THE ANNA BOOKS: SPIRITUALITY IN CHILDHOOD

INTRODUCTION

“There is a garden in every childhood, and enchanted place where colors are brighter, the air softer, and the morning more fragrant than ever.”

~Elizabeth Lawrence

“Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man.”

~Rabindranath Tagore

“The child must know that he is a miracle, that since the beginning of the world there hasn’t been, and until the end of the world, there will not be another child like him.”

~Pablo Casals

You are about to enter the world of the most magical child you will ever meet—Anna. You will need to open your mind, your eyes, your heart, and your imagination to follow her endless explorations through 431 pages in three books: Mister God, This is Anna, Anna’s book, and Anna, Mister God, and the Black Knight. Once you open the first book, you’ll feel like you’ve crossed a threshold into a world that resembles Alice in Wonderland and The Chronicles of Narnia as played out on the rough streets of pre-WW II London. You won’t be able to put down the books. And you will find yourself changed in the most delightful and subtle ways.

Novelist Graham Greene once said “There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.” For Anna each moment of her short life allows the whole spectrum of time and place to enter and infuse her with dreams and doings we can hardly imagine happening in ourselves.

Before you begin your serious reading of each book, please take some time to page through each one, looking at the simple but evocative illustrations by Papas. Pick a few passages at random as you page through, reading and savoring, getting a feeling for the energy embodied in Anna’s life. Give yourself some time to sit down with Mister God, this is Anna, breathing in the essence of the lives and world occupied by Anna and Fynn, who taught her so much as she taught him even more.
“Two roads diverged into the wood. I took the one less traveled by and that has made all the difference.”

~Robert Frost

A colleague put me onto this book in 1976. One afternoon a month or so after the birth of my first child in 1976, I sat down with the book in a university dining hall. Anna’s first words induced excitement and tears: “The difference from a person and an angel is easy. Most of the angel is in the inside and most of a person is on the outside.” I couldn’t stop reading. Between laughter and lots of tears I managed to bring Anna inside me completely, a little angel like my newborn daughter. When I looked up from the final page, I realized that Anna’s enchantment had carried me into an imaginative place without time and space and several hours had passed. Over the next 20 years this book delighted hundreds of students in a variety of the classes I taught, including Philosophy of Religion.

So give yourself time, place, and space to absorb Anna. You won’t regret it. As playwright Tom Stoppard said: “If you carry your childhood with you, you never become older.” Tom Robbins resonates with this sentiment: “It is never too late to have a happy childhood.”

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course is part of a series of courses focusing on outstanding contemporary books in the areas of integral psychology and consciousness studies. The books range across the landscape of thoughtful human activity: research studies, literature, philosophy, fiction and non-fiction, all creations by authors approaching the human stage and all of its players in all of time and space and history. The books for this course provide marvelous examples of philosophy, science, psychology, and religion embodied and enacted life.

In these books you not only have thoughts, but also the thinker, not only imagination but also the dreamer, the designer, the life architect, and the creator, not only contemplation, but also doing and acting by the agents we all are. Anna’s world crosses all the boundaries we fabricate in our schools, and in our laboratories, revealing the stage on which the whole human being plays out their life.

For example, in the discursive prose of non-fiction, the sciences, and the rational constructions populating our lives, you have only the thought and, generally, its argumentative dress. But in poetry, novels, in drama, in scripts, in art the ideas and thoughts are incarnated and exemplified. Ideas give birth to actions and actions have consequences. Our literatures create a stage on which humankind can display all its qualities from the most sublime to the most base. It’s all there in its beauty and horror. The worlds of research, of art, of literature, of theater, of fiction, of poetry mirror the world itself. As Shakespeare said: “All the world’s a stage and all
men merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his
time plays many parts.”

As Anna notes in her every action, we exist in the presence of an audience, e.g., Fynn.
each action, however subtle or gross, is observed and appraised by those around us
and hopefully, by ourselves. We’re players, exercising our imaginations, indulging
our fantasies, cavorting and gamboling in make-believe and real universes. As
players we move in and out others’ lives as well as life at large. Each of us leaves
distinct traces in the world. Each of us plays multiple parts as we create joy and
suffering, tragedy and transcendence, freedom and enslavement, certainty and
doubt, harmony and chaos, love and hate, belonging and loneliness, clarity and
confusion, truth and falsity.

