human being, and personally respond to the one who needs help or sympathy.

The early childhood years are especially favourable for this sort of educational work, as little children react particularly sensitively to the suffering of others. Since grief, worries and suffering are always present in our social environment, a thoughtful and sensitive teacher, who is able to talk about such things expressively, will always be able to conjure up vivid images in a child's imagination, and influence the feelings of the little ones listening to them.

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1 Translator's note: Writing during the 1960s, Sukhomlinsky is quoting a Soviet slogan here. I have added the words 'or sister' in conformity with current gender-neutral language expectations.



## Educating empathy (continued)

We tell children about people who are in need of help, sympathy and heartfelt consideration. Once I told our little grade one students about a seven-year-old boy named Misha, who for two years had been bed-ridden due to illness and could not come to school. Straight away the children wanted to visit the boy. The first visit to the sick child left a deep impression on the children's souls. They told him about school and brought him toys and drawings, and the next day they brought him a box of alphabet blocks. After that, visiting the sick boy was not something they had to do, but something they deeply wanted to do, an inner imperative. Each one visited Misha when they wanted to. Misha memorised the alphabet and learnt to read. In the school workshop some of the students made a little table on which he could write. All the students, in the older classes as well as in grade one, wanted to be part of Misha's success. For his part, the boy wanted to do something to express his thanks to his friends. It turned out he had an exceptional gift for drawing, and he drew pictures and gave them to his friends.

Summer came, and Misha spent whole days in the open air. His bed was put in the shade of some trees. The children helped him to undergo a course of sunbaking. On the grass near his bed they played, told him stories, and acted out dramatised versions of folk tales. Misha turned out to be a good reciter and read his friends poetry and stories.

Another year passed, and again the children spent the summer with Misha. He kept up with them in his studies and graduated to grade three. The boy grew stronger. In the words of the children, his sick legs 'woke up'. When Misha stood on his own two legs and

walked several steps, each of his friends experienced this as their own personal happiness. For several months the children brought Misha to school in a little wheelchair. In the spring, Misha's walking improved significantly, and when lessons started, he walked to school himself. Each year his health improved. He graduated from secondary school and works as a metal worker at a car factory. He has become a sportsman.

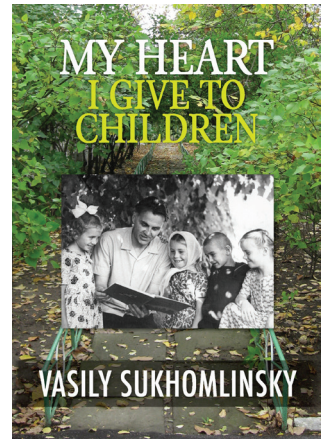
Caring for their friend played a major role in the spiritual life of the children. Each one felt that they had invested their strength and energy in a person who had been brought back to life. Each one who had befriended Misha and helped him, developed a trait that could be called gentleness or tenderness.

Human grief has many faces and is unique in each case. The important thing is that children are able to bring joy to others. Then they will feel others' grief naturally, and will themselves find a way to that most joyful creative labour that is humaneness.

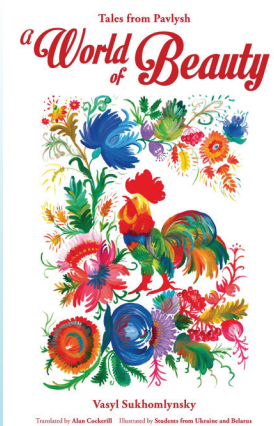
I told those same grade one students about the life of former partisan Andrei Stepanovich N. During the Second World War fascists killed his wife, and took his two little sons, aged two and four, to Germany, publishing a note in the local newspaper to say that the partisan's sons would be educated in the Aryan spirit, and would become enemies of communism. When the war ended, Andrei Stepanovich went to search for his son, but his efforts were fruitless. He could not forget his terrible grief. He worked as an electrician on the state farm, but kept to himself and avoided contact with people. In such cases a special kind of help is needed: a sensitive, tactful awareness of the feelings of the grief-stricken person. The person who is in need

