

Sukhomlinsky News



Stories about life and death

Dear reader,

I hope you are keeping well.

*This month I am once again presenting translations of stories from Sukhomlinsky's **Ethics Anthology**, from the section entitled 'People leave part of themselves in others'.*

Many of the stories touch on the theme of life and death, with one even exploring the idea of eternal life.

I hope you find the stories meaningful.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill



Stories from *An Ethics Anthology*

Life

Grandma Maria was dying. She had lived a long life and walked many roads. She had raised five sons and five daughters and cared for thirty-five grandchildren and ten great-grandchildren. Now her hour had come.

One after another her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren came to her bedside to say farewell.

The grandmother's bed stood by the window. Outside the window birds were singing, butterflies were flitting here and there, and bees were humming. Right on the windowsill a swallow had moulded her nest of mud. She fed her chicks there. The grandmother had often been visited by her youngest great-grandchild—three-year-old Olya. The old lady had explained to Olya how the swallow built its nest. Olya had observed how the swallow fed her chicks, and had kept asking, 'When are the chicks going to peep out of their nest?' Her great-grandmother had answered, 'Soon. In a few days.'

And then Olya's mother brought her to say farewell to her great-grandmother. Olya understood that they would take her dear great-grandmother to the cemetery, that she would never again see the person she loved so much. But she could not understand the forces that create a human being and then carry them off to oblivion. That was too much for a little girl to understand, and she wept...

'Farewell, Grandma,' said Olya, repeating the words her mother had taught her, and she kissed her great-grandmother's dry, wrinkly hand. At that very moment, a yellow-beaked chick peeped out of the swallow's nest, looked at them with its curious eyes, and cheeped loudly. Olya raised her head, and her tear-filled eyes smiled. Her mother also smiled, and so did her father and Grandma Maria.

'Farewell, little Olya,' said Grandma Maria quietly, with a smile.

Stories from *An Ethics Anthology* (cont.)

How Vasilko was born

'Children, today is your friend's, Vasilko's birthday. Today, Vasilko, you are eight years old. Happy birthday! Let me tell you, children, how Vasilko was born.

Before Vasilko was born his father worked as a tractor driver and his mother worked in the silk production team. The tractor driver's young wife was about to become a mother. Her young husband was planning on taking his wife to the maternity hospital the next day.

During the night a blizzard developed, spreading snow everywhere, and blocking the roads with deep snowdrifts. It was impossible to drive a car anywhere, but the trip could not possibly be postponed. The young wife could feel that her baby was on its way. Her husband went to get the tractor, and while he was gone the wife began to feel terrible labour pains.

The husband hitched a large sled to the tractor, lay his wife in it, and set off. It was seven kilometres to the maternity hospital. The blizzard still raged, the steppe was covered in a shroud of snow, his wife was groaning, and the tractor struggled to make its way through the snowdrifts.

Halfway there, it became impossible to drive any further. The tractor plunged into the snow and its motor died. The young husband lifted his wife from the sled, wrapped her in a blanket, and carried her in his arms, barely struggling from one snowdrift to the next.

The blizzard howled, the snow blinded his eyes, the husband was bathed in sweat and his heart was hammering in his chest. It seemed as if every step would be his last, but he knew that if he stopped to rest for even one minute they would perish.

After a few dozen metres, he stopped for an instant to throw off his coat, and continued in just his body warmer. His wife was groaning in his arms and the wind was howling over the steppe, but all the husband could think of at that time was the tiny living creature who was about to be born and for whom he, the young tractor driver Stepan, must answer to his wife, to his father and mother, to his grandfather and grandmother, to all of humanity, and to his conscience.

For several hours the young father trudged for four terrible kilometres. It was evening when he knocked on the door of the maternity hospital, handed his wife wrapped in a blanket to the nursing staff, and collapsed unconscious on the floor. When the doctors unwrapped the blanket, they could not believe their eyes. Next to the wife lay a baby, alive and well. He had just been born, and the mother immediately began to feed her son right there in the corridor.

Doctors now surrounded the husband's bed. For ten days Stepan hovered between life and death. The doctors saved his life.

That is how Vasilko was born.

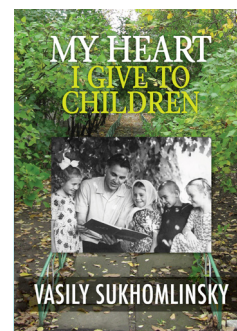
What do people live for?

It was a quiet autumn evening. The sun was setting. A V-shaped formation of cranes wended its way across the blue sky. Grandma was sitting on a bench by the fence, admiring the sunset. I asked her, 'Grandma, what do people live for?'

