

Tolstoy Inspiration for Today

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Anna Karenina: Novel of Wisdom and Hope

“Man lives for himself, but is an unconscious instrument in the attainment of the historic, universal aims of humanity.”

During periods of confusion in my life, I often turn to my family for emotional support, to my God for faith, and to Tolstoy for insight and inspiration. *Anna Karenina* is one of the greatest guidebooks to positive, everyday living I have encountered. Like any great teacher of life, Tolstoy doesn't simply give us the answers. Rather he gives us a deep appreciation of the truth of life, and he encourages us to seek out the answers on our own. Still, Tolstoy provides clear guideposts along the way. By showing us the various consequences of his characters' life choices, Tolstoy prods us to avoid their mistakes and make the right decisions in our own lives. Some readers feel that Tolstoy is too judgmental in the novel. But if you read closely, you realize that life, not Tolstoy, is the ultimate judge of right and wrong. Tolstoy merely records with utter truthfulness the wisdom of the world that existed long before and that will exist long after him.

Anna Karenina is a novel of hope. Tolstoy powerfully depicts the harsh truths about human suffering and tragedy, but with an equally strong force he describes the great possibilities for human happiness on earth. Characters experience so much confusion and hurt and loss in this novel. But consider the many moments of bliss and wonder that life gives them at the same time: the sublime love experienced by Kitty and Levin leading up to and during their marriage, Dolly's overflowing pride towards her children and towards her sister on her wedding day, Levin's terrified rapture during the birth of his first child, his feelings of ecstasy while mowing with his peasants in the fields, and Karenin's experience of profound spiritual joy after forgiving Anna.

Courage of the Human Spirit

Tolstoy understands human vice and frailty as deeply as any writer ever did, but he does not sneer at or judge his characters. He respects the dignity of every human being. Even as he brilliantly describes human vice and frailty, he just as brilliantly describes the courage and goodness of the human spirit. Tolstoy never, ever gives up his faith in the human potential for self-transformation. Tolstoy came to this faith the hard way. More than once in his life Tolstoy was on the verge of suicide. In fact, the scene in Part VIII of the novel, in which Levin hides the ropes and rifles so that he won't kill himself, actually happened to Tolstoy himself. “But Levin did not shoot himself or hang himself and went on living.” (p.798) And so did Tolstoy.

Some powerful inner spark brought both of them back from the brink of despair. What was that spark? It was Tolstoy's (and Levin's) conviction that, no matter how difficult things can sometimes become, life is always worth living. Remember, the novel doesn't end with Anna's tragedy, but with Kitty's and Levin's productive family life in the country. Both of these truths—the suffering *and* the joys of life—are perfectly intertwined in *Anna Karenina*. One cannot exist without the other. But happiness wins out in the end. There seems to be a higher justice, a benevolent moral order to Tolstoy's world. No matter how badly human beings stumble and fall, the majestic beauty of the universe always seems to shine through. Tolstoy has genuine hope for humanity. He inspires us, even in the face of adversity and despair, always to believe in a better tomorrow.

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**“We should show life neither as it is nor as it ought to be,
but only as we see it in our dreams.”**

Tolstoy's Love of Truth

“The hero of my tale—whom I love with all the power of my soul, whom I have tried to portray in all its beauty, who has been, is, and always will be beautiful—is Truth.”

One of the many reasons *Anna Karenina* is considered Tolstoy's greatest work—and one of the greatest books ever—is because of Tolstoy's ability to depict the subtleties of human experience with such remarkable truthfulness. “We are not to take *Anna Karenina* as a work of art. We are to take it as a piece of life. A piece of life it is!” resounded Matthew Arnold, a famous nineteenth-century literary critic. Consider how many characters there are in *Anna Karenina*, and yet none of them is a stock figure. Every character is irreducibly individual. Tolstoy makes these characters come alive in the way he takes us inside of their minds and hearts with an astonishing attention to detail.

The Storm in Anna's Soul

A good example of this is the famous scene in which Anna boards the train to go back to Petersburg. There is a storm outside and inside of Anna's soul. (pp. 99-104) We can feel Anna's agitation, anticipation, and exhilaration, not because Tolstoy tells us these things are happening, but because he shows us Anna's inner life through her external actions. We feel it in the way Anna moves in her seat, in how she tries to control herself by adjusting her belongings, in how she picks up the novel, reads, becomes absorbed, and then puts it down, in how she rubs the penknife sensually against her cheek and giggles with nervous delight. We know exactly what is occurring inside of Anna's soul from Tolstoy's subtle, vivid description of her physical gestures alone.

