

Sukhomlinsky News



Stories about empathy and human influence

Dear reader,

I hope you are keeping well.

This month I am once again presenting translations of stories from Sukhomlinsky's Ethics Anthology, this time from a section entitled 'People leave part of themselves in others'. The stories look at the way one human being influences another, and at the quality of empathy: the capacity to tune sensitively into what another person is thinking or feeling, and to adjust one's behaviour accordingly.

I hope you find the stories meaningful.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill



Stories from *An Ethics Anthology*

He will come

An elderly mother lives in our village. During the first month of the war against the fascists, she received an official notice signed by the commander of her son's unit. In it appeared the words 'Your son died the death of a hero...' His comrades in arms had added a note: 'A shell exploded, leaving no trace of your son. We filled in the crater, and having honoured it as a war grave, we went into battle with the enemy.' The old mother wept, and placed the notice under her icon, but she did not believe that her son was dead. Throughout the war, she kept expecting a letter from him, but no letter came.

And when the war ended, the old mother waited expectantly for her son's return. She believed that her son was alive and that he would return.

As soon as the sun began to sink towards the horizon, she would go to the edge of the village, stand by an ancient burial mound, and gaze along the road. All those who came by bowed low to the mother. They all knew that she was waiting for her son. Each one wanted to say a kind word of support to her. 'If he doesn't come today, he is sure to come tomorrow,' a traveller would sometimes say, when they met the old mother, and she would reply, 'Yes, he probably won't come today. The sun is setting... I'd better be off home. He'll come tomorrow...'

Every day, for twenty-seven years, the elderly mother went out to meet her son. She was fifty-three years old when she received the official notification of her son's death, and now she was already eighty. Her hair had turned grey, her hands were wrinkled, and her eyes were watery... The ancient burial mound stood with her by the road, like an eternal sentry, the only companion for the old mother, with her grief and her eternal hope.

'My dear boy,' the mother would whisper, on her way home after sunset, 'I would have died long ago... But who... Who will greet you when you return?'

Stories from *An Ethics Anthology* (cont.)

Beautiful Natalochka

Teachers call our 5B class unruly. We have lots of students who misbehave. Mishko, for example, will take a fly, dip it in ink and put it down on his neighbour's desk. The fly will crawl all over the desk drawing patterns and the boys will laugh. One day Mishko drew a rooster on his forehead...

Then there is Fedko. One day he quietly jumped out the window, sat in the branch of a tree and wrote his dictation from there. At the end of the lesson, he climbed back into the classroom, sat in his desk, and handed the teacher his exercise book. The teacher was surprised: 'You weren't in the classroom. Where did you suddenly appear from?' Everyone laughed.

Petko can make a sound just like a cricket. One day he was so convincing the teacher stopped and listened. 'I wonder where that cricket lives. I'll come back in the evening and see if I can find out... I like the sound of a cricket.' We could not tell if the teacher was joking or if she really thought a cricket had made its home in our classroom.

And Gritsko's shirt is always covered in ink stains...

But then in the spring a new student named Natalochka joined our class. She had blue eyes and long blonde hair. And her eyes were so gentle and kind that our boys could not meet them for long; they would lower their eyes. Something strange happened to our class. All the wild ones suddenly became meek and mild. For three weeks the teachers had been asking Mishko to get his hair cut, but he had ignored them. Now he suddenly had a haircut and started carrying a little mirror in his pocket. He no longer drew roosters on his forehead... Fedko covered all his exercise books. Someone whispered to Petko during the class to make a sound like a cricket... and got a punch in return. And most amazing of all, Gritsko's shirt was spotless.

What on earth has happened to our 5B class?

The cradle

Outside it was bitterly cold. The branches on the apple tree shivered from the frost. On a slender twig, a tiny little packet appeared. A little girl who was feeding a chickadee saw the tiny packet and said, 'What a tiny little bud!'

'People call me a bud,' thought the little boy who was inside the tiny packet that was his swaddling clothes. The winter wrapped him to protect him from the cold and said, 'Wait here for the spring.'

Spring came and unwrapped the swaddling clothes from the little boy leaf, and the leaf rose from his tiny cradle. He stretched out his arms, stood up, and turned green. The boy leaf grew not by the day but by the hour. Soon he was as big a sparrow's egg, and then bigger than a pigeon's egg. He basked in the sunlight and bathed in the rain. In no time at all he had grown into a young adult leaf, and proudly trembled in the spring breeze, stretching ever upwards.

One day at dawn the leaf looked down at his feet and noticed something tiny, brown, and transparent, like the head of an ant. This tiny, brown, transparent thing was stuck to the leaf's feet.

'Who are you?' asked the young leaf.

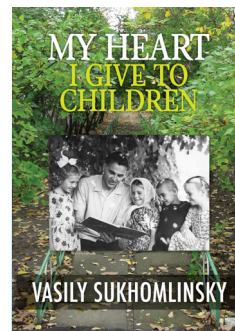
'I am your cradle,' answered the tiny, brown, transparent thing. 'Your swaddling clothes are still here too.'

