

Nature Deficit Disorder

Transcript of Podcast Episode 348

Julie Walker: Hello and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

So Andrew, this is the month of November. And technically in the Northern Hemisphere, this is still fall. And we love fall in Oklahoma because the weather is actually cool. It’s delightful to be outside.

Andrew Pudewa: And most of the irritating insects are no longer around.

Julie Walker: It’s true. It’s true. And we just had an event here at IEW where we were outside for the whole day. And it was glorious, and I thought, oh, we should do this more often. But then I realized why is because it was in the fall. And that’s when you want to be outside here in Oklahoma. But today’s talk is on nature deficit disorder. And I’m wondering if this talk originated in a state like Oklahoma, where it’s really hard to get outside most of the year.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, this talk originated when I stole the title of the talk from the book by that same name. But I have no qualms of stealing stuff as long as I give credit where credit is due. And so the author, Richard Louv (L-O-U-V, no e), wrote this marvelous book I came across, gosh, probably pushing ten years ago now. And it just struck me very powerfully.

I have told people in various times that I did not grow up in a Christian home. And as a teenager with curiosity in a car and a lot of freedom, too much freedom, I found myself in bookstores looking in the Eastern religions, New Age sections. And I got very, very much into kind of the New Age stuff as a young adult and never really escaped that until my mid thirties. And so I kind of hit a point; it was right around my fiftieth birthday. First grandchild was born.

You know, you get kind of philosophical. You figure, my life is half over or more. And I just became overwhelmed with this sense of gratitude for everything. And one of the things I was so grateful for was my faith. And I kind of looked back into my youth and thought, well, you know, what were the things that cultivated the soil of my soul that allowed for the seeds of the gospel to take root and flourish, so to speak?

And I identified two things about my childhood that I thought were extraordinarily positive in terms of their influence on my spiritual aptitude, if you will – one of them being fairy tales. Read a lot of fairy tales. And the other one: spending a tremendous amount time in nature. And so I ended up creating a talk on each of those because I was so fascinated. And of course, we’ve talked about fairy tales before, and I’m sure we will again.

Julie Walker: Sure. No doubt.

Andrew Pudewa: But this idea of time in nature and the extraordinary importance of that and the circumstances of our more modern world that make it less likely if not more impossible for most children to have as much time in nature as I was blessed with.

So I thought this could be inspiring, you know, for younger homeschool moms that are dealing with the impediments, if you will, to having more time out of doors. And you know, I think other people have been thinking those thoughts as well. And there are a few blogger mommies or podcasters that build on this theme. But for me it was kind of a personal revelation, reading Louv's book and then intersecting some of those ideas with my life.

Julie Walker: So you said that you were in nature. How did this come about?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, one thing is our family religion. We were culturally Christian with Easter eggs and Christmas presents. But you know, I think I only went into a Christian church maybe two or three times a year for my years up to the age of maybe fourteen, thirteen–fourteen. Our family religion was sailing. My father ... and he was an engineer. And he worked to live, and he lived to sail.

So whenever the weather was good, which was almost always in Southern California, we'd be, you know, out on our boat on the weekends. That was a normal thing: either going down and sailing and coming home and then going down Sunday and sailing or puttering around or hanging out at the yacht club or whatever.

Or we would take trips over to Catalina Island. So a lot of my experience of being out in nature was connected with the water, the ocean, the island, hiking, big rocks, climbing. And then even when I was home, I had access to space outside. And there was a school that I went to in elementary school, but it became an open space. And I remember, you know, I would climb up on the roof of the school and just sit there.

And I'd climb trees. And then there was a canyon, and I would explore the canyon. And you know, I'd get home from school, which was when life started. And then, you know, I'd be on my bike exploring. And you know in retrospect, I think, wow, my mother had really a lot of trust and faith to let me basically go out and be completely unsupervised to a degree that she would not even know where I was for several hours.

