

I'll Tell You a Story: Philosophy for Children, by Vasyl Sukhomlynsky (Compiled by Olha Sukhomlynska; translated by Nataliya Bezsalo, Alan Cockerill & Berta Karaim) (2024), EJRP Publishing. 583 pages

I'll Tell You a Story: Philosophy for Children (2024) comprises a translation into English of a compilation by Professor Olha Sukhomlynska of stories her father used to tell children in the schools he ran in Ukraine during Soviet occupation. The Ukrainian compilation, *Ya rozpovim vam kazku ... Filosofiia dlia ditei*, published in 2016, represented one of many attempts by his daughter to keep the memory and legacy alive of a widely acknowledged outstanding educator of the twentieth century, Vasyl Sukhomlynsky. Earlier translations into English of Sukhomlynsky's work, *My Heart I give to Children* and *Our School in Pavlysh*, have found their way into mainstream educational literary source material, most especially in the field of values education, as prime examples of ways in which an educational approach can prioritise the needs of children by focussing on their holistic development and, if necessary, defying governmental attempts to narrow education to serve its own utility ends.

Sukhomlynsky's professional life as an educator was bounded by a Soviet-dominated educational philosophy and system that, in many ways, stood in opposition to what he believed. Personal development of the individual pupil counted for little, and the meaning and direction of the curriculum were to be decided by the State, rather than tailored to the needs of the pupils and the particular context in which their education was proceeding. Towards the end of his life, he was under fire from Soviet ideologues for his 'abstract humanism' and his alleged failure to adhere to Communist ideology. Hence, Sukhomlynsky's status as an educational hero and exemplar of standing against government dispositions towards instrumentalising education are well founded. Among her many other academic duties and responsibilities, Professor Sukhomlynska has managed to find time to ensure that her father's work continues to challenge educators and educational systems to take heed of the age-old message that education is first and foremost for the good of the pupils in its care.

In this most recent book, Professor Sukhomlynska's belief that her father's work contains an especial pertinence to attempts to insert Philosophy for Children into the curriculum is foregrounded in a section titled, *From the Compiler*. In these opening words, she speaks to the connection between the stories and the stated goals, intentions and ambit of Philosophy for Children. She speaks to the well-researched appeal of the genre of fairy tales, parables and the like to attract and retain young people's attention, to the characterisation and event worlds of stories to deepen their thinking and, above

all, to the dilemmas and challenges inherent in them to impel moral tuition and instil moral acuity. The interest in and attention to the moral dimension of education in this newly translated compilation is not so much new as an endorsement of Sukhomlynsky's overall legacy as one of the most remarkable artisans of a view about teaching and learning to be gleaned from at least far back as Pythagoras, Socrates and Aristotle, namely, that all education is inherently moral education. In the preface to his book, *Our School in Pavlysh* (2021), he states:

The aim of our educational work is to give every young man and woman a moral, intellectual, practical and psychological preparation for work, to discover each person's individual talents, aptitudes and abilities. We strive to prepare our students for highly moral and aesthetic relationships, built on friendship and comradeship, on respect for everything that is truly human. Our collective educational work is based on ... [this] ... pedagogical creed. (p. 1)

Sukhomlynsky's pedagogical creed, or philosophy of education, is expounded in each of his works and summarised usefully in *I'll Tell You a Story: Philosophy for Children* in a series of sections that deal with issues of nurturing child development, perceptions of beauty, the role of parents and, crucially, the school as a place where thinking can be set right. What this book adds is an important element of his pedagogical practice in the form of stories and storytelling. By all accounts, Sukhomlynsky was a master storyteller, seemingly alert to the pedagogical potential of stories to entice, challenge and occasionally confront, to instil the imaginative cognition essential to moral development and, indeed, to holistic education in general.

Hence, the stories and vignettes in the book can serve to stimulate an array of philosophical considerations appropriate to school-aged learning. As examples, in 'How the Sun Sets' (p. 82), a little boy asks, 'Where Did Yesterday Go, and the Day Before Yesterday?' and in 'How Could They All be Here Without Me?' (p. 145), a little girl wonders how the world could have existed before she was born. They are stories tailor-made to stimulate ontological questions about the nature of the world in which we live and the finiteness of human existence. The reliability of the senses is questioned in 'The Moon in the Trough' (p. 87) and the limitations of an individual's point of view are suggested in 'Chicks' (p. 99).

'A Boy and His Sick Mother' (p. 205) is about a boy cheering up his mother by drawing pictures of trees, beehives and the blue sky, who then simply opens the window to point to the bright sun shining in the sky. It is a story about the beauty of nature all

around us, better than the best artificial depictions; a story that could stimulate any amount of discussion about our relationship with nature, an especially important element in Sukhomlynsky's educational philosophy. In 'Grandma's Wrinkles' (p. 217), a granddaughter asks why her grandmother doesn't have wrinkles around her eyes. The grandmother simply replies that some people do. The ending leaves much room for discussion of existential life issues, what the grandmother's message to the child comprised, what the lack of eye wrinkles in an otherwise wrinkled person might tell us about them, of how one might live one's life in a way more likely to leave the eyes wrinkle-free. In 'The Sound of an Axe' (p. 256), a boy's father expresses moral outrage that someone is illegally cutting timber in a forest, but as they approach the men involved, he recognises one of the men and retreats in embarrassment. The son cannot understand why his father's moral fortitude has given way to avoidance. A story like this could lead to ethical discussion of absolute and contextual rights and wrongs, standing one's ground, conflict of interest, and the like.

It is around this ethical dimension in Sukhomlynsky's pedagogy that his work has found such a ready home in an enterprise like values education. Equally, the stories herein are rightly proffered as highly appropriate additions to any Philosophy for Children endeavour, and indeed to any education aimed at holistic development. Furthermore, like all good stories, those compiled here might be aimed primarily at children but can be enjoyed and serve to inspire adults as well. As one of the translators, Nataliya Bezsalova, attests in a foreword to the book, many of these stories were used to heal the minds of those traumatised in the post World War II period, and are now to be found similarly in the hands of those fighting and suffering in efforts to preserve Ukrainian independence.

In a word, the book is a gem, offering multiple opportunities to enlighten the mind and quieten the soul. While I am not equipped to comment on the accuracy of the translation from Ukrainian to English, I can attest to the final production being a fine example of readable and engrossing English text packaged in a most impressive physical publication.

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References

Sukhomlynsky, V (2016) *My heart I give to children*. (A Cockerill, trans). EJR Language Service, Chapel Hill, Brisbane, QLD.

Sukhomlynsky, V (2021) *Our School in Pavlysh*. (A Cockerill, trans). EJR Language Service, Chapel Hill, Brisbane, QLD.