

# Sukhomlinsky News



## Schooling and Nature (cont.)

*(A continuation from last month of the translation of Sukhomlinsky's article about the role of Nature in education.)*

We are standing between an enormous sea of sunflowers on one side, and a white sea of buckwheat on the other. Apricots are ripening in a plantation that protects the fields from erosion, and we can see beehives, where, in the words of the elderly beekeeper, bees are sleeping. Ripening ears of wheat are bending towards the earth... The dawn sky turns red, and at any moment the fiery disk of the sun will appear over the horizon. The children gaze at this captivating world and notice amazing things. The flowering heads of the sunflowers stir almost imperceptibly (but the children do perceive it, preparing to turn towards the sun, and then, two hours later, it is quite evident that 'the sunflowers are looking for the sun' (in the words of the little children). What is it, in this remarkable plant, that forces it to seek the light? But it is not only the sunflowers that wake up from their night-time sleep to greet the dawn. The children see how an ear of wheat trembles (that is also a word chosen by the children) when a wave of light and warmth sweeps in from the east and floods the steppe, how the tiny buckwheat flowers straighten their petals, preparing to receive the bees and bumblebees, how blades of grass, plentifully covered in night-time dew, take a breath, how all living things drink in the dew. (The dew does not evaporate, as the children had thought earlier, but is soaked up by the soil and the plants). Something is happening with the blades of grass. It is as if they tense some invisible muscles, shaking off the drops of water so that they cannot hold on and become powerless. How is it that they held on, like frozen icicles, till dawn?

And how many discoveries the children make, observing how the stems, leaves and flowers help the insects—all those tiny bugs and flies—to escape from their night-time hideaways! The children observe with amazement: it is as if the plants specially prepare a bed for the insects overnight, and then pack the bed away when the insects leave on their daytime flights. Each insect has a favourite flower, each seeks its nectar. The children notice that plants appear to expect their friends, joyfully offering the sweet food they have prepared overnight. Why is it so? One, two, three, four days in a row the children see the same thing, and they begin to think: probably the flower offering its sweet food is essential for its life; probably the flowers could not live if the insects did not come.

[Continued on the following page]



## Recent and future events

*Dear readers,*

*I hope you are keeping well.*

*On 24 September there was an online conference conducted in Ukraine as part of an annual series entitled 'Sukhomlinsky in dialogue with the present'. This year's theme was 'Reflections on the artistic and emotional world of childhood'. This was the 28th such annual conference conducted in Ukraine, and the 11th involving international participants. The conference was to have involved offline sessions in Uzhhorod, but due to Covid restrictions it was conducted completely online.*

*I will be presenting an online seminar for Sightlines-Initiative in the UK (the UK reference organisation for Reggio Emilia's preschools) on 2 October at 9.30 am UK time (6.30 pm Australian time). This will be a paid event, conducted via Zoom. 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>.*

*This month's newsletter features a continuation of Sukhomlinsky's article on 'Schooling and Nature', and more stories translated by Nataliya Bezsalova.*

*Best wishes,*

*Alan Cockerill*

## Schooling and Nature (continued)

In the evening we observe how all living things in the steppe prepare for sleep and then fall asleep. The children discover dozens of phenomena that convince them that the awakening, wakefulness, tiredness and sleep of all living things—these wonderful states that all plants experience—depend on many factors: on whether the sky is clear or cloudy, and on the warmth and level of moisture in the soil... The children see the anxious, restless sleep, and the equally sorrowful wakefulness, of plants that are exhausted by intense heat. They observe plants luxuriating in warmth and life-giving moisture, or shivering from cold. Yes, an unexpected cooling actually makes plants shrink. They even change the colour of their leaves. (Winter wheat, for example, turns quite a different green under a warm sun, than it does when exposed to penetrating winds. It is as if the plant dons clothing, to help protect it from the cold.)

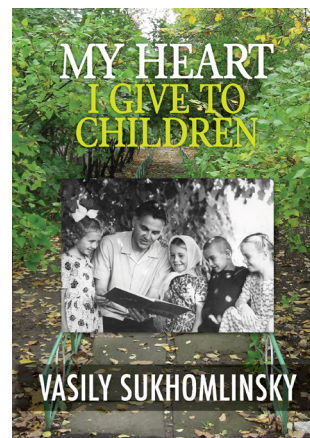
From an early age we teach children to look and listen carefully to what is happening in the soil. The soil, the black earth, is the nation's most valuable natural resource. It is not only the source of life, but a most vibrant living environment. During their primary and middle school years, the children read, figuratively speaking, the great and entertaining book of the life of the soil. Each time their thought comes into contact with nature (yes, it is very important that communion with the surrounding natural environment should involve thought) it brings many discoveries. A grade two student already knows that the soil is alive and breathes, and needs food, water, air and light. The soil has dozens of kind friends living in its clods, but it also has dangerous enemies.

