

Episode 428: Furnishing the Mind: Enjoy the Great Outdoors

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: Nature provides this kind of environment that is low stimulation and gives the space for the greater contemplations.

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: Well, Andrew, last week, if you recall, we spent some time talking about things to do over summer vacation. I'm saying that in quotes.

Andrew Pudewa: Because we don't necessarily want a vacation from all learning and thinking and reading and writing and all that.

Julie Walker: Exactly. So we spent some time talking about alternative ways to learn while you're maybe taking a break from formal school. And one of the things that we talked about was the great outdoors. And so we're going to spend a little bit more time talking about that because we at IEW have dubbed this month as the theme for the month being "Furnishing the Mind with the Great Outdoors."

Andrew Pudewa: Okay, well certainly we see a magnificent tradition of writers who were deeply inspired, profoundly affected by their experiences in nature. We see poems that reflect the beauty of nature so eloquently. We see books that have certain scenes or lots of scenes that are just struggling to take the magnificence of the ocean or of the mountains or of the the mowing of the fields and put it in words that recreates that experience or enhances a person's experience. So that would be one thing that comes to mind immediately is if you're going to spend more time in nature, read more that's going to increase your appreciation of the time you spend.

Julie Walker: Yes. Yes, exactly. So, I remember when we first set up this room that we're sitting in right now for our recording studio for a podcast. And we should probably put a picture of this room in our show notes because it is not very beautiful. It literally has packing blankets.

Andrew Pudewa: Packing blankets

Julie Walker: Packing blankets on the wall

Andrew Pudewa: If I'm going to move, I'll come here to get packing blankets.

Julie Walker: Well, then where will we use to soundproof our... So it's soundproofing materials. And you said, Oh, this is so ugly. We should put some pictures in here. And so I had this great idea. And It was a great idea, poorly executed, but I found these pictures that look like windows. So the windows are opened up, but they're much smaller than what I thought they would be.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, they are, and they're all California, right? So we have the pier, we have the coast, rugged coastline with a tree, Monterey, it looks Monterey, and then that's Yosemite.

Julie Walker: Yes, that is Tunnel View at Yosemite. One of my very favorite places to be.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, you showed me a picture on your phone that is almost like that, except the clouds are different.

Julie Walker: The clouds are different.

I just think of the times growing up that my family would go camping and sitting. You know, I grew up in Minnesota and there were lots of places to camp in Minnesota that were very hot in the summer. But I remember just being by the river and seeing, because my dad was a fisherman and just seeing and just being surrounded by just the sounds of nature was so quiet. And you could hear the water, and you could hear the birds and the crickets, and we're just surrounded by so much noise in the city.

And I think about your talk *Nature Deficit Disorder* and you talk about that idea of sound where it's just everywhere.

Andrew Pudewa: Noise pollution, auditory pollution, and it interferes with thinking and contemplation. I had a similar childhood in that I spent a lot of time on a sailboat off the coast of Southern California. And over at Catalina Island, we would anchor at my father's favorite place to go. And there was this big mountain that was kind of a cliff over the ocean. And because there were no screens, pretty much nothing to do, I wasn't obviously interested in reading all the time, I would just sit on that boat and stare at that mountain and then make up stories in my mind about the imaginary face that you could see or the shape that would then become something.

And in retrospect, I cherish those moments because they're kind of like that nexus between the reality of nature and the imagination that enriches our world, our universe, our life. And I fear that too many children just don't have contemplative opportunities like that.

Julie Walker: Yes, I pity today's parents who have to fight that fight, the screens versus just go outside and play. And again, I go back to your *Nature Deficit Disorder* talk. You have two stories that I'd just love for you to share. One is, Why does the boy want to be inside, and the other, just kind of that fear that parents have of letting their kids go outside and play.