The great big green leaf, trembling in the spring breeze, bent down and thought hard. He remembered something unimaginably distant and dear. He remembered his cradle and became tender and sad.

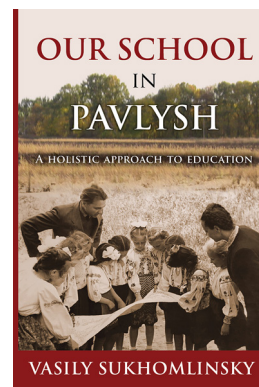
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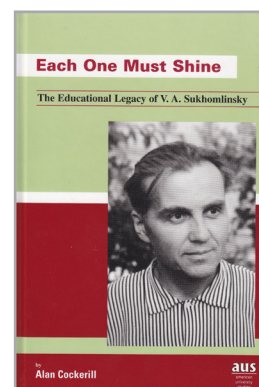
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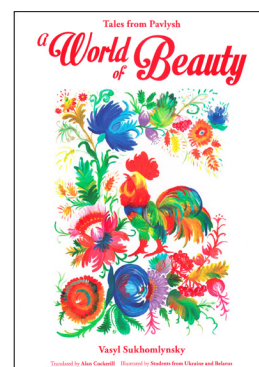
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Why the tractor fell silent

On the outskirts of the village the rumble of a tractor could be heard from early spring through to late autumn, as it ploughed the fields, harrowed, sowed seed, and gathered in the harvest. People heard its even, measured drone from dawn till dusk, and were so used to it that they did not even notice it.

But then, one day, around noon, the tractor fell silent. It became unusually quiet. Everyone immediately felt that something was missing. The silence seemed unsettling.

People began to come out of their homes, and many men and women headed for the field where the tractor had been working all morning. They saw the tractor standing in the middle of the field, but its driver was nowhere to be seen.

Where was the tractor driver? Everyone knew that the only tractor driver in their little village was Stepan Ivanenko, who had returned from the army two years earlier. What had happened to him? It seemed that everyone in the village was on the alert and holding their breath.

Then suddenly everyone poured out of their homes, joyful and smiling, congratulating each other. The news spread around the village like wildfire that Stepan Ivanenko now had a baby son. That was why the tractor had fallen silent. It seemed as if even the field gave a sigh of relief. But the tractor still missed its driver.

Take three more flowers, Tina...

In our school greenhouse there is a flower kingdom. There may be a bitter frost outside, but behind the glass are dark blue, pink, scarlet, and light blue chrysanthemums.

Early one morning, Tina, a little girl in grade one, came to the greenhouse. No-one else was there. The flowers had turned their heads to seek the sun, which would soon rise from beyond the horizon. When Tina opened the door of the greenhouse, the flower heads gave a little start. They liked the quiet, and the sound of the door frightened them. Once they had settled, they continued watching for the first rays of the pale winter sun, but each chrysanthemum also kept one eye on the little girl. Why had she come?

Tina had come to pick a light blue chrysanthemum, a flower of joy. Nowhere else was such a flower to be found, only in the school greenhouse. Tina's grandmother was seriously ill. At midnight she had taken a turn for the worse. Tina very much wanted to bring her grandmother some joy, to ease her suffering.

As soon as Tina had picked the flower, she heard the greenhouse door squeak. The flower heads gave another start, but as soon as they saw the teacher, they smiled. He was their faithful friend. He came to see them every day.

Tina knew the teacher, though she was not in any of his classes. He was kind but strict. He loved flowers

and loved and respected other people who loved flowers. He hated laziness, carelessness, wastefulness and idleness. During winter, nobody picked any flowers in the greenhouse. They only created and protected the beauty there and came to admire it.

When the teacher saw Tina with the light blue chrysanthemum in her hand he stopped in surprise. Tina looked into the teacher's eyes, but all she could think of was her grandmother. She could see in her imagination her grandmother lying in pain, and her lips whispered some words about the flower of joy easing pain. Her eyes implored the teacher and begged him to understand. And he felt her entreaty. He understood that she was not being naughty. The little girl had not picked the flower to discard it. In her hand she was holding life that she needed to bring to another human being.

The teacher walked up to Tina, put his arm around her and said, 'Pick three more flowers, Tina. One for you, for having such a kind heart, and one each for your mother and father, for bringing up a daughter with a kind heart.'

In spring, Tina came to school with her grandmother. The grandmother thanked the teacher for the flower of joy and gave the school a violet coloured chrysanthemum.

The boy with a heart of stone

A woman gave birth to a son. He was the apple of her eye. She worried that a speck of dust might land on him, or that he would be exposed to a draught. She took special care to make sure her son did not take other people's pain and suffering to heart.