Julie Walker: And of course, she could call you on your cellphone whenever she wanted to get ...

Andrew Pudewa: I mean, there was zero communication. If there had been a disaster, I would've been completely at the mercy of other people. And I just thought, what a different childhood. Even you know, and I would say my wife and I tried to be very liberal in the sense of letting the kids go places and do stuff. But there was never a time when a twelve-year-old child was somewhere for two or three or four hours, and we didn't know where that was. That just never happened.

And I thought, so our children were much more supervised and controlled and micromanaged than I was as a kid. And I would guess that'd be true for almost everyone in our generation. And I suspect I was more supervised than probably my parents were ...

Julie Walker: Oh, interesting. Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: as a kid or at least my father. And now I look at this generation, and I see young people that are even willing to consider putting, you know, some kind of tag on their kids or in their kids so they can track them 24/7. And Louv talks about this in his book: the various reasons that people don't spend more time outside. And then he talks about remedies and benefits.

Julie Walker: Right. So one of the reasons today's parents ... And honestly it was us. We didn't get out as often as what you and I did growing up ... was because parents are too busy to supervise their children. And that is culturally necessary today. I mean, I can't imagine my five-year-old granddaughter walking down to the park and just playing there. But that's exactly what I did with my brothers and sisters at five years old.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. Louv talks about the fear of strangers and dangers as really being something we have manufactured, and it's not real. So if we statistically—and you know, he did this in his book—compare crimes against children, it hasn't significantly increased in this (decade), at least when he wrote the book ten years ago, compared with twenty, thirty, forty years before. What has increased is the reporting.

Julie Walker: Oh, sure. Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: So most parents are hearing of a horror story that happened in some different state in some different circumstance far away, you know, one out of a million. And yet because that comes into our awareness, it cultivates a fear. And so our reaction to fear is to ramp up the protectiveness and the concern and the monitoring, if you will. And so, you know, I think that's something that would warrant further investigation by some social scientist somewhere. But that was his claim in the book. And I thought that sounds very reasonable.

Julie Walker: But at the same time, we are in no way advocating, "Hey, Son, let my five-year-old granddaughter walk to the park like I did." Oh, my word. No.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, if any of our listeners want to read something that's so outrageous it's almost not believable, but it's well documented as being true, there's a little book called *Bud & Me*.

Julie Walker: Oh, right, yes.

Andrew Pudewa: Written by the younger of the two Abernathy brothers, who if I get my memory straight, rode their horses from Oklahoma City to Santa Fe, New Mexico, alone when they were seven and five years old in around the turn of the century, early 1900s. Their father was the U.S. Marshall for Western Oklahoma Territory.

And this book just ... It's mind blowing. It's the autobiography. And you think, well, how could a five-year-old even remember all that stuff? Which, you know, there may be some parts amplified by imagination. But the historical record exists outside of that, in the news. And so the first year they rode from Oklahoma City to Santa Fe. Their fathers took the train, met them there. So they had dinner with the governor of New Mexico.

Julie Walker: But that's got to be ... That's got to take days on horseback.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, yeah. And then the next year, they decided that they wanted to ride their horses from Oklahoma to New York so they could meet Theodore Roosevelt. And their father took the train out and met them there. Then they bought cars. And they bought two cars, and they drove back. Now these kids are like eight and six years old. Obviously the laws regarding driving cars were not firmly in place at that time.

And I guess if I remember, their dad's car broke down; their car didn't. So they kept going, and then he had to get his car fixed and all that. And then the third year, some magazine offered them a huge amount of money if they could ride their horses from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean in a certain amount of time. So they did this. And by this time, you know, there was press; there was popular ... They'd come into a town; the whole town would come out and meet them.

Julie Walker: Well, and by virtue of the fact that they got all this publicity, this was still remarkable.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, I mean, it's beyond remarkable. It's unbelievable, but it's in this book, and you can get it. It's called *Bud & Me*. The Abernathy brothers. And if you don't want to read the book, just read the Wikipedia article on the Abernathy brothers.