Andrew Pudewa: We should give credit to the author of the book which uses that idiom, *Nature Deficit Disorder*. I didn't think of it, Richard Louv, in his book, *Last Child in the*

Woods. And this is a pretty old book now, I think it's got to be at least 15 years, somewhere around there, maybe more. And he coined that term, "Nature Deficit Disorder" that being disconnected from nature actually has a deleterious effect on us as individuals, as families, as communities, on our brains, on our spirit, on our physical well being. And that just like a medical condition, we need to look for the remedy. And fortunately, the remedy isn't too hard to find, but it's sometimes hard to carve out the time and make the effort to get to the beach or get to the mountains, or just get to the park and get up in a tree.

So in the book, Richard Louv gave some examples of how people are so very disconnected from nature. And in an interview with, I think it was six year olds in New York, he asked them, Some various questions and one of the questions is where do you like to be? Where do you like to hang out? And one little boy said, "inside. That's where the plugs are."

Probably that's not a problem anymore because almost all devices are wireless. But that whole idea of this is where my life is this little narrow screen and this cartoon version of life. And it's just not sustainable from a soul perspective. Emotional health is huge.

So what was the other thing?

Julie Walker: This idea of parents being concerned about their children being unsupervised.

Andrew Pudewa: he does talk about the phenomenon. That really, children don't live in a more dangerous world than they ever did. Crimes against children have not really increased. In fact, in many places, they have decreased over the last 40, 50 years.

What has increased is the reporting of crime against children. So someone in Iowa reads about some horrible thing that happens in upstate New York, and then they transfer that into, "Oh no, it's dangerous to let your kids walk two blocks to the park unattended." And then you also have the nosy neighbor problem of people saying, "Oh no, there's two children outside alone."

Well, they might be 12 and 10 years old. And, but, oh no, they're alone. This is endangerment. Their parents need to be confronted on this. And so this, what is it he called? The "fear of strangers and dangers" that somehow we just can't give kids freedom outside anymore.

And I think we were victims of it, even in our family. I remember my wife. If she didn't know where all of the children were at every moment, she'd get very nervous. When I was growing up, I think from the age of 10, 5th grade, probably, there were huge swaths of time where my mother had no idea where I was, nor did I feel any need to tell her exactly, "I'm going to be at so and so's house, or I'm going to be on top of the roof at the school building, or I'm going to be riding my bike around the neighborhood." If I didn't get home by dinner, then she might worry.

There's this freedom that I had. And I think that was much more universal when I was growing up in the 60s, early 70s. And I suspect that my parents had even larger amounts of unsupervised time. And a lot of that was just being outdoors. And you think nature, oh no,

you have to make a big trip to the wherever, which means you've got to prepare food and supplies and the correct clothing, and you've got to spend all day doing it. It wasn't like that. You just go outside and you're just outside for a few hours and wherever you go, there's trees and there's things to climb.

Julie Walker: And probably a bunch of kids that you can go play with. I mean, that was us growing up, the neighbor kids, we'd all go outside and we'd play together. And now there's not a lot of that going on.

Andrew Pudewa: No, it's very sad, and I think people are trying to intentionally create safe spaces where kids can have those types of experiences, but it's hard. It's hard to do. So, how, how can we help? How can we help that? Because we're just a little old writing curriculum publishing company here in Oklahoma.

Julie Walker: Right. But I love that you, you started off by saying, one of the reasons why it's so valuable for a writing company to encourage people to get outside is, it does furnish our mind with images. How can we write about a river, and what it sounds like, and what it looks like, and the fishes leaping from that river and being *The River Runs Through It* image, where the guys, how can we do that if we haven't experienced that ourselves?

And, um, but we do have a good friend that we've actually had on the podcast before— the thousand hours outside...

Andrew Pudewa: Ginny, Ginny Yurich, yes. And her new book is really good, too. *Till the Lights Come On*, I think

Julie Walker: *Until the Streetlights Come On*.

Andrew Pudewa: *Until the Streetlights Come On*

Julie Walker: So shout out to Ginny and everybody go out and buy her new book. And I love that. That was the sign “go home-dinners on the table because the streetlights are coming on” for us. It was a dinner bell. My dad would ring the dinner bell and hopefully we were close enough to hear that dinner bell, but it rang pretty loud, but just stay outside until the streetlight.