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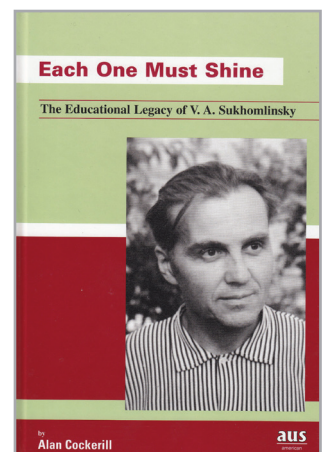
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of such help is sensitive to the slightest insincerity, the slightest artificiality. In the hearts of the little children I tried to awaken feelings that would allow them to offer help and sympathy in such a way that they did not rub salt into painful wounds, but gave warmth through their kindness. They simply needed to bring joy to the man. In the remote lane where Andrei Stepanovich lived, we pulled out the weeds and planted apple trees. For a long time Andrei Stepanovich did not pay any attention to us, and we were disappointed. But then he began to come out of his house to see us. We saw how he was drawn to the sound of the children's voices. Then he asked us to bring him some grape vines. This request brought us great joy.

Andrei Stepanovich planted the grape vines, invited us into his house, and gave us apples to eat.

A lively conversation followed. Andrei Stepanovich asked the children about school. The children told him about their games, about their walks in the forest, and shared their secrets. They had a little cave in the forest in which they hid their toy weapons. They knew of a secret place on the bank of the lake where pike swam.

The following Sunday Andrei Stepanovich went with the children to the forest. It was an unforgettable day. Andrei Stepanovich could talk very engagingly about nature. He showed the children a hare's burrow and a fox's den, a squirrel, and, by the dam wall, a muskrat.

It was as if the man had been waiting years to meet people who really felt his grief but would never mention it. Andrei Stepanovich stopped being a loner. The need for human company, which had been extinguished, awoke in him again. Each Sunday the children went with him to the forest, to riverbanks and lakes, into the steppe, and everywhere they

discovered something new and previously unknown. During the spring and summer holidays they rowed to an island, chose a remote spot, cooked dinner and collected natural specimens and herbariums. During ten years of friendship no-one broke the promise they had given. Not a single word was spoken about Andrei Stepanovich's past as a partisan. No-one asked him to tell them anything about the cruel years of the war. The students became adults, and their friendship with him became even stronger.

The years of friendship, filled with the mutual creation of joy for each other, educated in the children a sensitivity to a person's inner world, an urge for human fellowship. One who has this urge is led by some sixth sense to people in need of kindness. My pupils found such people again when they were studying in grade four. Returning home from the forest one day, they saw an old man. It was a hot day, and the old man was also making his way home. The children helped him to carry some clothes. The children's heartfelt sensitivity helped them to see that the old man was sad about something. 'He is grieving about something big,' said the girls. From their parents they learnt that their new friend was 70 years old, a retired doctor who had recently moved from a neighbouring village. Several months ago he had buried his wife, who he had lived with for nearly 50 years, and had moved away from there so that nothing would remind him of the loss of such a dear person. Now he went every Sunday to his wife's grave with flowers that he grew in a little greenhouse.

The children sensed that the old man was in need of sympathy and friendship. On the eve of the following Sunday they took the doctor a bunch of roses. The old man was moved. They asked his

permission to accompany him to the neighbouring village, but he declined. They accompanied him only as far as the forest and waited for his return. From then on they did that every Sunday. The children were not deterred by rain or cold.

The children began to help their new friend look after his flowers, and he taught them the secrets of floriculture. He was delighted that the children were so interested in flowers. He passed on to the children his love of beauty, teaching them to appreciate its subtlest shades.

