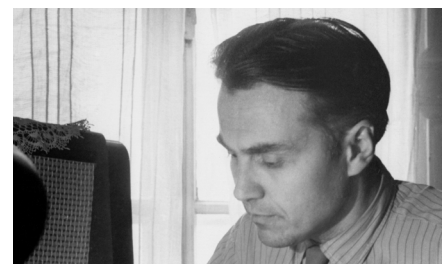


# Sukhomlinsky News



## Forthcoming events

*Dear readers,*

*I hope you are keeping well.*

*I would like to inform you of two events taking place later this year.*

*The first is an online seminar I will be conducting as a guest of Sightlines-Initiative, a UK based organisation that is the UK reference organisation for Reggio Emilia's preschools. This will be a paid event, conducted via Zoom on 2 October at 9.30 am (UK time). If you are interested in attending via Zoom, further information is available at: <https://www.sightlines-initiative.com/educators/forthcomingevents/seminars/online/empathy-curiosity-and-creativity-an-introduction-to-the-work-of-vasily-sukhomlinsky>.*

*The second event will be the book launch of my translation of Sukhomlinsky's Pavlysh Secondary School, which I am publishing under the title **Holistic education in a Ukrainian village**. The book launch will be held at the Avid Reader bookshop in Brisbane, Australia, on 20 December at 6.30 pm (Brisbane time). It will be possible to attend via Zoom, as well as at the bookshop itself. I will provide more information in forthcoming newsletters.*

*This month's newsletter features an important article on 'Schooling and Nature', and more stories translated by Nataliya Bezslova.*

*Best wishes,*

*Alan Cockerill*

## Schooling and Nature

*One of the most prominent features of Sukhomlinsky's approach to education was the way it was embedded in the natural environment. Sukhomlinsky wrote an article on the role of nature in education, published in the journal **Sovetskaya pedagogika** [Soviet pedagogy] in 1970. We are publishing the first instalment of our translation of this article in this month's newsletter.*

Many years of experience in educational work has convinced me that nature is not only an object of knowledge, not only an arena of activity for our students, but a part of their being, their relationships, their whole way of life. Nature is an educational factor of enormous importance, leaving its mark on the whole education process. Nature, as the world into which children are born, and in which they come to know their surrounding reality and themselves, both lightens educational work and makes it more complicated, because it makes it richer and more multifaceted. Constant communion with nature and interaction with it becomes an essential part of the education process.

The integration of intellectual education on the one hand, and physical, vocational, moral, aesthetic and emotional education on the other, that is facilitated by constant and ever-expanding communion with nature as a child grows up, opens up particularly beneficial opportunities for the influence of character education on studies, on the acquisition of knowledge.

Entering a child's life with their first sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and concepts, nature becomes an ever-present yardstick for values, a source of enrichment. In this fact lies enormous potential for the harmonious all-round development of a human being.

[Continued on the following page]

## Schooling and Nature (continued)

Young people's 'educability' (their openness to the influence of elders) is only possible when from the first steps of their conscious civic lives (and a person's civic life, in my opinion, should begin from the time a child sits at a school desk) they are in direct contact with things of material and spiritual value that play a significant role in the life of society. They should come in contact with these things not as passive consumers, but as creators who feel and understand their responsibilities, their duty.

In any corner of our homeland, whether it be on the busiest street of the capital, amidst the fertile fields and vineyards of the south, or in the distant tundra, everywhere you can discover the wonders of nature. But to discover them you need to think, think and think again. Nowadays the decisive role in educational creativity is played by thought, wisdom, by a teacher's scientific approach to their work. What a scholarly teacher needs more than anything today, is to shine the light of our deepest scientific knowledge on what appear to be the simplest and most ordinary facts and phenomena of school life.

### Nature as a source of knowledge

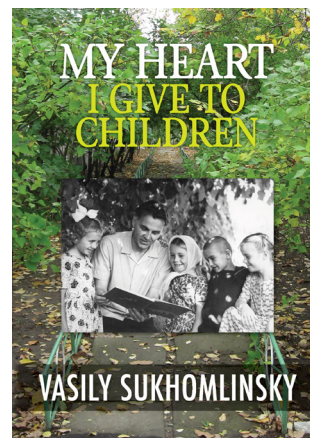
The role of nature in studies is determined first and foremost by children's activity, by the involvement of their physical and spiritual energies in the acquisition of knowledge. The natural world becomes an inexhaustible source of knowledge, because knowledge enters a child's head through a complex route: through their hands, through work, through interactions with other people, through the feelings and emotions that colour their activities.

We consider direct communion with nature to be enormously significant in the development of intellectual ability, of inquisitiveness and curiosity. We strive as much as possible to lead children into a world of work in the midst of nature, to those places where the phenomena of nature and of human work give rise to many problems, questions and mysteries, that may have already been discovered by other people, but that are constantly discovered anew by children in the process of study. The so-called problem-solving approach to teaching and learning begins with dynamic interaction with nature. If I want children's thinking to be particularly intense, so that they have many questions (and the more incomprehensible things a person discovers as their understanding expands, the more inquisitive and curious they become), I take the children to our experimental plot, to our orchard or our greenhouse, and we roll up our sleeves...