Anna transformed Fynn’s life utterly and she has been leaving traces and echoes in
all her readers’ lives since the publication of Mister God, This is Anna in 1974.

The structure of each course in this series is quite straightforward. Read the
assigned book(s), write very brief weekly progress and questions reports, and then
write a 15-20 page report on the book(s) and its (their) impact on your, the reader.

Psychology 285-005, The Anna Books: Spirituality in Childhood is based on the
following books: Mister God, This is Anna, Anna’s Book, and Anna, Mister God,
and the Black Knight, all “co-authored by Fynn. Since these books are currently
out of print, please go to the Amazon.com site where you will find many new and
used copies of each book.

The mind that we see the beauties of the earth and sky, or music, or art, in fact,
everything. That silent shuttle of thought working in and out through cell and nerve
weaves into one harmonious whole the myriad moods of the mind, and we call it
life.”

~Charles Filmore

Anna will be your teacher in a classroom that encompasses the world, the human
mind, the human heart, and the human body. Anna is the exemplar of embodied,
enacted consciousness in a world of objects, actions, and doings. Anna knows well
that all learning occurs in the presence of contrasts. She doesn’t use my academic
language, but she knows its reality and truth in her bones. Our Lebenwelt (life-
world; leben: life; welt: world) is a dynamic matrix of contrasts. Contrasts, as you
will witness in Anna’s world and mind, compel attention, sustained attention
genерates reflection, and reflection, coupled with wonder, creates action and feeds
the quest for understanding so that we may live a better, fuller, richer, and more
satisfying life.

When you read the instructions under the Writing Assignments section of this
course outline, you will encounter ideas and insights I want you to read and reread
and reflect upon slowly and deliberately. There I am talking about stark contrasts
between two lived worlds, two lived persona, the world of the street—Anna’s venue, and the world of school—Anna’s part-time venue reluctantly attended. The contrasts between these two worlds cannot be more stark as we look at them through Anna’s eyes. For us, and for Anna, contemplating those contrasts makes us more aware of who, what, and why we are and of the ways we interact with the world and other embodied, enacted consciousnesses. That awareness enhances us as human beings. As noted above, we play multiple roles, adapting ourselves to different situations and different people to maximize relationships, communication, and creativity without giving up our authenticity. Philosophers, sociologists, psychologists refer to this character of human life as simultaneous occupation of multiple realities. Anna moves into and through these realities with incredible facility, while we adults often must struggle to change our profile to fit each individual situation.

Philosophy, psychology, the natural and life sciences, in fact, all the arenas of our activity and lives always occur in the matrix of cultures and civilizations, which create and exemplify historical and institutional patterns of action and thought. Each cultural setting constructs its distinct Weltanshauung (world outlook; welt: world, shau: view, insight; anshauen: look, intuitive knowledge, opinion) and Lebenanshauung (leben: life; anshauen: approach, intuition). A culture’s or civilization’s philosophers, scientists, artists, and sages both create and reflect these Anshauungen as they live, ponder, and describe human experience in order to make sense of their lives and discover as well as disclose what we call inhabitable views of reality. Each of us in our own inimitable ways is philosopher, scientist, artist, and sage. Anna does not live in this abstract world of words, but she knows exactly what we’re talking about and can provide a simpler and more understandable way to express the ideas.

It is vitally important that you keep all these insights and perspectives in mind as you work through Mister God, This is Anna, Anna’s Book, and Anna, Mister God, and the Black Knight.

Anna and Fynn discovered one another in 1935. Their extraordinary relationship lasted but a few years. Anna died just before England entered WW II. Fynn was called to service and survived the European campaigns. Fynn remarks on p. 177 that

The war years took me out of the East End (of London). The war dragged its bloody boots over the face of the world until the madness was over. Thousands of other children had died. Thousands more were maimed and homeless. The madness of war became the madness of victory. Victory? I got good and drunk on VJ (Japan’s surrender) night. It was a good way out.

Then Fynn, inspired and reconciled by the encounter with some lines about the poet Coleridge he and Anna had come upon in their adventures, returned to Anna’s grave and discovered that Anna was in his middle. But it took him 30 years before he was able to show Anna to the world with the first book.
Fortunately, Fynn was able bring to the world the gift of Anna. The words of Fynn and of Anna will help you recover your own childhood so that you can savor it, review and redesign it, and ultimately, integrate it into the healthy, whole adult you are today.

