

# The Goodness of Memory

## Transcript of Podcast Episode 349

**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.

Andrew, we’ve spent many episodes talking about memorization and the value of memorizing poetry, for example. We talk about that in your talk “Nurturing Competent Communicators” and how important that is to help with the formation of words and vocabulary. But I know that you have another talk “By Heart – The Goodness of Memory” that talks more about the value of memorizing stuff. So I thought we could spend some time today talking about that.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yes. Well, that talk, which—We have a good studio level recording of that talk, “By Heart – The Goodness of Memory”—kind of came into my thinking as the result of a talk I had given a year before that, called “Ten Thousand Times and Then Begins Understanding,” which I only did once, so ...

**Julie Walker:** But it’s a good talk.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah. It’s about repetition and the difference between what the world might perceive as *vain* repetition versus *valuable* repetition, and how do we discern the difference. And when you say vain repetition, that usually makes people think of the scriptural injunction against it. But there’s the danger of people assuming that all repetition is vain.

We also see this expressed in kind of the progressive twentieth-century views, kind of Deweyism, that evolved or developed or infected, I guess would be the better word, modern education as where memorizing things—in Dewey’s view—was at best a waste of time and more likely a stifling of creativity and an unnecessary burden on children.

**Julie Walker:** Why memorize things when you have the world at your fingertips, the world of knowledge at your fingertips?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Right. And when Dewey started pushing this in the early 1900s, and then it became kind of more of the standard fare in teacher education up in the ‘70s, ‘60s, ‘70s, ‘80s, we had not yet entered the world of instant access to information. So even before we had the ubiquity of internet-connected devices and Wikipedia, there was this kind of attack against memory in education.

So you know, what I do in that talk is try to speak about the goodness of memory and then point out a few obvious things. For example, everything we know, everything we can do, everything that we can say or recognize whether it’s our mother’s face or a poem or a Latin verb

conjugation or how to do a layup ... Everything that we can know and do and say and use to create with, we acquired through memory.

**Julie Walker:** Right. Sure.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So an attack against memory essentially is an attack against humanity. And one of the things I realized in this contemplation was my mother ... She was a music teacher. She taught piano and voice for my whole life. And so I just grew up in this world. And she taught at home, so there were, you know, a lot of discussions and helping at recitals. And then I grew up playing music as well.

I never remember her saying “you have to memorize your piece.” She would always say “you must learn it by heart.” And so that idea of *by heart* – well, there’s so much truth to that. I’m sad that the expression has gone away. It’s very rare that you would hear anyone ever say “learn it by heart.”

**Julie Walker:** Listeners, let’s resurrect that phrase. Let’s start using that more often because I, too, remember learning music pieces by heart. Not a well known fact. In Julie Walker world, I grew up playing the accordion. Yes, yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** The accordion! I would have put you on like a French horn or a flute or something ...

**Julie Walker:** Well, later in high school I did play trumpet, but the accordion was the closest I could get to piano because I always dreamed of being able to play the piano.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well in a way, an accordion has advantages. You can carry the thing around a lot easier.

**Julie Walker:** It’s true.

**Andrew Pudewa:** But that idea, you know: What you memorize, what you commit to memory goes right into your soul in a way. I mean, what you memorize will affect you. And I mentioned in, you know, other talks or podcasts that I did not grow up in a Christian home per se.

But I don’t know why; I did memorize, you know, the Lord’s Prayer, the twenty-third psalm. And I’m not sure what motivated me to do it. I know I was not forced to do it. Maybe my mother thought, well, it’s just kind of a part of being literate. Or I think she had a little bit more of a spiritual bend than my father.

And I just remember having memorized that. And then, you know, there’d be some kind of unpleasantness, something I didn’t like about what was happening in my life, you know. And I would recall the words: The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. And I didn’t even have a theological connection with it.

But number one, the beauty of the poetry. And number two, the kind of innocent faith of a child. That was encapsulated in this thing that was in my soul because I had spent the time to try and memorize it. And you know, I also point out to parents: Look, if you do not give your children good stuff to memorize, they will memorize stupid stuff.

They're wired for memory. I remember working very hard to memorize "two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a sesame seed bun," which was a commercial that I heard, I'm sure, ...

**Julie Walker:** Over and over again.

**Andrew Pudewa:** thousands of times on the television, attesting to the effectiveness of repetition to inject ideas into the minds and hearts of people.

**Julie Walker:** Well, and the fact that you can still say it today, what, thirty years later?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, and you know, I would never eat such a horrible thing as a Big Mac, but I do know the formula for a Big Mac. But you know, today the options are worse. You know, there's really ugly, ugly stuff that kids will memorize because it's in their environment. So it's almost like you have to choose. You know, you will breathe air and eat food whether you want to or not. You will take things in through the memory.