You often hear people affirm that children today have access to far more information than they would have had, say, thirty years ago, and that is it this circumstance, rather than any other, that permits us to place them in a different learning environment as they acquire knowledge, and to make new demands of them. This is true only in a limited sense. Children's eyes have always been wide open when looking at the surrounding world. Their minds and feelings have always taken a keen interest in what is going on around them. If today's child is interested, for example, in observing how a helicopter flies and comparing it with an aeroplane, then a child in the 1920s or 1930s would have been no less interested in something else. Today's children can still take in no more of the surrounding world than their cognitive and creative abilities permit. If they are noticing differences in the construction of various machines that surround them, and the variety of television broadcasts, then they do not have the opportunity to observe other things. Changes in the quality of information and continual growth in the flow of information: that is what has entered the world of today's children, and of course it would be foolish not to take this into consideration when defining future directions for the development of education. There have been changes in the way information about the surrounding world is delivered, and this change is ongoing. Now children do not have to go to the

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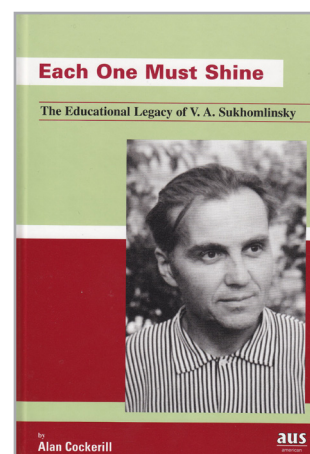
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original source of thought and language. Technology brings the world closer to them. Children do not have to go themselves to see a beehive, they do not need to gaze into that amazing cradle of life. They can see complex phenomena from that world on a screen.... In the passage of five minutes a popular science film can explain and show how a bud turns into a flower, and a flower into a fruit. We do not need to go and observe a living plant for many days. We do not need to wait for a fortunate collocation of circumstances in order to see rare phenomena with our own eyes.

Is this good or bad? It is both good and bad. Technology creates wonderful opportunities for the rapid acquisition of knowledge about objects and phenomena and appears to bring the world closer to children. However, at the same time it distances the world of nature from children, if direct communion with nature is replaced by 'abbreviated', 'mediated' viewing of depictions of certain phenomena. Nature is immeasurably richer and more interesting than any 'abbreviated' information about it. Living phenomena, living contemplation, active communion with nature should not be replaced by any amount of information conveyed via technology.

In nature is enshrined, in a form accessible to children, simple and at the same time most complex things, objects, facts, phenomena, interdependencies, laws of nature, information that cannot be replaced by anything else, because it is perfectly suited to a child's nature, because information about these things makes up the world into which children enter. In this world is the source of all their impressions, understanding, thoughts, generalisations and judgements.

In other words, nature is the source and at the same time the world of the 'childhood of thought'. A child will always be a child, and childhood will always be childhood. The 'childhood' of thought is just as essential, inevitable and natural for a person's normal intellectual development as the embryo's time in the womb or playing with toys. We must not forget this at the present time, when so much that is new and necessary is coming into our schools, but when some people are rushing to abandon things that should remain constants in our lives, just like the air, the sky and the sun. Nature is the cradle of children's thought, and we should ensure that every child passes through a school of children's thought. We will pay very dearly if we forget this truth. Inattention, an inability to concentrate, an inability to work independently, helplessness when trying to solve intellectual problems: these serious defects in students' intellectual work will be the result if the cradle of thought is not experienced in childhood.

Every one of our primary school teachers has developed a well-defined system of excursions to the source of thought and language. We find it convenient to call these unique activities amid nature 'lessons in thought'. Each activity has its own theme and is allocated particular objects and phenomena for observation. It is very important here not to overwhelm children with

an avalanche of impressions. The cradle of children's thought is characterised by the fact that children immerse themselves mentally in some apparently insignificant detail, concentrating all their attention on it, forgetting everything else, and narrowing their field of observation, of course for a relatively short time.

Here are some of the themes of such activities: 'Nature's awakening from nocturnal sleep', 'How flowers meet the rising of the sun', 'How butterflies hide from bad weather', 'The journey of an ant from the ant nest to a breadcrumb', 'The sun's rays play on dew drops', 'What are the first birds to greet the sun in the village and in the steppe?', 'Where do bees fly early in the morning when they leave their hive?', 'Why could the bumblebee not hold on to a buckwheat stem', 'Twenty shades of autumn colours in the forest: how shall we name them?', 'How the lark sings', 'What can you hear in a flowering garden?', 'Living and non-living in nature', 'How life awakens in the forest in spring', 'How the forest prepares for its winter sleep', 'The sun and the green field', 'How a beautiful flower grows from a tiny poppy seed', 'How snowdrops force their way through last year's fallen leaves', 'Winter life under the snow', 'Oh! How difficult it is in winter for the tits', 'The journey of a drop of water', 'Plants and animals', 'Life in water and on land', 'A grain of wheat and an ear of wheat', 'The flowers and fruits of apple trees, pumpkins and roses', 'How swallows build their nests', 'There is no life without water', 'Spring, summer and autumn flowers: how they live and die', 'How a storm approaches', 'How wheat, sunflowers and roses wait expectantly for the rain', 'Every phenomenon has its own causes'.