Julie Walker: Well, that reminds me of the book *Little Britches* – great read-aloud that I loved reading to my boys and that whole series because that young boy really just took on family responsibilities way beyond his years. And I just thought how great. What a great role model that was.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and we are very encouraged to see and hear stories of children who not only have opportunity and support but rise to the occasion of essentially leadership ...

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: at a young age. I don't know that either of the Abernathy brothers grew up to do anything particularly notable or interesting, but their contribution to the lore of what children are capable of certainly is mind blowing. And I won't spend time on all the incredible, unbelievable stories in their life there. But it's worth it.

Julie Walker: So Andrew, I know that you grew up on a sailboat. And I know you know, but perhaps our listeners don't know, but I, too, grew up sailing. But my sailing began in Minneapolis. I raced a sailboat with my sister on a lake in Minneapolis. And so there we are in nature, but it was just my sister and I racing this sailboat. And there was a lot of uncertainties

because of the wind, and you know, yes, we flipped our boat on occasion. And I was nine years old racing this sailboat. I wasn't that good, but I was still ... My dad trusted us enough to be able to bring the boat and ourselves ...

Andrew Pudewa: Well, the lakes there are big and cold.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: But there is something about being young and apprehending the incredible magnitude, the power of nature. And when it's just you in a little boat, and there's these big waves and lots of wind, and you have to somehow get yourself to safety, get home ... And it taxes you.

It uses every erg of your knowledge, your physical strength, your capacity. And there's no option. You can't really just say, hey, you know, I'm feeling uncomfortable right now. Send a helicopter. You know, pick me up. No. It's like you've got to do whatever you've got to do to stay alive. And you know, for most of human history, that's a reality that children have often faced – is you have to rise to the occasion to stay alive.

And I think overcoming that type of, I don't know, gut-level fear, if you will, is just so valuable at a young age. You know, you climb a mountain. You don't know that you could. That's an asset in your spirit for your whole life. In some cases a child might specifically say, "God helped me through this."

But even if there isn't that conscious idea, there's that realization that there was someone looking out for you. There was a supernatural assistance. And of course, I think the funny thing is ... I think almost every human being, religious or not, has had moments where we've said, "Okay, God, if you just save me now, I swear I'll be good forever." You know, that kind of desperate desire for salvation. And you know, there's so many opportunities in nature. I also went to summer camps. Did you go to summer camps?

Julie Walker: Yes, I did.

Andrew Pudewa: And I didn't do this well with my children. We tried a few times, but for me it was like this incredible ritual of growing up. And I think I started flying alone on an airplane when I was eight or nine to go to Colorado to go to this 3-week summer camp.

Julie Walker: Oh, wow.

Andrew Pudewa: I did this every year until I was old enough to be an assistant counselor. And man, if it was cold, it was really cold. Well, you live with it. If it was hot, it was really hot. Well, you live with it. Well, we're going to go climb this 13,500-foot mountain. There's no opting out.

Andrew Pudewa: And I remember one time in particular, we were on a ... It was a 5-day backpack trip in the Sangre de Cristo mountain range. It was just magnificent. But it's just a

bunch of people, mostly kids, and whatever you could carry on your back. And that was your survival.

And it was going to be a horrible, terrible storm. And the leader of the camp, who I remember very well—one of the few people from my childhood I have a crystal clear memory of—he said we're going to get home tonight instead of staying where we are because this horrible storm is going to come. We're going to go home tonight. It was ten miles. And we left in the afternoon.

Julie Walker: Oh, wow.

Andrew Pudewa: And I thought I was going to die. I honestly thought that I would collapse on the trail. And he put me right up front, stood right behind me, and said we're only going to go as fast as you go. And if you go too slow, I'm going to kick you in the pants. And I was terrified.