And so to the degree that we as parents and teachers can provide nutritious language and thought, and not just nutritious in that it's good for you, but also it tastes good. You know, "taste and see the goodness of the Lord." Taste and see the beauty of language. And we have such a rich tradition.

**Julie Walker:** It's true.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So that's one thing that I have kind of been sad about is to see, you know, in the popular culture people just aren't learning things that once upon a time everyone knew. Or at least in my position of imagining that once upon a time everyone knew, you know, certain things that ... You know, you didn't even have to believe them, but at least you were literate.

You know? And that goes even to like the Preamble of the Constitution or the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence or the very short and easy-to-memorize "Gettysburg Address" or even just little snippets of Scripture that connect us with our heritage, with our cultural origin so to speak. Those have just kind of all gone out the window. And I think it's sad because, you know, our country – we are ...

**Julie Walker:** The melting pot.

**Andrew Pudewa:** the melting pot. And there was a pride; there was a happiness; there was a joy in the fact that we all had these different rich traditions. And we could draw from those, and yet there were things we could hold in common. And I think, you know, as we lose both of those, we

are losing part of the broth, if you will, in which we can live and happily be a nation of diverse people.

**Julie Walker:** Yes, exactly. My mind went to actors and how we esteem actors, and yet they spend so much time memorizing stuff, so ... But what are they memorizing?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Right. But you know, when you meet a well-read person, you kind of have a bit of awe for their fluency with ideas and whether they have memorized exact quotes, or they simply have had enough repetition to be familiar with those things. And they can weave those ideas and names and events and references. And they weave them into a conversation, maybe an analysis of our current world or a conversation about someone's life. You kind of are just, I don't know. I'm kind of envious, like, wow, I wish I knew as much as that person knows. Well, how did that person learn that stuff? Well, it's the combination. I mean, we go back to "Nurturing Competent Communicators."

**Julie Walker:** We keep going there, don't we?

**Andrew Pudewa:** You know, they read and/or were read to – a lot of good and great literature. And so it furnished their mind with not just the vocabulary, not just the grammar in syntax, not just the beauty of language, the literary devices, the schemes and tropes, but very often with the seminal ideas of what's right and good and true and just and beautiful.

And then, you know, a lot of people do have a store of memorized things that might include Scripture or poetry or quotations or excerpts. I don't know a single person who could quote something and not be grateful that they could do that. You think about ... Who could you quote? I know a few Chesterton quotes, a few Mark Twain quotes, maybe a John F. Kennedy quote, a few Bible verses that would float into my mind at any moment. And what does that do?

It kind of punctuates my point. It kind of adds depth, adds credibility. It connects my thinking right now with someone who lived a hundred or two hundred years ago. So having that memorized repertoire of various things, which is part intentional but part accidental, is just enriching. It's just enriching, whereas I don't think you would get that same satisfaction of knowing, you know, a rap song or the formula for a Big Mac or some random thing that advertising stuck in your brain.

I find it incredibly ironic that while modern education has kind of marginalized the importance of repetition and knowing stuff, the advertising world has maximized that through repetition and forcing you to know stuff that is not even necessarily good or true.

I mean, I'll bet almost every American walking around in the country would at some point in their moments of living have "you deserve a break today," you know, float into their ... I don't deserve a break today. I mean, what have I done to earn a break, you know? But, oh, no, just by merit of being alive you deserve McDonald's.

It's almost insidious the way advertising uses these natural human faculties to inject into your brain things that displace the good and true and beautiful that should be in your brain. And so it's

just this huge cultural shift. So I guess my point would be if you don't actively pursue cultivating the memory intentionally, you will end up with accidental and not necessarily beneficial snippets running around your consciousness.

**Julie Walker:** Yes. Yes. And so I'm hearing now our listeners respond: But Andrew, I have such a hard time memorizing stuff. Do you have any words of wisdom for me to help me memorize the good stuff?

**Andrew Pudewa:** So EZ + 1. So I'm old. You know, I'm sixty-two years old right now, and my memory is not as good as it used to be.

**Julie Walker:** So I just want to just insert this right now. You are not old, Andrew. Sixty-two? Because you're only one year older than me. And I am not old. So therefore ...

**Andrew Pudewa:** We are not old.

**Julie Walker:** We are not old, but we're older.

**Andrew Pudewa:** We do experience the problem of getting older and finding it a little bit harder to remember stuff whether it's the name of a person ... If we don't make a conscious effort to do it, we may not remember that name. And then the next time we see the person ...