We have very interesting and exciting excursions into the fields on that special spring day when the soil awakes from its winter sleep. There is only one such day each year, and we must not miss it. The whole school is in the field that is located next to our experimental plot. This mysterious, not yet fully explained phenomenon occurs on a warm sunny day. A semi-transparent mist hovers over the awakening soil. On that day everyone in the village utters the same words: 'It has woken up. It is already breathing.' In mysterious cells within the soil something happens that causes all of nature to awaken. The children note that it is always on this day, when the soil awakes, that the lark soars into the blue sky and sings its first springtime song. As long as the earth sleeps, the lark will not soar and sing. Why is it so? This phenomenon attracts the children's minds both because of its poetic nature, and also because of the hidden links that lie waiting to be discovered in this fact. It is on the day when the soil awakes that the children first smell the scent of grass as a living being. The grass begins to breathe. Something wonderful is also happening with the buds on the trees. They begin to exude their unique aroma. The orchard begins to 'smell of life!' (This is also the children's vivid expression.) Having awoken, the soil waits expectantly for rain. We help the children to see and feel this expectation as an interesting phenomenon of nature, upon which many others depend.

This cradle of thought—the book of nature—has a remarkable quality. The more discoveries little people make and the more deeply they experience the joy of being a thinker, the more they become aware of many more incomprehensible things, the more you hear the questions 'why', 'how' and 'what', and the more energetically the children's inner resources are directed to learning, to finding answers. A drop of thought about nature gives rise to a mighty river of thought. An inner drive to think becomes part of a child's being, of their nature. Children no longer believe just because they are told. They want to experiment and test everything in the light of their own experience. In something that at first glance appears obvious they suddenly see something hidden. They have a multitude of questions, and questions are the sparks that ignite the powder of thought. In essence, these sparks give rise to what we teachers strive so hard for: that our pupils should gain

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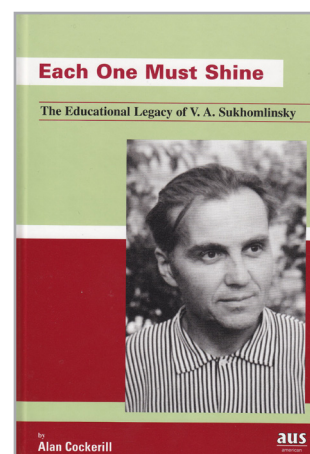
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the ability to think for themselves. Such students have a particularly attentive, sharpened, inquisitive view of the world, and, I would say, an insatiable drive to think, to research and to reflect. They have their own, personal relationship with books. For them books are just as necessary as the living world of nature. In reading they find satisfaction and enjoyment. Children educated amid nature experience a need for reading that challenges their thinking. They are not satisfied with mere textbooks. They read scientific literature from a simple urge to know, to think and reflect.

The cradle of thought—thought in the midst of nature—develops refined intellectual feelings in children. Discoveries in which children are conscious, active participants awaken in them feelings of wonder and amazement. The more unexpected the mystery that is illuminated by the light of thought, and the more subtle the connections that the child becomes aware of, the more joyful is the experience of wonder and amazement. Many years of observation have convinced me that such feelings provide an inexhaustible supply of mental energy, giving rise to the urge to know, which is again what each of us dreams of: the ability to make oneself think.

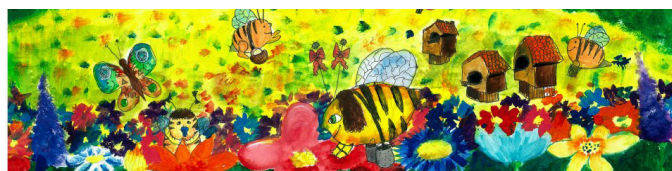
It is appropriate in this connection to remember the words of Albert Einstein: 'The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder, and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead—his eyes are closed.' In this poetic image is the true essence of that which teachers are exposed to every day. In essence the desire to know is a subtle intellectual feeling of wonder at a mystery that is being uncovered. A person's intellectual development depends to a great extent on how subtly this feeling is developed in childhood.

Among the children who join our preschool group and who enrol in grade one, are some whose thought processes are slow and who are of limited ability. You cannot send them to a special school, because they are not intellectually retarded or hopelessly behind in their intellectual development. For many years these children have been the subject of our close attention. The evidence shows that intellectual weakness, inertia, backwardness, are always accompanied by emotional poverty, indifference, by what one might call primitive feelings. Children who have limited ability are primarily unable to experience thought: at first the thoughts of others, and then the thought that should come about through the exertion of their own thinking processes. Many years of experience has convinced me that these children require treatment (and their education may be likened to medical treatment) through the development of subtle emotions. Our concern for these children is addressed first and foremost towards helping them become more intelligent, and only then are we concerned to ensure that they master the compulsory content of the curriculum. We teach them to experience wonder and amazement, and the best school for that is

the cradle of thought: nature. The fact that these children are able to study together with their peers, to progress from class to class with them, that in the end they do master the curriculum (because they have become more intelligent), that they appreciate their own worth as human beings, and become good citizens, workers, mothers and fathers, is due to the decisive role of the cradle of thought: nature.