The children wanted to bring Petr Afanasievich (that was the old doctor's name) some joy. They found out when his former wife's birthday was celebrated and the day before they placed a bouquet of flowers on her grave. Petr Afanasievich was deeply moved, and from that time he did everything in his power to show his appreciation. In spring he helped the children to establish a nursery of gladioli and a new grove of lilac bushes. Looking after the flowers brought the children new joys. Each of them created a flower bed at home, and some created greenhouses. Flowers became part of the spiritual life of their families. Vera T's parents had been quarrelling a lot. Vera planted some ornamental flowers in the shape of their initials in front of their window. This had an amazing effect on her parents. The arguments stopped and peace reigned.

... Two years later the old doctor died. His death was a great loss for us. He was buried next to his wife. From time to time bouquets of flowers appear on their graves. The young people do not forget the one who showed them another facet of human beauty and kindness.

We consider such lessons in humanity to be an important component of moral education.



## Stories

### The most miserly old man in the world

On the edge of the village lived a miserly old man. He planted grapevines in his garden. Not many people grew grapes in that area, and they were regarded as a marvel. After two years the first bunches of grapes appeared. They filled with sweet juice and became big and transparent.

One day a mother and her three-year-old son were walking past the grapevines. The boy saw the bunches of grapes and asked, 'Mum, what is that?'

'Grapes.'

'What are grapes? What are they for? What are they like?'

'They are sweet. There is no berry as sweet as a grape.'

The boy wanted to try the grapes, so his mother asked the old man, 'Please give my boy a bunch of grapes, so he can try them.'

The miserly old man would not give the boy a bunch of grapes. He gave him just a single grape, and even then his eyes went dark. He was sorry to lose that single grape...

The mother and her boy left. After that the miserly old man built a tall fence around his grapevines. He hid not only his grapevines, but his house as well. The miserly old man felt happy and at peace. Nobody could see his grapes now, and nobody would ask for them. But he did not notice that one grapevine climbed up the fence, reached the top, and flowered there. A bunch of grapes hung over the fence and ripened, swelling with sweet juice.

The same mother and her son came walking along that path. The boy saw the bunch of grapes

hanging over the fence and was overjoyed.

'Look, mum, a bunch of grapes. Why did it grow so high?'

'It doesn't want to be hidden from people by a fence.'

'What beautiful grapes!' said the boy.

The miserly old man was standing on the other side of the fence and he heard the boy's words. He became terribly angry that the boy had seen the grapes. He was so mean and angry that his heart burst. The old man died, but nobody in the whole world knew of his death, because it was hidden from people by the high fence.

A year passed. The spring sun woke the earth and the grapevines turned green again. Their living vines wanted to see the sun so much, and hated the fence so much, that they pushed it over. It fell to the ground, and people discovered the amazing beauty that had been hidden from them. The grapes sparkled in the bright sunlight, and in each grape was reflected the sky, the sun and the beautiful earth. People came to the vineyard and looked after it, but they forgot all about the miserly old man.

### How Mitya had lunch

On Sunday all the grade five students went into the forest. They went for a whole day, so they could collect plant specimens, draw autumn landscapes and rest. Each one took their own food and water.

Mitya's mother packed his bag with salami, boiled eggs, bread and butter, and a little jar of honey. As she said good-bye to her son she said, 'Make sure you eat well, so you don't get hungry. You don't need to share with anyone else. Each of them can eat their own food.'

Mitya's bag was so heavy he could hardly carry it to the forest.

At lunchtime the whole class sat on the grass to have lunch. They spread out a tablecloth, and everyone put out their supplies: bread, lard, potatoes, butter, meat... But Mitya remembered his mother's instructions and took his bag behind a bush. He quickly opened his bag and ate his bread, butter and salami. There was lots of food left over, but he did not feel hungry anymore. Mitya's friends came to him and asked, 'Why don't you come and have something to eat with us?'

Mitya did not reply. He was too ashamed to admit that he had already eaten his fill.

All the children returned home with bags full of plant specimens, but all Mitya had in his bag was food.

On the way home Mitya thought, 'I'll never behave like that again.'