

Podcast 424: An Encomium for Mothers and Teachers

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: Teaching is not a profession in as much that you choose it. It's a vocation. You're called to it.

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.

Julie Walker: So it has been decided by people that make these decisions that May is Teacher Appreciation Month.

Andrew Pudewa: Who makes such decisions?

Julie Walker: I don't know, but I kind of like it.

Andrew Pudewa: I see.

Julie Walker: It goes well with the idea of the school years wrapping up. A lot of schools are done by the middle of May.

Andrew Pudewa: What does Mother's Day have to do with schools wrapping up, and isn't it possible that May is also International Nematode Appreciation Month? I mean, how do you know?

Julie Walker: It could be, but you mentioned Mother's Day, which is also celebrated in May. So I think oftentimes they do go hand in glove because a lot of teachers are mothers, a lot of mothers are teachers. That's not always the case. But we're going to combine both of those topics, specifically speaking to mothers who perhaps they have their children in school, some ideas that they could do to help show appreciation to their teachers, or perhaps to those students who are listening to our podcast whose mothers are their teachers and ways that they can express appreciation.

I think the whole thing is appreciation, which is a big thing. That we talk about a lot here at IAW.

Andrew Pudewa: This does remind me of a Mother's Day joke.

Julie Walker: Okay, great. Let's hear it.

Andrew Pudewa: So there's two little kids, about, I don't know, probably six and four, and they come into their mom's room on Mother's Day. And say, "Mommy, Mommy, stay in bed. We're, we'll be in the kitchen." She thinks, Oh, maybe they're going to try to make me some breakfast in bed. So she stays in bed. She hears noises in the kitchen. She stays in bed longer. Few more noises. No more noises. She's in bed. It's been a long time. Nothing. So she finally gets up and goes into the kitchen where she sees her two children with a huge mess.

Julie Walker: Oh, dear.

Andrew Pudewa: all over the place. Happily eating their scrambled eggs, toast, and cereal.

Julie Walker: Six and four making scrambled eggs. That's impressive.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, it was a mess.

Julie Walker: Okay. Got it.

Andrew Pudewa: And she said, "Oh, what are you guys doing?" And they said, "Well, it's Mother's Day, so we decided to make our own breakfast for you." Something like that.

Julie Walker: Save her the hassle of making them breakfast. Something like that. So breakfast in bed. I'm trying to remember if through the years. Cause there have been many times, many years I've been a mother, if I ever got breakfast in bed.

Andrew Pudewa: Have you ever wanted it? That's probably the bigger question.

Julie Walker: Well, here's the truth.

Andrew Pudewa: It's the thought that counts.

Julie Walker: Well, here's the truth. I typically don't eat breakfast. I usually try and wait until 10 or so, but I always do have a cup of coffee. So if we call that breakfast, then yes, my husband brings me breakfast in bed every day.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, well, that's very romantic and sweet. My wife used to do that for me. I never did that for her. She's too picky about how her coffee is made.

Julie Walker: Yes, so ways to show appreciation to teachers and mothers. You probably can't do breakfast in bed for teachers.

Andrew Pudewa: No, but you could write an essay of gratitude.

Julie Walker: Okay, well, that's a good idea.

Andrew Pudewa: Actually, it's one of the ancient rhetoric exercises, part of the pro gymnasmatata was an exercise called an encomium, and that's where you find someone to praise, and then you write basically a speech in praise of that person.

Julie Walker: There you go. I like it.

Andrew Pudewa: And so it used to be something that all children would practice doing at some point in the process of their rhetoric training growing up. Of course, I think it's a handy thing to have.

Julie Walker: Oh, yes, absolutely.

Andrew Pudewa: Why not start with the most praiseworthy of all, moms and teachers?

Julie Walker: Moms and teachers, indeed. And I know that that would be something that would be cherished.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, but it also might need a little coaching. So for all the kids out there who want to write, secretly, an encomium praising their mother or teacher, what do you think would be some good topics to include?

Julie Walker: Oh, that's good. Okay, let's come up with some possible topics. Let's see, their patience

Andrew Pudewa: Patience,

Julie Walker: in the classroom or with them, their perseverance in going through reviewing their homework, their creativity in ways they present the materials, their inquisitiveness, because a good teacher will ask questions, not just give the answers to questions,

Andrew Pudewa: I hope everyone's writing these down, they might not remember

Julie Walker: I know. Well, I didn't write them down, but we can.