**Julie Walker:** I'm terrible, yeah!

**Andrew Pudewa:** So you know, one thing I've done is just work really hard to learn names of people and then use mnemonic devices so that the next time I see that person, I'll connect it with something. And you know, there's a whole lot we could talk about in memory. In fact, I believe we will at some point have a actual product, a writing program that will help students learn memory techniques. But, okay, so I think I told you this, but most people don't know because it's kind of a new idea. I've been trying to spend time in the sauna.

**Julie Walker:** Oh, nice. Yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I have been convinced of the health benefits of sitting in 185 degrees temperature and sweating as hard as I can for as long as I can. And you know, this is like anything; you kind of have to build up a tolerance to it. And so I'm trying to gradually increase my length of time. And it's not fun.

I don't think, oh, it's going to be enjoyable. No, I think, okay, I'm going to really have to force myself to do this. But I'm doing it, you know, often enough almost every day, that it gets easier and easier. But what do you do when you're sitting there? The time moves very slowly when you are in such an uncomfortable situation.

Well, I just decided to start memorizing prayers in Latin. So you know, I'm into this stacking habits idea: Like if you want to do something, you have to do it every day. If you want to do something else, you've got to do it every day. If you could do those two things at the same time,

hey, you know, the proverbial two birds with one stone makes no sense because nobody ever did that.

But nevertheless, I started memorizing these Latin prayers in part because I wanted to maintain my Latin. Number two, I thought, well, you know, it's just cool. And number three, if I'm really working hard mentally, I will be distracted from my physical discomfort. And I also thought the more Latin prayers I have memorized, the more I'll have to recite, the longer it'll distract me.

And so gradually I should be able to increase both: the memorized repertoire with the number of minutes I can tolerate 185 sometimes even 190 degree sauna. But it's slow. For me, it's really slow. And I don't have the paper or the phone. I'm in there ... just my brain. It's whatever I happen to carry around in my brain.

And so, you know, I start out with like four words. And I'll recite these four words again and again and again and again and again and again. And then the next day, I may not remember them. I'm like, I did that fifty times. Well, okay.

**Julie Walker:** Ten thousand times ...

**Andrew Pudewa:** Four words. Just four words until it's really solid. Then I just add on two or three more words. And then I will recite all seven or eight of those words and do that again and again until it's super solid. And then I'll do that again and again and just gradually add on. And once I got the whole *Anima Christi* prayer memorized, then I would just always recite that three or four or five or six times. And it's getting faster and faster and faster.

And what's so interesting is, you notice that your brain is in this mode of struggling to remember the next word. Then you get past that, and then you're in this mode of struggling to remember the next sequence of words. And you get past that. And then pretty soon, there's no struggle. It's automatic, or it's second nature.

And I got that one under the belt. And so I went on to another one and another one and another one. Now I've got about five. And the whole sequence to do each one of them three times takes me about four or five minutes. So if I can do that whole sequence three times, boom, I'm twelve minutes. And that's my current main daily goal. I'd like to get up to twenty.

**Julie Walker:** Well, I'm glad you said that because I'm sure our listeners would ask. And I don't know that we would ever present "Strategies of How to Sit in a Sauna" as a separate podcast.

**Andrew Pudewa:** It's just me. But the idea ... And anyone wanting to learn something is you decide what you want to learn. And you say, well, does this have merit to make it worth the effort? And then you just start doing it even if it's just one word, right, or three words. And then, you know, did I get it right?

Did I actually get that right? And in Latin it's a little bit trickier because, you know, did I say it the way it's spelled? Did I remember the correct ending of the word? Did I miss an article or a

preposition or something? Oh, it's not articles. But did I miss a preposition that ... or get the wrong preposition, right?

And then I go back and check and then self-correct. And then next time, try again. And then ultimately once I have the whole thing memorized, I test myself by writing it out and comparing the written out version with the original. And then, oh, wow, I've been saying that word incorrectly. Okay, I fix that, or whatever.

That I think, you know, for me has been a really good personal stacking of stuff. And part of what I've also been contemplating these days is the problem of what do you have if you lose everything? So I mean, what if? What if society broke to a point where I didn't have all the things I have? And you can start making a list of the things that you could lose: from your bank account and your income, to your home, to your car. I mean, good heavens! What if you had no phone?

**Julie Walker:** Right?

**Andrew Pudewa:** I mean, literally you would be in a state of extreme emotional stress and disruption because you'd feel cut off from everything. Well, what if? I mean, whether I ended up, you know, as a political prisoner, or I ended up stranded somewhere, or we all ended up with no electricity for ... I mean, it's bleak to think about, but it's not impossible.