But the role of nature in intellectual development is not limited to this. A sharpened, attentive, inquisitive, interested perception of the subtlest links between natural phenomena is a powerful means for refining children's speech. The development of children's speech is unthinkable without their active communion with nature. Intense, attentive observation of natural phenomena leads to the organic unity of image, emotion, and language. This combination, in my opinion, is what in practice we call vitality of thought. Nature can create a state of spiritual preparedness in children to receive the knowledge you want their minds to absorb, to make it an attainment of their own thought. In this context we have some very interesting activities: 'Twenty shades of autumn colour in the forest: what shall we call them?', 'How the lark sings', 'How a storm approaches', 'How wheat, sunflowers and roses wait expectantly for rain', 'How flowers greet the rising of the sun'. During these activities the thoughts and feelings that excite our children materialise in their language, and language, once it has entered the spiritual world of a child, stimulates new thinking. Here we come across one of those subtle things that lead young people to think for themselves: they want to express themselves clearly, expressively, precisely, and in the end to speak beautifully about beauty. To seek the necessary words means to make oneself think. After 'lessons in thought' our students write compositions, stories, and fairy tales. This work is one of their most sought after, and at the same time most intense, forms of the kind of thought that requires will and effort.

I am firmly convinced that the role of will in thought processes (the ability to make oneself think) is unthinkable without inspiration, which flows from the confluence of thought and an emotional appreciation of beauty, a beauty that is first discovered in nature, and then in work and in human relationships, in strength of spirit, in the noble struggle to uphold lofty ideals. But the primary source of beauty is nature. Nature provides the most precise, infinitely subtle standard of beauty. In the words of Emerson, you will never catch nature looking unkempt or half-dressed; she is always beautiful. We consider the ability to feel and understand the beauty of nature to be an important prerequisite for that many-faceted, energetic activity that elevates and ennobles a human being. [To be continued next month.]





## Stories

### There is only one sun

Sashko was sitting at a table in the green garden and doing his homework. Today the teacher had given them an unusual assignment. The children had to look around and evaluate every object close to them and then compare it with another object.

Sashko thought hard. Above, the wind played with the leaves of the aspen. They trembled and whispered all the time as if sharing secrets, just like first-grade girls sharing secrets during the break between classes.

The boy looked at the ground and saw two green leaves with white flowers between them. It was a lily of the valley. Her flowers were just like tiny crystal bells! It seemed you only had to touch them, and they would ring.

He heard a bee buzzing, and then the deep drone of a bumblebee. Sashko closed his eyes and imagined two strings, one thin and one thick. A musician was sitting and playing on both strings. That was what the buzz of the bee and the drone of the bumblebee could be compared to.

A mosquito's high-pitched sound was really hard to compare. Maybe, Sashko thought, it could be compared to a reedpipe made from a dandelion's stem.

The sun was setting. The sky in the west turned red and was like a huge poppy field with thousands of red flowers in bloom. If you could find a field like that, wouldn't it be beautiful!

The sun touched the horizon. The sun was a huge crimson orb... What could it be compared to? Sashko thought for a long time but he could not think of anything, because there is nothing else like it. There really is only one sun.

### The swans are leaving

It is a quiet autumn evening. The sun goes to sleep and the purplish red sky on the horizon warns of a windy day to come. But for now, the air is still and motionless.

Suddenly, from beyond the forest, an anxious cry resounds: 'Oh-OH, oh-OH...' A flock of swans is flying high in the sky. Why do they cry out so anxiously?

They seem to be taking something with them

from their native land. It reminds me of a fairy tale told me by my grandmother. She said that when the swans are leaving, their wings sow sadness on the earth. I gaze at the passing flock. The swan's fine wings are tinged with purple from the rays of the setting sun. But sadness cannot be purple! It should be azure or lilac, like the tall, distant hills in the steppes.

'And when the swans return, what do their wings sow?' I asked my grandmother.

'Joy!'

### The fields are bare

In late autumn there is nothing in the fields: no ears of grain, no stubble, no straw. Everything has been gathered, harvested, and stored in silos or barns. Young winter crops are the only green in the dark plowed fields. A cold autumn wind sings its songs among the bare trees. Heavy grey clouds float low above the earth. They bring constant drizzle, day after day. The sun is nowhere to be seen. If you come to the field, you cannot tell what time of day it is, morning, afternoon, or evening. The birds have fallen silent.

Two men are crossing the field. One is wearing city clothes. He is visiting for just a few days. Looking at the bare plowed fields, he remarks:

'It is so empty and unwelcoming in the field now. It makes me feel sad. It was quite different in summer when the ears of grain were whispering in the wind.'

The other man is an agricultural scientist. He has been working in these fields for many years. He looks at the bare ploughed fields with joy in his eyes and replies:

'These fields are beautiful now! They are beautiful precisely because they are bare.'

### The rainbow

Beyond the pond there is a blue cloud, with a rainbow shining right through it—a mixture of yellow, green, blue and red. It is as if a multi-coloured milkmaid's yoke is hanging over the river. Beyond the forest, high in the mountains, lives a mighty giant named Thunderstorm. He takes this wondrous milkmaid's yoke and draws a bucket of water from the pond. Then he pours the water into the cloud, so that rain can fall from it.