Andrew Pudewa: Inquisitiveness or the ability to engage well

Julie Walker: Yes, yes. A good teacher should have a repertoire of jokes.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh. Well, I think you can be a good teacher without jokes, but you can be a good teacher who's even better if you do have some jokes. Probably the small things that aren't noticed, such as keeping a space organized,

Julie Walker: Does your teacher have a nice clean desk? That's something to praise.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, or just when you're in the room where you're, does that environment facilitate the attitude conducive to learning? Is it tuning you in to good and true and beautiful things? Does it kind of cause to arise within you a desire for more wisdom and learning? I think an environment can do that.

Julie Walker: Oh, absolutely. I'm thinking of my daughter-in-law who used to teach kindergarten, first grade, primary years, and she's also very creative, clever. She's a decorator, and her classrooms were always so beautiful. You would walk in and just go, ah. I don't have that skill, that ability to be able to see how to arrange things in a really pleasant way, but I love being in a space that has that.

Andrew Pudewa: But one of the things I talk about a lot is culture and how the purpose of culture is to grow stuff,

Julie Walker: Right. I like that. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: Because you cultivate...

Julie Walker: Like a Petri dish.

Andrew Pudewa: like a petri dish. And so teachers, parents, anyone who's creating an environment should be asking the question, what are we trying to grow? And then a student can maybe semi-consciously say, "Oh, that's a very beautiful picture."

And then subconsciously, they want more beauty in the picture,

Julie Walker: I like

Andrew Pudewa: or they could hear an interesting or exciting story that engages their spirit. And then they semi-consciously want more of that engagement level.

Julie Walker: Yeah, I like that. You and I are about the same age, and so this might be just as hard for you as it is for me, but think back over your childhood on into, through high school. Can you think of some of your favorite teachers and what they did? For you, to help you?

Andrew Pudewa: That's a tough one. I've cancelled out a great deal of my childhood memories pertaining to school. I do remember 5th grade teacher, Mrs. Berry. She was very short. I don't know how short, but this was 5th grade, and some of the kids were as tall as she was. She used to play dodgeball with us, and she would get out there and hurl that dodgeball and try to whack us and we would try to whack her. And it didn't in any way undermine her authority. If any way, it just increased our respect that she would get out there and give it all she got. Of course, when you're 10, 11 years old. You look at any person who's your teacher and you think they must be old. I suspect she wasn't as old as I might have thought, given her vigor, in the dodgeball circle.

That's probably the single most powerful memory I have of a teacher in school, which I think is interesting because it really had nothing to do with the academic side. It wasn't Oh, I remember her reading a good story to us or helping us write our reports or whatever. I mean, that's really fuzzy. But dodgeball, that's a crystal clear memory. So, it kind of proves that those things that maybe we might think are super important are going to fade away. And some of the little things that we do to engage with our students and our children may be the more significant.

I think about my home. We grew up in the days before screens, really. I mean, there was television, but it was very tightly controlled in our home

Julie Walker: Four channels.

Andrew Pudewa: And not, not a lot of options. And so there was just time to like be in the house. And you know how kids just kind of space out and stare at stuff when there's nothing else to keep them busy and you can't say I'm bored or else then you get to do chores.

But there was a picture, a painting, on our wall of a cypress, a Middle Eastern scene, I think. It was kind of a desert type of cypress tree. I, cumulatively over the years, I must have spent hours just staring at that picture and imagining all sorts of things in that picture. The other thing is there was a framed copy of the poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling, which I did not memorize, but I must have read many, many, many times because when there's nothing to do and you're looking at the walls or you're standing around waiting for something or bored, it's either that or find the Sears catalog and look at the toy section, but that's only in the weeks before Christmas.

Andrew Pudewa: So, I, I do think that judiciously placed art and poetry and things on the wall...we weren't so inclined, my mother wasn't, but I've seen homes where there's framed scripture verses. It's just in the environment and it can't hurt and it can very possibly do a tremendous amount of good.

And I think teachers, also, in classrooms, we'll often want to have a balance between things that are perhaps useful, like a multiplication times table chart or something, and also beautiful

or engaging, like the famous picture of Washington crossing the Delaware, something that kids will just daydream about.

Julie Walker: Yeah, because hopefully there's not too many screens for them to look at when they're in their school environment, right? Whether it's home or in a classroom.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, we hope. We know the statistics. We know the truth on it.

Julie Walker: It's true. So I think of two of my teachers growing up. One is Mrs. Jensen, and she was actually my fifth and sixth grade teacher. And one of the things that I love loved about her teaching it reminds me of your nurturing competent communicator talk because we would come in from recess And we would put our heads down on our desk and she would read to us and she read *Where the Red Fern Grows*. That's the first time I heard that

Andrew Pudewa: Oh my.