Andrew Pudewa: I mean, I was absolutely terrified, but it was good. You know, I think if someone did that today, you'd look at it as being almost like harsh, abusive, horrible, emotionally scarring. But I tell you, we got home at midnight, and I felt on top of the world like I had done an impossible thing.

Julie Walker: Right. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: So part of it is that kind of stress, good stress, stress that makes you stronger. You know, if you don't tear muscle fibers, you're not going to get stronger. If you don't tear the limits of what you believe you're capable of, you don't get stronger. And I think that's, you know, more true when you're a child.

Julie Walker: Right. And I wonder how often parents, and I include myself on this, allow our children to experience the edges of their success so that they do fail. Like we want our children to be successful, but they don't know what success is unless they've actually experienced failure, right?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. We're not getting very far into the conference talk.

Julie Walker: No, we are not.

Andrew Pudewa: So I would just at this point say if this subject interests listeners, go try to listen to the whole conference talk we have somewhere on the website, I'm sure, because you know, I unpack Louv's argument a little more fully without so much of my personal opinion stuck in there. But I do think it's difficult but important for parents today to really work hard on this, spending time outside. In addition to the fear of strangers and dangers, as Louv says, the other big impediment that we have is an addiction to comfort.

Julie Walker: Oh, yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And you know, he talked to a lot of children. And he talked to a lot of families and teachers. And he found that, you know, children today are much more likely to

choose to want to remain inside because that's where the screens and plugs are. And one little boy said specifically that's where the plugs are as a reason to want to be inside, whereas in my day, well, we had television; we had records. But the television was ... There were rules. So it wasn't like I could just come home from school at three o'clock and turn on a television.

I mean there were rules. And I had to budget my time to get homework done. And you know, there was an hour of TV that I could watch per day. And I had to help, you know, with dinner, cleaning up after dinner. So like those two hours from 3:30 to 5:30 were so valuable to me. And I would always want to be outside like I said, climbing trees or playing just in the yard.

But mostly I wanted to be on my bicycle, exploring the world. And now children – I think they may live in a place where that is much less possible, much less safe—at least according to perceptions or in reality—much less safe. And their whole world is much more centered around screens at increasingly younger ages. And of course, there's many, many books written about the problem of essentially being addicted to screens whether that's games or social media or grolling or ... Whatever stage of life we're at, there's plenty of highly addictive content.

Julie Walker: Yes, and I'd be remiss if I didn't mention your talk "Pen and Paper: What the Research Says." And we've also done some podcasts on that and the problem with screens.

Andrew Pudewa: That's another impediment Louv unpacks. And then the third one is just regulations. There are laws and things that make it increasingly difficult to even be in nature. I remember visiting a friend who had bought a house in a fairly upscale subdivision where they had kind of planned the whole thing and put a river through and the trees ... And you know, it was kind of in its early stages of growth. But there was, you know, these signs: Don't play in the creek. Don't play in the river.

And you're thinking, "Wait a minute! I moved here so I could have this nature out my back door." Only the kids can't even go there because you know, if you've got a little kid, boy or girl, and there's a stream, well, what are you going to do? You're going to like dam it up; you're going to play in it; you're going to float boats down it.

Julie Walker: That's what you look for. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And I just thought we're creating a fake nature in a way. I mean, it's real. But you can't immerse yourself in it that same way. And then I don't know if it was from the book, or I heard this somewhere else, but this family had constructed a treehouse for their kids. And there was this violation, city zoning ordinance, that didn't allow for outbuildings in that area. And the city came and was like forcing them to deconstruct this beautiful treehouse they had created for ... Well, you know, and I've heard equally stupid things of, you know, cities saying, no, you can't have any vegetable garden growing in your front yard, you know.