Another online course I designed is based on a book by research psychologist/philosopher Alison Gopnik: **The Philosophical Baby: What Children’s Minds Tells Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life.** Whether or not you take that course, you will profit from reading the book. It will place Anna in a context that expands our understanding of her and of all children, including the child who lives inside us. Always keep in mind that the Anna books (and Gopnik’s) are about *You* as well as the subjects and scientists Gopnik cites and the captivating and enriching life Fynn and Anna lead. All of us were once one of those babies and one of those children—round-the-clock learners confronting and integrating experience. Although we all grew up, comprehending, integrating, and using all that we experienced, we, as those babies, still exist within as the neural/musculature/brain and behavioral patterns acquired through all those years.

Christopher Morley, an American writer and editor, said something that captures the contrast between and child and the adult: “We call a child’s mind small simply by habit: perhaps it is larger than ours is, for it can take in almost anything without effort.”

> “Experience has shown, and a true philosophy will always show, that a vast, perhaps the larger, portion of the truth arises from the seemingly irrelevant.”
> ~Edgar Allen Poe

**COURSE OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of this course can be understood at two levels: the immediate and the overarching.

**IMMEDIATE GOALS**

A careful examination of the ways a child experiences, frames, and enacts in life the great questions of human life and the human spirit. This examination will increase your ability to embrace and give voice to these issues, as demonstrated in a book report.

**OVERARCHING GOALS:**

Philosophy, Psychology, and the Natural and Life Sciences address three fundamental questions, doing so with methods native to their conceptual habitats. Anna is philosopher, psychologist, and scientist all rolled into one. Her life and
quests embody these questions and answers to them. Anna points out that answers are easy to generate. The task of discovering the questions that produce those answers is much more difficult. Anna, of course, doesn’t use the philosophical language you see here, but her life is an exemplification of these observations.

(1) We possess the gifts of self-consciousness, self-observation, and self-knowledge. These endowments require that we be attentive to all that occurs in our consciousness at all times. Anna is a model for of attentivity.

(2) Given these facts about our awareness and the way it seems to operate in our lives, how, truly, is it that we can and do know anything? What do we actually know about ourselves, others, and the world? What are the ways in which we know?

(3) So, who are we who are conscious and self-conscious and know so much about so many things? How do we fit in?

It’s clear that different people propose sometimes radically different contexts for and answers to these questions. Anna’s ever-going explorations will help you understand some of these contextual variations and disparities and will tease your mind with wonderfully diverse and absorbing answers and questions.

This course is also intended to help you find within yourself the attentivity, the sensitivity, and the skillful means, and the heart necessary to comprehend and incorporate useful elements from Anna’s portrayal of the human being and human development.

“Every human being is a mystery, and you cannot, nor can any mortal, trace the endless windings of his mind.”

~Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller’s Teacher

Anna teaches us so much, but, above all, she teaches us about learning how to learn. So, a further objective of this course is to create environments and tools in which and with which both learning and learning how to learn become simultaneously possible for you. Your mental concentration and even-mindedness in all areas of life depend on the cultivation of learning how to learn as well as learning itself. Your education, particularly in school and on the job, focuses primarily on the mastery of subject matters and skills, while ignoring that the first and continuing task is to assist you in learning how to learn. The latter enlarges the scope of your endeavors and accomplishments, opening up universe of action and understanding. The former only fills your toolbox with specific tools for specific tasks in very specific contexts. You need both to overcome failure and to succeed in this life, and, become the best possible human being you can become.
STUDY GUIDE--THE ANNA BOOKS: SPIRITUALITY IN CHILDREN

Introductory Remarks

“We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it.”

~George Elliot, The Mill on the Floss

“Adults are always asking little kids what they want to be when they grow up because they’re looking for ideas.”

~Paula Poundstone

Each week you will be reading and rereading each Anna book, reflecting upon what you are encountering, making summaries of the themes and ideas, taking careful notes to help you comprehend and remember what you’ve read, and saving your notes for inclusion in your learning journal.

You may feel like a stranger in a strange land as you work your way through the three Anna books. The most common reaction adults have to Anna’s activities and boundless curiosity is that she’s a genius, a precocious child, and a one-of-a-kind child in a world of ordinary and average kids. But Anna is no exception to what all of us could have been, could be, and can be. You don’t have to waste time wishing you had been like Anna because you are an embodiment of her, however remote that seems to you in your adult present.

“Every child is artist. The problem is how to remain artist once he grows up.”