The teachers consider it very important that each of these themes brings children many independent discoveries. Every student comes to know themselves as an active, creative force, and experiences pride in their ability to observe. With eight-year-old children, who have only been at school for a year, we come at dawn on a warm summer morning to observe and reflect on how nature wakes from its night-time sleep. I repeat, children come to reflect: that is the most important thing. The more children realise how pleasurable this work is, to discover and reflect, the more organically their minds merge with their wills. This is so important in schooling: this personal experience facilitates the disciplining of the mind by the will. Children learn from an early age to set themselves intellectual goals and develop the ability to think for themselves. I assure you, in all our educational work, there is nothing more complex and difficult than your students knowing how to think for themselves. This represents the seven seals of many educational mysteries that teachers find so difficult to unravel in practice. If you want your students to learn to think for themselves, give them the pleasure of overcoming challenges, lead them on a path where they will become the proud discoverers of cause-and-effect relationships, of the links between phenomena.

[To be continued next month.]



## Stories

### The girl and the chamomile flower

One bright sunny day, a little girl was playing in a green glade. Suddenly, she heard somebody crying. She listened more attentively and realized that the cry was coming from under a stone at the end of the glade. The stone was not large, but very hard. The girl leaned over the stone and asked, 'Who is that crying under the stone?'

'It is me, a chamomile flower,' replied a soft, weak voice from under the stone. 'Please free me, little girl, I can't breathe under this stone.'

The girl threw the stone aside and saw a tender chamomile flower.

'Thank you, little girl,' said the chamomile, breathing a deep sigh of relief. 'You have freed me from my stone prison.'

'How did you end up under the stone?' asked the girl.

'The stone tricked me,' said the chamomile flower. 'In autumn, when I was just a little seed, I was seeking a warm place to shelter from the winter cold. The stone gave me shelter, promising to protect me from the cold and heat. However, when I told him that I want to see the sun, it nearly crushed me. Little girl, I want to be yours! Let's be friends!'

'Sure, I'll be your friend,' the girl agreed.

The girl and the chamomile flower became friends. Every morning, the girl would come to visit the chamomile flower and they would greet the sun together.

'It is so nice to be yours!' the chamomile liked to say.

'But what if you grew in the forest or by the road? What if you didn't belong to anybody?' asked the girl.

'I would die from grief,' quietly replied the chamomile. 'But I know that there are no flowers that do not belong to anybody. They are always somebody's. Can you see that bell-shaped poppy flower? He is friends with the sun. The tiny blue forget-me-not is a friend of the spring breeze. A flower cannot live if it doesn't belong to anybody.'

### How the shepherd shored his sheep

I asked my grandma why there were so many white clouds in the blue sky, and she told me this story.

Far, far away, beyond blue seas and dark forests, there were some high mountains. Between those mountains there were green valleys. In the one of those valleys a shepherd pastured his sheep. The sheep were as white as snow... One day, the shepherd drove his sheep to a valley high up in the mountains. There he shored them, and made a huge pile of white wool. Suddenly, a swirl of wind snatched up the wool and scattered it across the sky. In the blink of an eye, the wool turned into the white clouds that you can see.

### Grandma's summer\*

In autumn there are warm days when the sun still shines tenderly and silver gossamer threads float in the air. We call these days 'grandma's summer'. An old lady sits on a bench, warming herself in the sun. Her shoulders are covered with a warm shawl. She gazes at the field and her eyes are sad because there is nothing left there. The field is empty and quiet. But then the old grandma smiles: she sees a tiny chamomile flower by the road.

### The sun sets on the frost

It was a frosty January day, but the sun was shining so brightly that the snow started melting under the oak tree. A ladybug crawled from under its bark to warm herself in the sun. The stream sparkled under the apple tree and a sparrow rushed to get a fresh sip of water. He drank and bathed himself, but the water was too cold, so he flew to the nearest branch and warmed himself in the sun. By the time he dried himself, the sun was already setting. It grew huge and red, as if forged by a blacksmith. The sky, too, turned red, as if there was a fire beyond the horizon. Even after the sun set, the fire still burnt, and the snow on the roofs turned red. Anxiously cawing, some crows flew westwards.

There would be a frost tomorrow. The sparrow hid in his warm nest under the roof and dreamt of the warm summer. The ladybug crawled back under the oak tree bark and went to sleep.

\* In Ukraine and Russia, warm weather in autumn is called a 'grandma's summer'. (In England it is called an 'Indian summer'.)