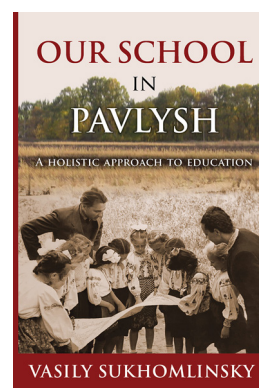
Grandma chuckled and said, 'For eternal life.'

I did not understand. 'What do you mean, "eternal life"?' I asked.

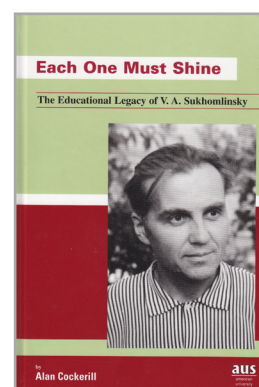
Grandma said, 'Come with me into the garden.'



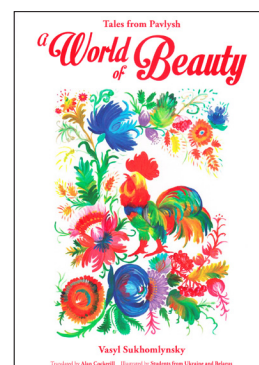
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We went into the garden. The marigolds were at the end of their flowering. Grandma collected a bunch of dry seed heads and wrapped them in a bundle.

'Wait until spring,' she said, and left the marigold seeds in a dry place.

Spring came and we sowed the seeds in a flower bed. Little plants appeared, grew tall, and flowered, producing beautiful marigold flowerheads. Now they were more beautiful than they had been in the autumn.

'People also live so that their beauty can live eternally,' said Grandma. 'Parents live to educate their children. And when their children grow up, they will also raise children, so that the human race can live eternally.'

'And what does the human race live for?' I asked.

'For happiness.'

You have to be human to understand

A man walked to the cemetery to visit his father's grave. He pulled out some weeds, then dug a little hole and planted a rose bush.

A dragonfly was sitting nearby on stalk of grass. She carefully observed the man's work and wondered, 'What is he doing? Why is he pulling out grass, and why is he planting a rose bush? This is not a vegetable bed or a flower bed.'

Several days passed. The man returned to the cemetery, pulled out some weeds and watered the rose bush. He smiled when he saw the first flower on the rose bush.

'Man,' asked the dragonfly, 'What are you doing? Why are you planting flowers on this little mound? Why are you pulling out weeds and watering the grass? What is underneath this mound?'

'My father is here,' answered the man. 'This is his grave.'

'What is a father?,' asked the dragonfly, 'And what is a grave?'

The man tried to explain, but the dragonfly could not understand a word he said. She asked, 'Man, please tell me what I need to do to understand what you are talking about.'

'You have to be human to understand,' answered the man.

All graves are human

Olya and Seryozha often walked to the cemetery with their mother and father to visit their grandfather's grave. The cemetery is on a hill and the soil there is dry, infertile and stony. Nothing much ever grows there. They always took four watering cans from home, two grown-up ones, as the children would say, and two children's ones. They filled them with

water, carried them up the hill, and watered the rose bushes on their grandfather's grave.

Next to their grandfather's grave was another grave: abandoned, forgotten and overgrown. The watchman said that it belonged to an old lady who had died without any relatives, close or distant. Their father said, 'Let's weed the grave.'

They pulled out all the weeds, and the next Saturday their mother brought a little pot with some rose cuttings for planting. They planted a rose bush and watered it whenever they visited their grandfather's grave.

'Why are we watering flowers on a stranger's grave?' asked Seryozha.

'There is no such thing as a stranger's grave,' answered his father. 'All graves are human.'

Everlasting flowers

Eleven-year-old Vitya had never seen his father. He was only three months old when his father, a fighter pilot, had died in an air battle above Berlin on one of the last days of the war.

On the table where Vitya and his mother worked in the evenings, there was a portrait of his father. Each year, on the anniversary of his father's death, Vitya's mother placed some everlasting flowers by the portrait. On other days a vase with a red rose always stood there.

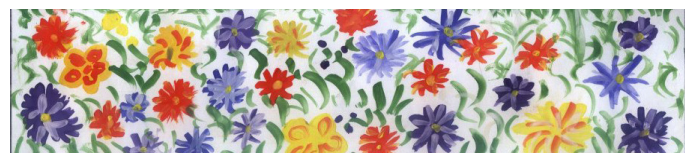
Ivan Vasilievich, an engineer, had begun to visit them in the evenings. He worked at the same factory as Vitya's mother. Vitya understood that his mother was going to marry Ivan Vasilievich. It pained him greatly to think that his mother would forget about his father...