What would I have if I had nothing? I would only have what's in my mind. I would only have what I have furnished my mind with in terms of the stories, the Scriptures, the Latin prayers, right, for whatever they're good for, the memories that I had. And then my capacity to serve other people in that situation would very much be dependent upon the quality of whatever I was carrying around in my brain.

**Julie Walker:** Right. So by investing in yourself, you're investing in others.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah. And you know, if I go through the rest of my life, and I never have lost everything in that way, well, I'm still richer as a result of it. Plus it's just cool, right? I mean, I met a boy once at a homeschool convention who had memorized ... And this child was probably if I recall, maybe ten or eleven years old. He had memorized the entire book of James. And I said, "Wow, could you recite some of it for me?" He goes, "Which chapter?"

**Julie Walker:** Nice.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Right? And so I just picked one at random, and he recited it. And I just thought this is cool on so many levels.

**Julie Walker:** Not only was he able to do it; he was able to do it under pressure because saying a random chapter that Mr. Pudewa has called upon ... Wow, that's really good.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah. I mean, he could just go straight to that spot. And I did not meet this person, but I have heard the story of a girl who memorized the entire New Testament. She started when she was about six, and she accomplished it by the age of sixteen.

**Julie Walker:** Wow. That's incredible.

**Andrew Pudewa:** That is pretty amazing.

**Julie Walker:** Ten years to memorize all of New Testament. I would ...

**Andrew Pudewa:** Like I said, I didn't meet this girl. But think of the richness of carrying around, you know, I mean just the Gospels. But the Gospels and the Epistles and all the way up to the Apocalypse, that's like mind-blowing. But you know, I'm sure she experienced what all of us would experience whether it's music or dance or any kind of physical activity. I'm thinking of martial arts, katas, things like that, certainly language. The more you have memorized, the easier it is to memorize more.

**Julie Walker:** I think that's a really important, important point, Andrew. I want you to say that again.

**Andrew Pudewa:** The more you have memorized, the easier it is to memorize more. So you know, I found this to be like one hundred percent true with music students. If I had a student who had done what I asked and maintained a memorized repertoire of music, learning the eleventh piece in Book 1 was so much easier and faster and better than a person who had not maintained the memorized repertoire, trying to learn that same piece.

And so you know, if you spend half an hour a day doing that whether it's ... You know, music is the obvious one because you practice every day. You spend half an hour a day practicing music. Well, if you spent half your time just playing what you already knew and making it better and easier and faster and smoother and everything, and half your time learning a new piece, you'd learn a new piece faster than if you spent one hundred percent of your thirty minutes trying to learn a new piece.

It would probably be even be true at around two-thirds, like two-thirds of your time, practicing what you already know, making it easier and faster and better and one-third of your time trying trying to learn something new. I don't know where the perfect sweet spot is. Obviously, if you spent one hundred percent playing what you know and zero percent trying to learn something new, you'd never learn something new.

So where's the ratio? Where's the optimal ratio? But I would guess it's somewhere in between that half to two-thirds. And yet a lot of people don't realize that. And they spend a lot of time learning a new poem, but they forget their old poem. But the thing that, you know, I've realized is any new thing whether it's music or dance or language, is really not entirely new.

It's a combination and permutation of previously known patterns. It may increase in complexity, but the complexity broken down is still the previously learned patterns. And so we furnish our



mind. We stock our consciousness. We learn by heart; it becomes second nature. Then we can draw on those patterns to acquire new patterns and expand our repertoire.

And then those newly memorized patterns empower us. And it goes on forever. You know, I'm always realizing this painful thought (We can finish with this because I know we're about out of time.) that technology will cause atrophy of the skill which it replaces. And one of my favorite stories is that story of the king of Egypt and the great god Thōth or Thòth or Tùth or however you say it. We've never really figured it out because we haven't found someone who speaks ancient Egyptian.

Anyway, Thoth T-H-O-T-H said to the king of Egypt, "I will give you these gifts of technology. And one of them is writing." And this was related in one of the *Socratic Dialogues* by Plato.

And the king of Egypt said, "Well, thank you. We'll take your gift, but this gift will have the effect of weakening men's memories because they will rely on the written word rather than their own memory."

So you know, we can now see that times a million. We don't have to know anything anymore because we can just ask our phone. But I don't see that as a valid reason to not cultivate the human faculty of memory in the really sad and puny way that we are capable of, being modern twenty-first-century, technology-enhanced humans.

But I will go into the sauna, and the first thing I will say is *Anima Christi, sanctifica me. Corpus Christi, salva me. Sanguis Christi, inebria me. Aqua lateris Christi, lava me. Passio Christi, conforta me.* And it goes on for a while.

**Julie Walker:** Yes. That's lovely. Thank you, Andrew.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Thank you.

**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](http://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.