And then I think the one that really got me was that the PETA group, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, was trying to pressure the Boy Scouts into eliminating the fishing merit badge because fishing is mean. Even if you throw the fish back and it lives, well, it was hurt by being caught in the first place, so we should never do that. And you know, it's just completely

kind of eliminating all of the things either ideologically or physically or legally or social pressure of humans being a part of nature rather than we being disconnected from it in this way. So that's kind of what his book, you know, talks about. And then in the end he unpacks what are the solutions.

Julie Walker: We've got three minutes. Andrew. What are the solutions?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, the short version is don't feel as though you have to undertake something big, right, because psychologically for the modern family, you know, a 4-day camping trip is just overwhelmingly complex to arrange. And you have all of these expensive things you have to acquire. And figuring out where to go, and then worrying about ... Okay, you may never do it. I mean, you might, and that would be great. But it could be overwhelming.

So and you know, particularly for those of us who are homeschooling, we have flex time. And we don't have to, you know, hide in our house from nine to three, five days a week, pretending that our kids have to be in school. So why not just say, okay, no, we're just going to take the day off. You know, field trip! A "field trip" used to be like go to the field, I guess.

I mean, I always remember it as, you know, going to some cheese factory to view cheesemaking or a museum or something. But you know, maybe we get back to the idea of, hey, let's just grab a good book and some lunch and leave the home. It's a beautiful day. We don't have any reason not to. And if we can't find true wilderness, well, let's just go to a park and get on the edge of nature and run around. And, you know, he does talk a little bit about the correlation between a lack of time in nature and physical health ...

Julie Walker: Oh, sure. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: particularly with childhood obesity. And then there's other things we wouldn't even think about like visual or sensory development. You know, when you're inside, what you're seeing, what you're hearing, what you're feeling on your skin is much, much narrower in its variety than what you would if you were walking through a forest or sitting on the beach.

And so that kind of sensory enrichment, you know, that a lot of children just don't have the same degree. So you know, I think his book is worth reading if you have time. I know that after he published that book, he started a foundation. I don't remember the exact website, but you could find it very easily.

Julie Walker: Link in the show notes.

Andrew Pudewa: Richard Louv (L-O-U-V) and *Nature Deficit Disorder*. And he started a foundation to promote this. We, of course, have a friend in the homeschool world: Ginny Yurich, who has kind of started a significant effort here called 1000 Hours Outside.

Julie Walker: I love that.

Andrew Pudewa: And she's kind of, you know, building on all these themes in a wonderful way. I've met her personally on a few occasions, and she's one of those super, super joyful, bubbly, enthusiastic women. And you know, I think she understood this as her kids were young and starting to grow up and realized how many other families just didn't see it. So she's using her 1000 Hours Outside to kind of give people goals and methods ...

Julie Walker: Good. I love it.

Andrew Pudewa: for really expanding that. So we can recommend her resources wholeheartedly.

Julie Walker: Do you know most recently our family vacationed in Yosemite? And, yes, love Yosemite. And my grandson turned two. And one of the things that my son and his wife got each of the kids while we were there in Yosemite, is one of those national park passports. And so their goal now is to spend the next dozen or so years getting stamps in their national park passports.

And I just think that's such an awesome, cool goal. My problem is I keep going to the same national parks over and over again: Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Yosemite, Grand Canyon.

Andrew Pudewa: As the kids get older and go a little bit farther from home, you will accompany them. And who knows; maybe you'll find yourself at the Great Sand Dunes in Colorado or Mount Rushmore or well, probably not the Sahara Desert. But there's a few deserts you could go to. So and then they've got to come to Oklahoma.

Julie Walker: And they do on occasion.

Andrew Pudewa: Because we've got all these lakes and rivers. Get a boat; jump off the boat into the lake. And a 3-foot fish swims right by you; it's kind of creepy!

Julie Walker: Very fun. Well, I love thinking about getting outdoors. It just ... it makes me want to go outside right now because it is a beautiful fall day.

Andrew Pudewa: It is a beautiful fall day.

Julie Walker: Thank you, Andrew.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.