Wordless Communication

Tolstoy also takes us inside his characters through his description of profound, yet wordless communication between human beings. One of the most important moments in Levin's and Kitty's life, the declaration of their love for one another, happens without a word being spoken: “He simply could not pick out the words she had in mind; but in her lovely eyes shining with happiness he understand everything he needed to know!” (p. 398) Or how about communication between a human being and an animal? In one of the novel's most poignant moments Vronsky is lying on the ground after having crashed his horse during the steeplechase. “...Before him, gasping heavily, lay Frou-Frou, her head turned to him, looking at him with her lovely eye.” (p. 200) Is this a tender moment of reconciliation between the horse and her reckless rider? Or is it perhaps a chilling moment of realization for Vronsky that he alone has caused the destruction of another living creature? Vronsky's sorrow, sympathy, guilt, perhaps even love for his horse are all packed into this brief sentence. Tolstoy knows how to say much in so few words.

Truth Comes from Within

Tolstoy's ability to render life so truthfully is not just a matter of his superior literary technique. It comes from something much deeper inside of Tolstoy. It comes from his profound compassion for human beings and his sincere desire to understand human life

without illusion. Tolstoy sees his characters as they truthfully are, not as socially constructed images or stereotypes. He senses the inner world of his characters with clarity, honesty, and compassion. This contrasts sharply with the way many characters in his novel often see each other and themselves—as projections of their own insecurities and illusions. In a nineteenth-century Russian society dominated by delusions and lies, Tolstoy had the courage to see and express the truth. Speaking the truth was not always easy for Tolstoy. It often cost him his inner peace, his friends, and even his relationship with his wife in the end. But there was no other way for him. Love of sincerity and hatred of lies were too deeply embedded in his blood.

Tolstoy believed that true understanding of life is not a matter of intellect or education. In fact, some of the most highly educated and intelligent people in *Anna Karenina*, such as Karenin and Koznyshev, are among the least capable of dealing with life's complexities. True understanding, Tolstoy believed, comes from the heart, not the head. It stems from the courage to embrace one's own inner truth and from the ability to truly understand the soul of another. In *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy demonstrates that courage and that ability as remarkably as any writer—and perhaps any human being—ever has.

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“There is no greatness where there is no simplicity, goodness, and truth.”

Tolstoy's Infectious Love of Life

“The goal of the artist is not to decide a question indisputably, but to inspire people to love life in its countless, inexhaustible manifestations.”

Never stop living! Never stop learning! Never stop loving! That is one of the overarching messages of Tolstoy's own life. Unfortunately we sometimes have this image of Tolstoy as a “serious Russian writer,” who wrote imposing novels and who preached from on high about serious matters of life and death. But this was only one aspect of Tolstoy's personality. Another dominant aspect, which is less well known in the West, is that Tolstoy was a vibrant, earthy man who had an insatiable love of life. Tolstoy's love of children is legendary. He famously spent hours at a time telling his grandchildren fantastic tales about exotic people, animals, and even vegetables. Tolstoy loved nature, too. All of those wonderful scenes in *Anna Karenina*, in which Levin is mowing in the fields and taking in the thrill of nature, come right out of Tolstoy's own personal experience.

Tolstoy also had a dark side. He liked loose women. He liked gambling. And he loved to party a little too much, especially in his youth. When you go today to Yasnaya Polyana, the country estate where Tolstoy lived most of his life and wrote his novels, you see a big open space where there is supposed to be a house, the house that Tolstoy was born in. That house is no longer there. There is just a stone, indicating that the house was sold in order to pay off a 3000-ruble gambling bet Tolstoy had incurred when he was a young man. “I'm so disgusted with myself that I'd like to forget about my existence,” Tolstoy wrote in his diary the day that happened. He was twenty seven.

In fact, if you read through all of Tolstoy's diaries from when he was in his twenties, you get a charmingly humorous portrait of a man, a real man, who lived life to the hilt, who made mistakes, and who constantly struggled with his own passions. Tolstoy even tried to control himself by resuming his teenage practice of writing down daily rules of conduct and then grading himself the next day. Apparently, his grades were low: “It's absurd that having started writing rules at fifteen I should still be writing them at thirty, without having trusted in, or followed a single one,” Tolstoy wrote.

