

Annie Know-Nothing

by Anne Emerson

Annie prefers an open-ended type of relationship, where people learn about one another gradually. A side-effect of this approach (not revealing what society might consider her badges of honor too quickly) is that she sees, first-hand, the nature of stereotyped thinking, or what we might call “societal group-think.” If, later, her various technical skills become more-widely-known, she finds that she remains in the low-status, or out-group, box. (Are some readers already rolling their eyes? I’m trying to be a good teacher; my having worked as a teacher. But I can’t teach eye-rollers by writing essays! So, any eye-rollers might as well stop reading now.)

Annie gives the impression of being small and sweet, and she has learned not to tell people, on first acquaintance, that she is well-educated. It tends to invite one of two responses – from those less well-educated than Annie, defensiveness of one sort or another (“Well, I’m so stupid,” or perhaps, “You snotty so-and-so,” perhaps not quite so rudely, but the message conveys); or, from those who consider themselves her peers, education-wise, competitiveness of one sort or another. In the latter case, more people than one might expect like to make a show of demonstrating to Annie that they know more than she does.

Here are some typical behaviors on the part of people enjoying “educated” conversations with Annie:

Annie and a very nice man-friend out for a walk under the stars:

Him, looking up and pointing: “That’s Orion – those three stars there are his belt...”

Annie: “Yes...” (Wonders to herself, should I tell him I know that already? He appears to think he is educating me, and that I will appreciate the information. Decides against bursting his bubble.)

Annie at a party, sharing information hot off the innovative lecture of a very-eminent professor:

Annie: My professor says that, if there is political stability in a country, its institutions ossify (losing dynamism and innovation). He thinks that that is going on in a particular European country right now.

Husband’s co-worker: There have been multiple changes of political party in that country over the past few decades. (Implication in sneering tone of voice – what you just said cannot be correct; I know better.)

Annie is silent. What the professor meant was that the institutional structure had ossified in that country. Changes in political leadership can occur under the same institutional structure. She was not invited to clarify, nor was it acknowledged that the idea being dismissed was not hers; it was a brilliant professor’s idea. That professor later wrote a book expanding on the matter. (Mancur Olson, “The Rise and Decline of Nations.”)

Annie in a meeting, discussing how to share politically-sensitive economic ideas:

Another attendee, in a slightly-aggressive, almost “gotcha,” tone of voice: What are your sources for what you have just said? (Annie thinks, from context, that she is about to be sneered at for reading a left-wing newspaper, and probably by more of the attendees than the person addressing her.)

Annie: My economics textbook.

(Stunned silence. Then the conversation moves on. No-one acknowledges that perhaps Annie might know more about the topic than either the mainstream left-wing or right-wing media outlets. No-one asks her whether she was a student or a teacher of economics, or to what level she might have studied the subject. She is now “uncomfortable” to talk with, but not appreciated, going forward, as an “expert.” She will acknowledge that she has met a few people who are exceptions to this observation; but even those who like to hear her thoughts appear to stop at thinking she might know ANYTHING better than a real professor.)

Annie in a meeting, discussing the economics of energy companies:

Annie (to the group at large): Companies that run (distribution) networks are natural monopolies. They are usually regulated, so that they can enjoy the (efficiency) benefits of owning the whole network, but not charge monopoly prices to customers.

Energy Expert (to Annie): Yes, I am familiar with that – we worked with the regulators all the time.

Annie (to energy expert): I know you know that; I was explaining the matter for those who might not know.

(Annie thinks – I wasn't attacking his expertise; I was sharing pertinent information. Why didn't he take my point and run with it? Perhaps I had inadvertently undermined a point he was making. Even so, the information I offered was relevant to the discussion.)

And, the same point is relevant to internet monopolies. Someone needs to be thinking about how to regulate a global "network monopoly." Or, how else to manage it, if you cannot figure out how to stop it from making monopoly profits and plowing them all back into whatever its managers think will give them more money and more power. You would, of course, have to worry about international tax laws, allowing profits to be declared on products and in places most advantageous to the company... among other things.)

Annie discussing Wellness:

Annie: Everything is connected; physical health and mental health go together – we need good nutrition, exercise, meditation, a social life, a spiritual life...; a healthy environment...; an Indian guru...

Others not familiar with this concept: We trust our doctors, even when they advocate more pills and procedures.

Annie: There's more money in pills and procedures than in prevention... "Medicine" run as a business contains a fundamental conflict of interest...

Others: Well, it has to be better than "socialized medicine." Our doctors are good doctors...

(Annie stops, at this point. There are books about it, but she cannot persuade her friends and family to read them. Here's one: *The China Study*, by Campbell and Campbell.)

Annie discussing Grief and Loss:

Annie: I work with people who have suffered loss and trauma. They need "help not handcuffs" – (if at all possible, I might add).

Others: People who behave badly deserve to be punished.

Annie: Many of them are victims who have already suffered much. There are some in my own family.

Others: Stay positive please; you are your own worst enemy.

Annie: I know Shadow work has gone out of style among psychologists; I know that the science of epigenetics might be making it more respectable again; here are some books you can read; resources you can explore.

Others: Not interested...

(OK, so people have a right not to be interested. If Annie were a real doctor or a real psychologist, would she get more respect? Real doctors and psychologists learn things in lectures and classes; they get degrees from respectable institutions. Some of them also learn on the job; some of them share, with interested people like Annie, what they have learned and where one can find out more. Some of them tell how their role is limited, even with the best will in the world. They have many patients; they have bosses and, perhaps, publishers; in the U.S. they answer to for-profit insurance companies. They have to keep up with changes in their fields. They need the help and support of family members in caring for their patients, but they have to be careful not to cast doubt on their own talents, or they might be out of a job, or sued for malpractice.)

Annie and Pollyanna:

I had a mentor once – At Oxford, it is the general idea for students to have a close collaboration with their professors. I have told several stories about my best mentor. This is one I have not shared before.

Annie, about the world in general: Well, everything works out for the best...

Professor: If that were true, we would condone Emperor Haile Selassie's regime in Ethiopia.

Annie is silent. She cannot condone an oppressive and brutal regime. (This is how it was perceived back in the 1970s. She now reads that the regime's history is being re-written.) She thinks, probably, that something could have been done differently, and some people might have been derelict in duty to allow such a regime to arise. So, yes, the interaction of fate, free will, and one's spiritual philosophy are complex. But this professor showed Annie that we must confront what we do not like. It is not ok to be relentlessly positive, in the face of great negativity. What would he think about the threats to his country, Lebanon, today; it is January 2024?