

Sukhomlinsky News

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A natural education

Last month, thinking about education for the Anthropocene, I wrote: 'it is crucial that our education systems develop an awareness and understanding of the natural environment upon which we are totally dependent, and a willingness to live in a way that is sustainable.'

This month's extract from Pavlysh Secondary School shows how much Sukhomlinsky thought about the natural environment within which he operated, and how significant he thought it was for children's holistic development.

He wrote:

'Everything that surrounds a child is put to use for their physical, intellectual, moral and aesthetic development.'

As a greater and greater proportion of our population lives in major cities, and has less contact with the natural environment, I believe Sukhomlinsky's description of a natural education takes on more and more significance.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

The influence of the environment

This month's extract from Pavlysh Secondary School is from the second chapter, in which Sukhomlinsky focuses on the educational impact of the environment that surrounds children.

The school's material base (including the environment that surrounds the children) is both a necessary prerequisite for a proper education, and also a means of influencing the students' spiritual worlds, a means of forming their attitudes, convictions and good habits. Everything that surrounds a child is put to use for their physical, intellectual, moral and aesthetic education...

...The art of education involves educating people not only through human relationships, not only through the examples and words of elders, not only through traditions that are carefully preserved by the community, but also through objects of material and spiritual value. Education through an environment that is created by the students themselves, through things that enrich the spiritual life of the community, is, in our view, one of the most subtle aspects of the education process.

We see the material base of the school as being inextricably connected with the environment, which includes the natural environment, and the work and activities of the surrounding people. The objects in this environment, many of which have been created by the students themselves or their older friends, and are imbued with their loving attitude, become dear to each one of them, and are linked in their emotional memories with events, human relationships, feelings and experiences. I have dozens of letters from former students, whose childhood, adolescence and youth were spent in an environment very dear to their hearts, the hospitable and comfortable environment of their school, a second home.

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From Pavlysh Secondary School [cont.]

Our former students want to hear what is new at our school, what is driving the life of our community. In every letter there are moving lines that awaken memories: 'How is the apple tree I planted the day before my final exams? How is the rose that dried out after we transplanted it, but then recovered? Have the rowan trees sent by our Belorussian friends taken root?'

Thanks to the life with which these objects are imbued, and the loving attitude towards them that unites the children with them, our material assets, the objects in the environment, become a part of the spiritual life of each child, and strengthen our community.

In the school orchard there grew an apple tree, planted in distant times. The oldest people in our village said it was a hundred years old. Under this luxurious tree the most heartfelt conversations took place, and the first confessions of young love were spoken. But then this old tree began to die. The children decided to graft a cutting from this old apple tree to some young stock, so that it could one day grow to be just as big. Now former students often ask in their letters, how 'our apple tree' is feeling. This is not just an expression of a love for nature, but an expression of extreme care for something that was formerly part of their spiritual lives.

The things that children create in their environment, which at the present time may only be of practical use or meet an essential need, will in the future be dear to them as reminders of their previous life in our community.

Our school is located on the outskirts of a large village, located about fifteen kilometres from the city of Kremenchuk. The school grounds occupy an area of about

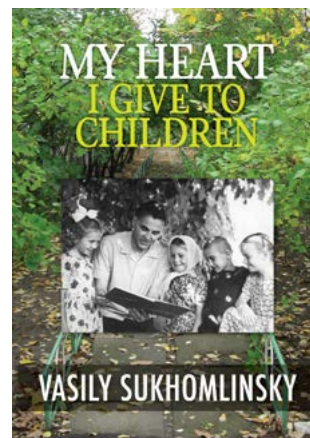
5 hectares, bordered by forest, the fertile fields of the collective farm, and, to the south, by the Omel'nik River, a small tributary of the Dnieper. There is a dam across the river at this point, that has created a large reservoir.

The village is surrounded by orchards. Between the school and the fields of the collective farm we have planted several oak groves and thickets to protect the fields from erosion. Next to the school is a sports ground, around which we have planted apple trees. On the school's north western boundary was a dark ravine. We planted it with young oaks and on its slopes we planted lilac bushes. An oak grove sprang up and a wonderful lilac thicket. The land on which our school is built is slightly hilly. If you climb one of the hills you can see wonderful views of the distant banks of the Dnieper. From the heights of an ancient burial mound in the steppes, on a fine day, you can see the fields around Poltava, beyond the Dnieper, the dark blue waters of the Kremenchuk Reservoir, the outline of the hydroelectric power station on the horizon, and in a misty haze, the buildings of the railway construction and car factories. To the west and south spread wide open fields, scattered with ancient Scythian burial mounds.

The school is located on the quiet outskirts of the village, in the midst of nature, near large expanses of water. This has a beneficial influence on the physical development and the health of the children. The fields surrounding the school are planted with wheat, clover, buckwheat and meadow grasses. Science has shown that above a square kilometre of land that is not covered in green plants, about 500 tonnes of dust

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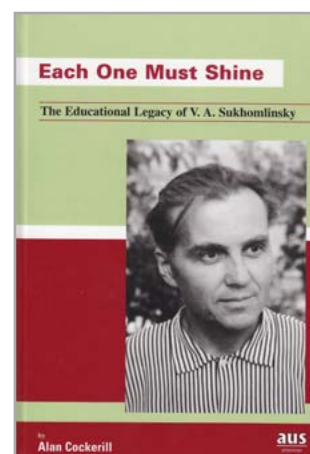
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constantly hovers, while above the same area of greenery the figure is no more than 40 tonnes. In a cubic metre of city air there are more than 5,000 microbes, but in the same volume of air in a locality dominated by greenery, only 400-500.