Tolstoy was a man who lived life to the fullest. It is because of this passion for life, and the excesses and the mistakes that went along with it, that he understood life. He was not writing about people and about the world from up in an ivory tower. He was writing about them from down here, where all of us live and struggle every day. Tolstoy appreciated characters, such as Levin, who are out there living life, experiencing it, making mistakes, getting hurt, picking themselves up, and doing it all over again. He much preferred that to characters, such as Karenin, who hide from life and from themselves in their little self-protective bubbles.

If there is any lesson to be learned from Tolstoy's life, it is that you must have the courage to take emotional risks. You must make yourself vulnerable to all of the joys and

the sadness and the mystery life has to offer. Only that way can you truly appreciate life. This kind of healthy risk-taking mentality was the basis of Tolstoy's own life. And it is the reason his writing still appears so rich and so real to us today.

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“Error is the force that welds human beings together.”

How Tolstoy Changed My Life

“If I were told that what I write will be read by today’s children in twenty years and that they will cry and laugh over it and love life, then I would devote my entire life and all my strength to such a work!”

Tolstoy was not just a great writer. He was also a great and inspirational teacher of life. Probably the greatest lesson about life that I have learned from reading him is that it doesn’t matter if you lived in Russia in the 1800’s or in America in 2004. Human nature is the same everywhere, and it hasn’t changed. I learned this lesson in a very personal way when I first discovered Tolstoy seventeen years ago as a freshman at Amherst College.

I was going through a difficult time in my life. I had just moved from Michigan, where I grew up in the small town of Muskegon, to Amherst, Massachusetts. It felt as if I had been thrown into a foreign environment. The East Coast college world felt cold and competitive to me. I felt like everybody was smarter than I was. I felt like everybody was better prepared for college than I was. And I felt like there were social rules, which everybody seemed to understand except for me—what to do, how to speak, how to approach women. I felt awkward and bumbling. I was searching for myself, for who I was, for what was important to me in life.

It was in this stage of anxiety and insecurity that I was assigned to read a book for an English class: *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy. When I first saw the book in the bookstore, I was terrified! I had never even seen a book this big in my life (except for the dictionary). And I had to read it?! I was intimidated, like many people are when they first encounter the large Russian novels. But something amazing happened. As I started to read this book, the world that Tolstoy created from the very first page was so real and vivid to me and the characters were so full of life that I completely forgot about the fact that I had five hundred, a thousand pages, to go. I was utterly absorbed in the moment-to-moment experience that Tolstoy was creating.

There was one character in particular, with whom I fully identified: Pierre Bezukhov. At the beginning of the novel Pierre is young, he’s insecure, he’s socially awkward, and he’s on a philosophical quest for meaning. Pierre was essentially me. I had discovered myself in Tolstoy’s novel. That made me realize that Tolstoy could become for me something more than just a writer I had to read for an English class, or even a so-called “great writer.” Reading Tolstoy could become for me self-therapy. I could learn about myself and work through my own problems by living through the experiences of Tolstoy’s characters.

That was the beginning of my long journey with Tolstoy. I began to appreciate that, even though thousands of miles separate our two countries and over a century separates today from Tolstoy’s time, human beings basically go through the same experiences

everywhere. That was a very comforting lesson for me, especially as a young man at that stage in my life.

Tolstoy's Ideas Live

Even though I am now considered a Tolstoy “expert,” my love for Tolstoy’s art remains deeply personal. Every time I stand before a class or an audience today to talk about him, I still experience that innocent excitement and respectful trepidation of the young Midwestern boy who encountered the author for the very time some seventeen years ago. I have read *Anna Karenina* about ten times, and it still feels fresh to me. Tolstoy’s writing has wisdom, innocence, and purity that touch me to the core every time.

Studying Tolstoy has helped me to become a more compassionate person. Tolstoy has taught me that it is not the grand gestures, but the small ones, that determine the quality of my relationship with those around me. The smallest kindness can make a world of difference in another person’s life. I always try to remember that. I look for opportunities to deliver small kindnesses to my family and friends, to the man who serves me my coffee, and to the stranger on the street. It is not always easy to remember to do these things, and I often don’t measure up. Still, I keep striving towards this goal, and in the very striving itself, I find that my life has more meaning. Every day I try to live more and more like Tolstoy lived and wrote—with courage, compassion, and sincerity.

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“Art is a human activity having for its purpose the transmission to others of the highest and best feelings to which human beings have risen.”