~Pablo Picasso

Your upbringing may have been constrained and ordinary, walled in by the ideas and practices of parents, teachers, and adults. Few parents and teachers know how to get out of the way so the child’s innate capacity for learning can flower. In your reading you’ll see many examples of adults who do their best to confine a child’s learning to the scope of their own—teaches, preachers, even Fynn’s mentor, the Black Knight, at least in the beginning. Your own biographies are probably filled with examples like this. You can appreciate, I’m sure, a penetrating remark made by famous anthropologist, Margaret Mead, who said: “My grandmother wanted me to get an education, so she kept me out of school.”

“One learns people through the heart, not the eyes or the intellect.”

~Mark Twain

Anna will prompt you to new kinds and levels of self-awareness and self-analysis. Her example might reignite the curiosity and excitement you once felt and lost as
you grew into adulthood. Anna often uses the idea of someone or something *being in your middle*. What she means is that you carry ideas and images of others within yourself in an almost incarnate form. We *incorporate* others in an almost literal fashion. Remember, *incorporate* means to take something within and make it an integral part of your being.

**Note Taking**

Keep the note taking to as few words as possible. Always be reflectively aware of what you are jotting down. Try to find a word or words that really capture what you are trying to say to yourself about the word, phrase, sentence, or passage you've encountered. Attentive, focused note taking will help you start unraveling the mysteries of embodied consciousness and of Anna. It will be helpful if you keep the 12 Thought Questions in mind at all times. These questions will provide idea frames for notes, the journals, and, of course, the final paper.

“There’s nothing that can help you understand your beliefs more than trying to explain them to an imaginative child.”

~Frank Clark

As you prepare to write about Anna, reflecting on what you have read, thought, and felt, as well as considering the Thought Questions at the end of this outline, I recommend that you just start by writing what comes to mind in whatever form it takes, however formally or informally, organized or not. Think of the process as having a conversation with yourself. The words you put on the page (or screen) are expressions of you and your thoughts. People, including teachers and professors, will often say (if they’re honest and self-honest) that they don’t really know what they know until they talk it out or sketch it on paper.

“Joy is not in things it is in us.”

~Richard Wagner

Here are some important points about the many persona (assumed identities or roles) and realities you occupy that have a lot to do with your writing and what you submit to me.

The moment you enter school for the first time, you immediately confront different language and behavior demands. You realize immediately that the language you use on the street and at home, or with friends, isn’t really acceptable in the classroom. The free and easy speech you’ve encountered and mastered from birth doesn’t fit the Standard English matrix your teachers impose. You have to develop a new persona, one of the many personalities you construct as you grow up and bounce off the people and world around you. Philosophers and linguists, as I said above, call this the process of simultaneously occupying multiple realities and persona.
You also discover how constraining and limited most curriculum and lesson plans are.

For example, if you were blessed with a language-rich upbringing, you entered kindergarten or the first grade with a working vocabulary (recognition and use) of thousands of words. In the course of one year, your teacher will focus on about 100 words. You have to squeeze all your language abilities and behavior into small molds. It’s no wonder that by the time you hit the third grade the light in your eyes dims and you feel like you’ve lost yourself. The free and easy talk (usually sentence fragments or single words) quickly gives way to Standard English (SE) requirements. When you walk into the classroom (K-12, college, and beyond) you rapidly learn to become formal, self-conscious, studied, and you do your best to speak and write in accordance with the rules and forms of SE. Your writing assignments become formalized and organized, conforming to those rules and standards and organizational styles, sometimes at the cost of what you really wanted to say. In short, you adopt another persona when you enter the classroom, leaving behind the personae displayed on the street. It must be said, though, that SE constitutes one of your vital personae because its use is ubiquitous. Everyone has to be multilingual in this sense.

*Street* talk with friends is very casual. Stop a moment and think about text messaging and its abbreviated forms. Or think about Twittering (140 characters) or similar forms of communication. There’s a world of difference between the way we communicate on the street and the way we do or must communicate in a formal classroom or at work.

Just pause and reflect on the prose you are reading on this page. It’s formal, organized, and exemplifies the rules and forms of SE. I would never communicate in the same way on the street, although years of classroom speech begin to contaminate my street speech. Ordinary people in ordinary situations often said (or say) to me, “You’re talking like a professor—get real!“ And I would try to avoid using much street talk in the classroom.