In the organism of a child who breathes air saturated with the oxygen of forest and field the metabolism is activated, preventing illness. For our part, we do everything we can to ensure that the air is enriched with the phytoncides that kill microorganisms. The school grounds are luxuriant with plantings of nut, cherry, apricot, chestnut and fir trees, all particularly good sources of phytoncides. In a hazelnut grove, for instance, there are never any flies. All of this has been created by our children's hands, and may be created in any school.

The phytoncides in many agricultural plants, (especially grains) cleanse the breathing passages and blood vessels of pathogens that can give rise to colds, rheumatism, or tuberculosis. Someone who has spent two months harvesting wheat, near a reservoir, will not fall ill with influenza or tonsillitis during the following six months. Children who throughout spring and summer have breathed air saturated with the phytoncides of trees, grain crops and meadow

grasses, with correct routines and good diet, with never fall ill with tuberculosis.

The abundance of greenery in the school grounds themselves, and around them, create a specific forest microclimate. During the hottest months our temperatures are three or four degrees cooler, and during the strongest frosts, two or three degrees warmer, than in neighbouring open spaces. In both summer and winter, we have higher precipitation than in surrounding localities, especially in the form of dew, which cleanses the greenery of microscopic dust. Our own research has shown that dew, falling plentifully on greenery near a water catchment, on an area of one hectare, washes seventy kilograms of dust from plants into the soil in a single night. It is thus clear how significant it is not to allow a single square metre of the school grounds to remain without greenery. For many years the doctor and I have been systematically observing children who enter school with early symptoms of tuberculosis or joint tuberculosis. Air saturated with phytoncides, in combination with good diet and correct routines, performs miracles. The children are literally transformed, becoming rosy cheeked and full of joy. Life in the midst of nature is as important a factor as fresh food, rich in vitamins and phytoncides. Peace and quiet,

cool air during evening and night, and fresh early mornings are all part of our routines for work and rest.

One cannot help thinking that the school of the future should fully utilize all of nature's gifts and all means of ensuring that nature serves human interests, in order to further the harmonious development of human beings. If for no other reason than this, we should preserve and enhance all our natural resources. Our children's efforts to increase our natural endowments have, over a comparatively short time—two decades—significantly transformed the surrounding environment. During those twenty years we have converted forty hectares of barren, clay soil into lush meadows and flowering orchards.

A school should not be too far from industrial centres though. Our school's proximity to major machine construction enterprises (railway carriage construction and car factories), to a hydroelectric station, and an established agricultural station—cradles of science, knowledge and skilled labour—determines to a large extent the work skills and interests of our students, and the content and character of their extracurricular work, which includes technical construction and modelling.



Stories for Children

A mother's field

A mother had two sons, elder and younger. When the sons married, the mother gave each of them a field. It so happened that the field given to the elder son was one metre wider than the younger son's.

The younger son took offence at this, because every autumn he gathered three sacks less wheat than the elder son.

With each year his hurt became deeper, until it turned to hatred. The brothers grew to hate each other. That is what three sacks of wheat can do. They avoided each other. When the elder brother was working in his field, the younger one did not venture out into his. When the younger brother was working his land, the elder one stayed at home.

And their mother lived far away beyond the forest. She had her own field there, and worked it herself, to the best of her ability.

She heard from others that her sons hated each other. She visited them several times, so they might make peace, but the elder son would not hear of handing over half a metre of his field to the younger.

Then one hot summer day, just before harvest time, the sons heard some news. A plague of locusts had flown from far away, landed in their mother's field, and eaten every last grain.

The elder son went to the younger and said, 'Have you heard, brother, of our mother's misfortune?'

'I've heard,' answered the younger brother.

'What are you going to do?'

'We need to make peace, that is what we must do,' answered the younger brother.

'That is what I came to see you about,' answered the elder brother joyfully. 'Now that our mother is in trouble, we have to forget our quarrel and bury our hatred deep in the ground.'

The brothers went onto their land, stood on the boundary between their fields, dug a hole, and buried their hatred there.

As soon as they had buried their hatred, the brothers came to an amazing realisation: 'Why do we need a boundary at all? Why not work our land in common, and share the harvest?'

The brothers got rid of their boundary. They harvested their wheat, milled it, and divided it into three shares. They kept one share each, and took the third share to their mother.

Because when misfortune strikes a mother's field, you must forget all quarrels, anger, insults and hatred.



The old man and Death

There once lived an old grandfather. He was one hundred years old. One day Death learnt that such an old man was still living. She went to him and said,

'It is time for you to die, Grandpa.'

'Let me prepare myself for death,' said the old man.

'Alright,' agreed Death. 'How many days do you need?'

'Three days,' said the grandfather.

Death was curious to see what the old man would do. How would he prepare himself to die?

The first day came. The grandfather went out into the garden, dug a hole, and planted a tree.

'What will he do on the second day?' wondered Death.

The second day came. The grandfather went into the garden again, dug another hole, and planted another tree.

'What will he do on the third day?' wondered Death impatiently.

The third day came. Again the grandfather went out into the garden, dug a hole, and planted a tree.

'Who are you planting these trees for?' asked Death. 'You're going to die tomorrow!'

'For other people,' answered the grandfather.

And Death retreated from the old man, and ran as far away from him as she could.