Her call to families with children is get your kids outside a thousand hours a year and actually track it and see if you can do it.

Andrew Pudewa: That's a lot. Because if you do the math, that's over two hours for 365 days. I've known people that actually have tried and succeeded due to that. I've known people who tried but didn't hit the thousand hours but saw the tremendous value in it.

I'm thinking about this relationship between the experience and the verbal expression of the experience. So when you read a poem or a description, it brings your attention to certain things that when you then go out in nature you can notice better.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And it goes the other way too. If you're out in nature, you get these sensory impressions. And then when you read it, those sensory impressions are translated into words that give you the power to remember and communicate those things better.

And so this building of the bridge. The other thing we would mention is how many composers were deeply inspired by time in nature. And Beethoven being the one that comes first to the mind. But I think many people have written about that. And so the translation of the visual into the auditory. And as you know, I recently finished reading *Moby Dick*, which I was kind of guilt tripped into doing it, and I had a really hard time for the first few hours I was listening to it.

Julie Walker: Well and be careful, Andrew, don't say too much because, listener, we are going to be doing a podcast in the future about this experience.

Andrew Pudewa: But what struck me is that the level of detail of description that this author Melville was capable of was possible only because he lived on a whaling ship for years, but he also had this phenomenal education in the classics, and you, it was clear that he was well steeped in the Greeks and in the Bible and in Shakespeare and in many other things.

And so the literature that he had in his mind combined with the real experiences allows him to create an experience for a reader that no one would ever be able to have. I mean, there's no way that you could ever go on a boat and have an experience like he describes being on this whaling ship.

And it goes obviously in a thousand different directions we'll talk about later. But I've been increasingly aware that by writing and reading, people, I won't even say children but all of us, by writing and reading well, we're working on the verbal, the verbal side of it, of the experience. And then when we go to nature, we experience it more profoundly because we've read those words and then vice versa. When we're in nature and we have an experience of being on the top of a mountain or sledding down the side of a snow covered hill at great speeds with this expansive view around and these kinds of things, that's grist for the writer mill as well, which is why I think that it used to be much more common for writing instruction to include reflections on nature. And I think we're working in this direction because one of our new books, *Wonder of Nature*...

Julie Walker: *Wonders of Science*.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, *Wonders of Science*, which has so much nature in it. And I'm thinking that, a child who writes about bees, for example, and learns a little more about bees, they go out in their backyard and see a bee. Their experience of observing the bee will be much more enriching because they did some reading and writing about it.

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly. So I'm looking at a blog post that is on the 1000hoursoutside.com website. And there's a couple of comments here that I would like you to speak to, Andrew, provide color commentary.

Andrew Pudewa: You want me to comment on a comment on a comment?

Julie Walker: Yes, And this one, this statement right here, I'm just gonna kind of show my hand a little bit.

I want you to talk about the problem with boredom.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, okay. Let's see what it says.

Julie Walker: The key to creating a life or a summer with children that you don't want to escape from lies in honoring the physical, biological, emotional, and social needs of the child. And let me just, prior to this the author of this blog post was commenting on the fact that so many parents are eager for summer vacation to end so their kids can get back to the routine of school.

And yet here we have the opportunity to live in this world of outside. How do we create an environment that we don't want to escape from? And I think oftentimes it falls to the parents, or at least they think it falls to the parents to entertain these children, or they might become, God forbid, bored.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, one of the curses of being born into the world recently is that the world has convinced you and everyone else around you that you have a right to constant entertainment. And that if you are not happy, that's because someone is failing to make you happy, and, God forbid, you should be stuck without something to entertain you and suffer the horrible curse of boredom.

And that's such a modern mindset, I don't think our grandparents could even have understood the statement, it would be so ridiculous to them. Of course I've said a few times I never used the word *bored* around my parents because that was an immediate sentence to scrub all the floors and sweep the patio and go pull weeds and you would quickly become unbored doing things you maybe didn't think you wanted to do.