Julie Walker: That was I lived in Minneapolis during that time and just loved her. She had a house on the lake on Lake Harriet, and as an aside, my siblings and I would race sailboats on Lake Harriet. And so I knew that she would occasionally come out to see if she could spot our boat while we were rounding, Rose was the buoy that was by her house. But we would go over as a class. She would invite us over to her home, and we would have a little Christmas party there. So I loved Mrs. Jensen. She was just a delight to, to our, in fact, two of my friends.

This is, I don't recommend this for teacher appreciation, parents or students, but two of my friends and I got together and we gave a gift to Mrs. Jensen, a puppy.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh no.

Julie Walker: I know, right?

Andrew Pudewa: You must have had inside info that she actually wanted a puppy.

Julie Walker: We did talk to her husband first.

Andrew Pudewa: Because otherwise it would be a curse.

Julie Walker: My other very memorable teacher was my 10th grade English teacher, and I think so much of what I am today in terms of loving writing and loving English and how the words come together is because of Mrs. Mark and a lot of her -isms, her sayings kind of crept into my mothering and my teaching. Things like "good enough isn't." "I don't want excuses. I want production."

Andrew Pudewa: And hard work

Julie Walker: “Hard work is immensely satisfying.” Yes, so these are, these are just some things that the teachers instilled in me. So, not giving a puppy. Possibly writing an encomium to your teacher. What other ways? I actually printed out some suggestions from the Parent Teacher Association of how we can show appreciation to teacher.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I'm sure they had a great time brainstorming their own encomium points.

Julie Walker: Well, sure, and, but some of them are like public tributes. Let me just list a couple of these. So, host a special breakfast or lunch for your teacher. Kind of like making your mom breakfast in bed, but just do a special lunch for them.

Andrew Pudewa: And fix the things you want to eat.

Julie Walker: Well, right, of course, a thank you card, either individually from the students or collectively as a class. That would be fun.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you cards are interesting. I've gotten, of course, hundreds of them over the past decades. A lot more since we put the SSS stuff out. And I'll just get a little card from someone. You don't know how old, but by the writing, you figure 9, 10, 11, whatever. And it really does brighten your day as a teacher.

Like, oh. This effort I put in, here's someone remote, in my case, I don't even know these people, and yet they are experiencing, at least in part, my heart. And that's, I think, some of the great value of those thank you note cards. And it's unfortunately a tradition that's being lost.

Julie Walker: Exactly. So, highly recommend a thank you note, a gift, a certificate of appreciation. You could just design a little thing on your computer, print it out. Teacher of the Year, signed Your Class and could be something like that. Planting a

Andrew Pudewa: Sounds like a consolation gift for a teacher who didn't win the actual Teacher of the Year award.

Andrew Pudewa: Go ahead. What's next

Julie Walker: Planting a tree or something in their honor. I actually like that idea. We did that for our grandchildren. We have two trees and now a third tree for our grandchildren. Each one of them

Andrew Pudewa: Where are these trees?

Julie Walker: Well, the two are in Northern California and then one is in our

Andrew Pudewa: How are you ever going to find those two in Northern California?

Julie Walker: Well, they're in their yard.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, okay.

Julie Walker: It was kind of a joke at the beginning, like, how big will this maple tree get? Because it's pretty small to start with. We planted on the day of Lucy's birth, and now the tree is massive, and she stands next to her tree every year at her birthday, and it's really a fun little memory.

But planting a tree in your teacher's honor would be a great way to do that. Maybe find out what their favorite book is and get them a little gift of a book, maybe put together a library for them. Like, "here are the favorite books of the teachers in our school," and then the students can check them out and know that this was Mrs. Jensen's favorite book growing up.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm going to plug a little movie

Julie Walker: Oh, great. Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: called The Browning Version. I can't tell the whole thing, and it's actually kind of a depressing movie in the end. But it has, it has a moral, it has a lesson, but the name of the movie comes from the gift that one of the students gave to a teacher that everyone disliked intensely.

And it was a translation of a Greek classic by Browning, therefore it was called the Browning Version. And the relationship between this boy, who did see the heart of the teacher, even though it was severely crushed over and almost no one else could. And so it's a very interesting movie, but it is, you're going to cry. So

Julie Walker: I like happy endings, so maybe I'll skip that one.

Julie Walker: Doesn't have a happy ending. It's a redeeming moral value though.

Andrew Pudewa: there's redemption. We'll put it that way. It's about as happy, maybe, as The Little Mermaid. The real one, yeah.

Julie Walker: Got it. Got it. Well, and I think, just kind of along that line, think of all the teacher hero movies that are, that we can see. And I know that you've got a list of them that you've recommended in the past, lessons learned from watching movies, and a lot of them are teacher hero movies. I think of *Finding Forrester*.