So my suggestions are that you do your initial drafting in something like the ordinary speak of *street*, then begin to progressively tighten it up, organize it, and build the flow of ideas and themes into a coherent stream of ordered presentation. You might try drafting your ideas as text messages or as Twitters (Twitters force you to really compress and distill meaning; it’s kind of like writing Japanese 17 syllable Haiku poetry).

This way you will be expressing yourself initially in a genuine, individualized way and then creating the more formal character that will be different from the *Street* but will, at the same time, embody what you really want to say.

There’s another example of this process that I’m sure you can relate to: The struggle to find just the right word to express something. We all do it all the time and we intuitively know what words are wrong and what words are right for capturing what we know we want to mean. What philosophers call *Experienced Meaning* is the zone out of which arises the real meaning you want to display. Let your words
mean what you want them to mean. The right word has a *zing* to it; the wrong word falls flat. In your progress reports and final report I want you to keep these observations in mind. Let the final product reflect what you really mean rather than what you think you ought to write because you’re writing for me and the course and Worldu, trying to please us. I know the difference and reward the genuine, thoughtful product with affirmation and higher grades.

**Thought Questions**

1. The Anna books combine direct accounts of Anna’s life, direct quotations, and Fynn’s observations and re-creations. So, the books are technically neither fiction, nor non-fiction, but represent a genre that transcends the traditional two categories. How, then, do you respond to and understand the content of these three books?
2. If you were to offer a comprehensive characterization of Anna and Fynn, what qualities and personality traits would you include? What themes would you draw out of the characterizations?
3. How would appraise Fynn as a story teller? Is his story of Anna complete and coherent? Do you come away from your reading with a satisfying and inclusive picture of Anna?
4. Are Anna and Fynn believable?
5. If you are skeptical or critical about some of aspects of the Fynn/Anna story, what are those aspects and why are you skeptical or critical? What are your own particular points of view or experiences on the basis of which you are skeptical or critical?
6. Of all the ideas, incidents, and encounters in the Anna books, can you pinpoint some that you find truly interesting and perhaps meaningful in your life and in your way of looking at the world and living in it?
7. As you reflect on the books and your own experience and background, do you find connections between your life and the lives of Anna and Fynn? And do you find that the books contain some ideas, views, or characterizations that are at odds with your experience, beliefs, life, or ideas about yourself and the world?
8. I have often remarked about self-awareness, self-observation, and self-analysis in this syllabus. Self-observation and self-reflection are vital to your relationship with the books. What do you observe in yourself about your responses and reactions to the books?
9. Do the books leave you with unanswered questions about childhood, both yours and Anna’s?
10. Take some time to recall events, experiences, and memories in your childhood and while growing up that resemble features of Anna’s behavior. What are the events, experiences, and memories that come to mind?
11. Are there ideas, descriptions, and/or accounts in the books that seem alien to you and are at odds with what you have experienced, or believe regarding childhood and development?
12. How would (or how does) the content of these books change the way you think, act, hope, feel, and/or relate to others? Have the books expanded your awareness and self-awareness? Do you have a better or fuller sense of what and who you are as a conscious human being who lives and grows in the developmental stream of life from childhood to adulthood?

Resources

Gopnik, Alison. *The Philosophical Baby: What Children’s Minds Tell Us A Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life*. This book is the subject of one of my other online courses. Gopnik provides a comprehensive treatment of current research on child development. Her work and the work of her colleagues give the lie to most of the myths about childhood and child development. As it turns out, their work creates a picture of the child much like Anna.

Takikawa, Debby. *What Babies Want*. Narrated by Noah Wylie. With Joseph Chilton Pearce, Sobonfu Some, David Chamberlin, Mary Jackson, Jay Gordon, Barbara Findeisen, Marti Glenn, Ray Castellino, and Wendy Anne McCarty. *What Babies Want* is an award winning documentary film that explores the profoundly important and sacred opportunity we have in bringing children into the world. It is filled with captivating stories and infused with Wylie’s warmth as narrator. The film demonstrates how life patterns are established at birth and before. It includes groundbreaking information on early development as well as appearances by the real experts: babies and families. The film is available on DVD through Amazon.

Children’s Literature

Annn’s life show us a model of what childhood is and should be like. *The Anna Books: Spirituality in Childhood* is a vehicle for recovering, reviewing, and integrating your childhood. However, there is a vast body of children’s literature from all over the world is available in stores, libraries, and online. I encourage you to visit or revisit some children’s literary classics after completing this course.