So I just never said that to my parents. Blaise Pascal, the philosopher mathematician, made a statement I'm paraphrasing here, but he basically said most of the world's problems would be solved if humans could sit alone for several hours and be at peace. If humans could be at peace, sitting alone for a few hours, that would really change pretty much everybody's attitude about everything, and yet in our modern day, even old people like me are always looking for the thing I should be doing or the thing to do to keep my mind busy while I'm doing something. And I've tried to disconnect from that a little bit and say, "well, maybe I could just make dinner without listening to a podcast. What would that be like? Or maybe I could sit outside, surrounded by the plants and the bees and without a book. What would happen? And I have the childhood memory of doing this of just sitting with my parents. What are you doing? We're not talking. What are you doing? Watching the sunset. And the silence that is a space for the soul to breathe, maybe?"

Julie Walker: And maybe, just maybe, don't whip out your phone to take a picture of the sunset, right?

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, I recently traveled with my wife to a beautiful place. And we are almost exactly opposite in that I would just leave my phone in the car so that I could go sit on the beach and not have a phone anywhere. And she always wanted to be able to take a picture to send to the grandchildren. “How beautiful it is here!”

And there's a balance, I'm sure. But I think it would behoove all parents to try to cultivate in their children this ability to just sit and be and experience and learn to appreciate, to apprehend, if you want to use the words, the details of the world around.

Julie Walker: I love that. I'm craving that right now. I want to leave this room and go jump on an airplane and go sit at the beach.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you don't have to jump on an airplane. Oklahoma has many lakes.

Julie Walker: This is true.

Andrew Pudewa: But you are going to jump on an airplane...

Julie Walker: I am going to.

Andrew Pudewa: soon and go somewhere.

Julie Walker: And probably go sit on a beach.

So I have another comment that I'd like you to comment on. “According to educational philosophers, occupational therapists, and current research, children need hours of time in nature several days of the week in order to satisfy this period of immense growth.

So speak about this time of growth.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, what's growing? The physical body, obviously. The capacity to hear thoughts, to think intentionally. So, for young children, a lot of their thinking is always a reaction to the environment. But as we get older, we start to have these questions that we carry around with us. It may be a rather mundane question, like, “how come my mom always gives us oatmeal for breakfast?”

Or it could be a really significant question, like does God really hear my prayers? And everything in between. And so nature provides this kind of environment that is low stimulation and gives the space for the greater contemplations.

And we don't know always what's going on in our own minds, but we can experience reaching a point where we feel like, okay, you're, you're just connecting the dots. You're just making these connections between the myriad of things in your world. And that's how you kind of sort it out and make sense of stuff. In my talk, I sometimes tell the story of one of my daughters who was sitting at the large sliding glass door in that living room with the home we were living in, and she was sitting, looking out the window and I walked through the room

thinking, okay, this is about 10:30-11:00 and we're homeschooling, so this kid should be actually doing homeschooling.

So I kind of made a mental note to find my wife and find out why she wasn't doing something that resembled school at this time of the day. And, then I don't know, maybe 20, 30 minutes later, I walked through that same room again, and she was still sitting there doing nothing, just looking at the window. So in my gentlest, non-critical, loving dad voice, I said, "Hey, What you doing?" And she said, "Things are just kind of connecting up in my brain." And I had no real response. I don't even remember what I said, probably like, wow, that's great. And I walked out. But I remember thinking, who am I to assume that I should interfere in this process of things kind of connecting up in her brain and that somehow some activity I could force her to do would be in any way better than that?

And so that seeing opportunities for children, giving them the freedom, that's what really summer should emphasize is you don't have all these other things that have to be done every day. But you don't want to fill up the time with all of these things that are entertaining or amusing or busy. Or how do we really help children learn to listen and notice and feel the sun on their face and the wind in their hair? You can't do that without calm, without quietude, and it's a big problem. And that's why I'm so grateful that Ginny has her books and her website and she runs around speaking at conferences to really help parents catch the vision on how this is possible. Because I think what happens a lot of times is like, okay, kick the kids outdoors. They come back 10 minutes later. Okay, we did that.