When the boy's grandfather was near death, she took her son to stay with her sister in a neighbouring village. She only brought her son home when the grandfather had been buried. Her son asked, 'Where's grandpa?' She replied, 'He's gone to visit relatives.'

One day the boy saw the girl next door cut her finger. The mother immediately took him by the hand and led him home. In winter the son brought home a woodpecker with an injured wing and asked how he could help the bird. The mother took the bird somewhere and told her son that the bird had been cured, was alive and well, and had flown away.

The boy grew older, but his mother continued to protect him from life's problems. He did not know the meaning of grief, suffering, pain, hurt or disappointment. He grew tall and was approaching manhood.

One day his mother fell ill and was confined to bed. She sent her son to the chemist to buy some medicine. The son went to the chemist and handed him a note that his mother had written.

'The medicine will be ready in five minutes,' said the chemist.

'While you are getting the medicine ready, I'll go and play soccer with my friends,' answered the son.

'You have a heart of stone,' whispered the astonished chemist.



Stories

The most difficult lesson

When the children in grade three learnt that their friend Olya was moving away forever to the distant island of Sakhalin, they asked their teacher, 'Where is that island?' Their teacher explained that a swallow would have to fly for many days reach the island of Sakhalin. The children were surprised. 'So, it's a long way away!' they said.

Then their teacher said, 'Children, Olya is going away forever. That means you will never, ever see your friend again. The years will pass. Decades will pass, and you will all be grown up, and grow old, but you will never see Olya again.'

The children were sad. They asked, 'Can we go to the station to see Olya off?'

The teacher answered, 'She is leaving tomorrow. We will go as a class to see her off. Here is an album. I would like each of you to draw in it to express your wishes for Olya.'

The children stayed after school and each one drew what they wished for Olya. They drew the sun, which stood for happiness. They drew a sunflower, which stood for joy. They drew two storks, which stood for friendship. They drew a bee, which stood for a love of work. And one boy drew a multicoloured butterfly. When they asked him what it stood for, he answered 'beauty'.

Early the next day the whole class walked to the station, instead of going to school. They saw Olya off. They could not forget that they would never see her again. Tears shone in the children's eyes. By the time they came back it was already midday. Someone asked the teacher, 'Will we have any lessons today?'

'Today we had the most difficult and the most important lesson,' answered their teacher.

Repeating a year

This happened at our school. Fedko was studying in grade three. There was no-one to make Fedko study. The only person he lived with was his mother, and she was always at work. The teacher would set reading, writing, or maths problems for homework, but Fedko just went out to play without a care in the world.

Fedko's mother was often called up to the school. The teachers complained about the boy and said he did not study properly. His mother cried, and Fedko hung his head.

Each summer he was set extra work, and somehow or other he managed to complete it,

and was able to progress from class to class. But in grade three his teacher said, 'I cannot move you on to grade four... All the others are reading well, but you cannot read... And your writing is poor.'

The last day of the school year arrived. It was the final lesson in grade three. The teacher announced that everyone would be progressing to grade four, except for Fedko, who would have to repeat the year.

The class fell silent. Everyone turned and looked at the back row, where Fedko was sitting. Everyone felt sorry for him. Their eyes were sad, and Fedko was crying.

'We will never study with Fedko again,' thought the children, and they felt pain.

'I will never study with my friends again,' thought Fedko, and a magical bird, called repentance, awoke in Fedko's heart.

'Maria Petrovna, please let Fedko study over the summer holidays, and we will help him,' begged the children.

'Maria Petrovna, please don't make me repeat the year... I will study now,' pleaded Fedko.

'All right,' said the teacher with a sigh. 'If you can really make yourself study, you can stay with your friends.'

The doll with the missing arm

A little girl had a doll. Once, long ago, when she was playing with it, she had accidentally pulled its arm off. Every day since, she had bandaged the doll's arm, carefully attaching it to the doll. And the doll, whose name was Zoya, smiled. She liked the attention from the little girl.

But then one day the little girl's mother brought her a new doll named Lina, that she had purchased at the shop. It wore a luxurious pale blue dress and had long red hair. The fingers on its hands were very slender, and on one of the fingers was a ring. The doll's eyes opened and closed. When the little girl put the doll to bed, it said, 'Good night' and when she picked it up, it said, 'Good morning!'

The little girl and Lina were inseparable for a whole day. She plaited the doll's hair and tied new ribbons in it. Lina put the doll to bed and said, 'Good night.'

Suddenly the little girl heard someone crying. It was Zoya. The little girl had left her on the couch facing inwards and forgotten all about her. Zoya had taken it badly and felt very hurt. She felt all alone and had started crying.

The little girl felt ashamed. She picked up Zoya, held her to her heart, and kissed her. She bandaged her injured arm. Zoya smiled, opened her lips and whispered something. She was saying to the little girl, 'I still belong to you, don't I? Don't ever forget me.'