On the day when Vitya's mother told him that Ivan Vasilievich was going to ask her to marry him, Vitya could think of nothing but his father. He thought, 'I will come home from school today, and mum will have put dad's portrait somewhere else.' As he walked home from school, his heart ached. 'If it was not winter,' he thought, 'I would go into the field, find some everlasting flowers, and place them by dad's portrait.'

When he arrived home and opened the door, he saw his mother sitting by the table in a new dress. And in the vase by his father's portrait, instead of a red rose, he saw everlasting flowers...

'Mum,' whispered Vitya, 'You'll never forget dad, will you?'

'Never,' whispered his mother, and burst into tears.



Stories

I am not afraid of thunder or lightning

It was a hot June day. The students in grade five went to the forest for the whole day. It was fun in the forest. The children played, read an interesting book, and made porridge.

Towards evening, dark clouds appeared from beyond the forest and thunder rumbled. The children ran from the rain towards a shelter used by shepherds. Vitya also ran, but suddenly there was a flash of lightning and a peal of thunder so deafening that Vitya crouched in fear under a large oak tree, closed his eyes, and nearly burst into tears. He had opened his mouth to cry out for help when he noticed a girl from his class named Valya beside him.

'Is that you, Vitya?' she said. 'I'm so glad I'm not alone. Now I'm not afraid anymore.'

Vitya took a deep breath and looked around. The forest was drowning in torrents of rain. Flashes of lightning lit up for an instant the surrounding trees and bushes. The forest was howling and groaning. It seemed to Vitya that he and Valya were the only two people in the world.

He felt ashamed of his fear. How could he be afraid, when there was a girl next to him who was depending on him.

'Don't worry, Valya,' said Vitya. 'I'm not afraid of thunder or lightning.'

Vitya reached out and touched her blonde hair. Now he was not afraid of anything.

Collect her tears...

Anatoly in grade seven was friends with a girl in his class named Olya. He was a year older than her, and good at mathematics, and he often helped her solve maths problems.

One day Anatoly and Olya came to school very early, before any teachers or students had arrived. Olya asked Anatoly to help her with some algebra. The two of them sat at a desk in their classroom. They were so involved in solving the problems that they did not notice their friends start arriving for their lessons, or their amused faces as they looked in at the window. They only noticed when their friends started joking about them being a bride and groom.

Anatoly was mortified by their jokes. He went up to Olya during the break and angrily told her, 'Don't come near me again. It's your fault they are laughing at me.'

Olya looked at Anatoly in surprise. 'What have I done wrong?' she asked, and added, 'Don't take any notice of their stupid jokes.'

Anatoly swore at the girl, using a dirty, hurtful word. Olya burst into tears. She cried for a long time and did not come to the next lesson.

Anatoly came to his senses. 'I insulted her,' he thought. 'What will she think of me now?'

The boy still felt bad when he arrived home. His conscience tormented him. He could not get the girl's words out of his head, or the sound of her shaking voice. He could still see her, all by herself, leaning against the window. That night he told his mother all about it.

'Mum, tell me what I should do to make Olya forget the rude word I said to her.'

His mother thought about it for a long time. 'Will your conscience permit you to repeat that word to me?' she asked.

'No, mum... I would rather die than say that word in front of you.'

'Well then... I'll tell you what to do... Collect her tears. Yes, collect every single tear she cried. Only then will the girl forget the word that you cannot say in front of your mother.'

Anatoly lowered his head in deep thought.

The oriole

One evening, Oleg, who was in grade one, and his grandmother's youngest grandson, said, 'Grandma, tomorrow is the last day of classes. The best students will be given books as a reward.'

'And will you be given one?' asked his Grandmother.

'If Maria Ivanovna gives me an "excellent" in maths, then I will. This year, I have received both "excellent" and "good" in maths.'

The next day, Oleg's grandmother impatiently awaited her grandson's return. As soon as he opened the door and laid his schoolbag on the bench, she could see that there was no joy in his eyes.

'The teacher did not give him an "excellent"', she thought. She put away her knitting, approached Oleg and told him very quietly, 'I've got something to show you, and you will never guess what it is...'

'What?' asked Oleg and the life-affirming joy that had always comforted his grandmother returned to his eyes.

Oleg's grandmother took him by the hand and led him into the orchard. They came to an overgrown thicket of wild grapes. The grandmother parted the branches and pointed to a nest. In the nest, Oleg saw an extraordinary bird: an oriole.

The grandmother had never seen her grandson so happy.

She had been saving this joy for him for many days.