And it's the other thing that's very interesting is the normalizing influence. I remember from time to time, one of my children in that age range of maybe being 11, 12, 13, would just be in a really obnoxious mood and be wanting to just argue and push little dumb things and engage you in their little world of, I don't know, satisfying irritating you. I'm not sure what children get out of doing that, but obviously something. And I remember when, especially when we moved here, we had a lot of space and that was really helpful because I literally could say, "Leave the house and don't step foot back in here for an hour." And they'd go. And an hour later, come back and just be completely happy, completely normalized. The irritations, the argumentation, the whatever that was niggling at them disappeared. It dissolved into the greater goodness of just being in the trees or climbing a tree or sitting.

I remember one time my youngest daughter was in the house, and I was aware but I was having a conversation with her older sister and her soon-to-be fiance and we were, I don't know, talking about some interesting, probably, political thing or economics.

Julie Walker: Either that or farming techniques

Andrew Pudewa: Maybe farming techniques and then I realized that the youngest daughter was nowhere in the house And it didn't bother me a lot, but it was getting dark, and so it was dark. So I popped my head out, and I shouted, and I said, "Ellie, are you out there?" And she goes, "yeah." I said, "what are you doing?" She said, "Sitting on a mound." Well, we had some earth moving, and there was a big mound of earth. And she had walked up to the top and was just sitting there, presumably watching the sun go down and getting dark and having this freedom to be there. And I always thought, I need to do that myself. I need to just go find

a mound and sit on it for half an hour and see how that affects me because we at a certain point we start to look at time as currency.

Julie Walker: Right? It's

Andrew Pudewa: And I have to spend my time well,

Julie Walker: You can never get it back, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: to accomplish all the things I want to accomplish or need to. And I think this is a very modern view. People used to have the idea that time was, was available to do nothing with. That you would waste time wasn't an idea. You would always have time. You would always be using time, and it was okay to use time in something that didn't have proof of product.

Julie Walker: But I would argue that the product is, it's kind of back to what we've also talked about recently is that sharpen the saw idea. Isn't getting out in nature, both for children and parents and teachers, a time to recreate, to recreate and therefore be able to do better what you're called to do?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I would think so. And I would hesitate to recommend that anyone, like, force their kids to write about experiences they've had in nature. It's a very hard thing to do. Oftentimes when I've been teaching Unit 7 style assignments, the notes from the brain. Make a list of something you know something about. And you get them a list, and you get them to pick one, and you get them to divide it into topics. Occasionally, you'll have a student who will write about a family trip to the mountains or camping or the beach.

The beach seems to be the easier one and then they divide it into topics. There's swimming, there's making sandcastles, there's the animals at the beach. There's other things you can do at the beach. And I see the kids—they have this desire to articulate that depth of experience, but finding the words to do it is hard and can be frustrating. And that's why they often in this type of assignment need a lot of help, a lot of vocabulary help, a lot of follow up questions.

“What else did you hear? What else did you hear? What else did you hear? What did that sound like?”

And then they can start putting it together and expressing it. But I wouldn't say make the kids write about the things they do because that might undermine the happiness of having done it.

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly. Exactly. Well, Andrew, our time is up. That little bit that we had to have this conversation, but I do hope, dear listener, that you have time to get outdoors with your children and enjoy some time in nature.

Andrew Pudewa: And also read some of the beautiful nature literature that's out there, novels that the author was particularly good at incorporating beautiful scenes into. And that's what then gives the children the vocabulary to notice things and remember those things which they notice in a more powerful, concrete way.

So, get a good book, head out into nature, read about nature while you're in nature.

Julie Walker: I love it.

Andrew Pudewa: And then, at some point, maybe they'll want to write about that too.

Julie Walker: Sounds great. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you, Julie.

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, 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.