Andrew Pudewa: *Finding Forrester*, *Goodbye Mr. Chips*. Um, probably my favorite is *Stand By Me*. That, that one. Very powerful. the story, I don't remember the name of it, but it's, um, about Jaime Escalante who taught AP Calculus in inner city schools in Los Angeles.

Julie Walker: Oh my word.

Andrew Pudewa: And just raised these kids up from nothing. And it's based on a true story.

There are a lot of them. And, yeah it's as good, a good teacher hero movie is as good as a good war movie, only a little less violent, usually. Usually.

Julie Walker: Well, and I just think kind of going back to why, actually, I don't think we're going back to this at all because we haven't really discussed why is it important to show gratitude to teachers? And I think of, I think of the saying that you often say that you sometimes get in trouble for, and that is. Teachers essentially, they're just really sacrificing and they're giving so much of themselves. They're either

Andrew Pudewa: You want me to say that teachers are either saints or idiots. Because if they weren't saints, being there because they love children and are living a life of personal sacrifice, they would be idiots to stay in a school because there are easier ways to get money. Yeah.

Julie Walker: But it's also true that a lot of teachers, my daughter-in-law being one of them, it just, it did not work for her.

Andrew Pudewa: Sure, sure. No, it's a vocation. Teaching is not a profession in as much that you choose it.

Julie Walker: right.

Andrew Pudewa: It's a vocation, you're called to it, and people who stick in it long term clearly are called to it. I want to remind everyone that in our *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* Seminar Workbook Unit 5, there is one of the most magnificent story compositions written from Unit 5 by a student that I have ever read. It's the one on the Rockwell painting and there's the teacher who's standing and it's happy birthday and there's an apple on the table. And there's only one picture, but the student who used this picture, of course, imagined

a scene before and then a scene after and wrote a three paragraph event description of this picture.

And it, I think that, more than anything else, really strikes this. And this was, of course, an old style because Norman Rockwell, so 100 years ago or more, of a teacher who really had given up a lot of the comforts of family or wealth or stability because she loved these children. And this expression of their love back to her was a real fulfillment, and it's a beautiful, beautiful composition. It's one of the best things I think we've ever seen a Structure and Style student write.

Julie Walker: For a Unit 5. Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: especially Unit 5

Julie Walker: Yes. Which is, of course, why it made it to the seminar workbook because, yes. And we'll link to that actual page in our show notes so that our listeners can take a peek into what you're thinking in terms of what the possibility that a teacher can bring to students.

Let me just read a couple more of these ideas. And this one is specific to students—what can students do? Invite students to help decorate for Teacher Appreciation Week, maybe decorate their desk or so when the teacher walks in, kind of like that Norman Rockwell idea, like before the teacher got there, I don't know if that's possible.

Andrew Pudewa: The surprise party kind of thing.

Julie Walker: Yeah, exactly, exactly. Have students, interview their teachers and make that a part of their writing, like asking them questions about why they decided to become a teacher and these would be then either recorded or given as a speech. “Let me tell you about Mrs. Jensen. When she was 15 years old...”

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you hopefully don't have too many students doing that, or it would get a little bit tedious after a while.

Julie Walker: I love this one, and I don't even know how this would be possible, but invite alumni students and their parents to attend an open house at the school. And How would you find them? But I know that teachers love to see their former students. And Mrs. Mark was one of these. She had such an impact on her students that when they graduated from high school, they went off to college or went off to have a family or whatever, they would just pop in and say hello to her. And we would see that. So there I was in 10th grade English seeing, Joe come in and saying hello to Mrs. Mark. And she would just beam. She was so excited. So of course, when I went off to college, I did my best to pop in.

Andrew Pudewa: Come back and see your old teacher?

Julie Walker: Yes! Yes!

Andrew Pudewa: good for you

Julie Walker: That was both a joy to her and a joy to me,

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I don't think that ever occurred to me, ever.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: Sadly.

Julie Walker: Right. Right. Well, just to kind of wrap this up, I think our teachers deserve to be thanked. I think it's a lot of work. I think, in particular, teachers who happen to be homeschooling parents should not be neglected during this time. Just because, just because they're your mom, that whole idea of familiarity breeds contempt. And I know, sometimes moms, Find every opportunity as a lesson in teaching.

Like, oh, we're going to the grocery store. Oh, we're going to go to a soccer game. Oh, we're going to Disneyland. And suddenly it becomes an essay assignment later on. So just, just to, just to appreciate moms for taking on that incredible responsibility for the future success of their children.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, happy Mother's Day.

Julie Walker: Well, 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. 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.