

Podcast 471: How to Think by Furnishing the Mind

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: Kids have a tremendous facility. If you give them the tools, they can put things together in ways you would never imagine. Sometimes I'm kind of in awe, like, I wish I had thought of that. I wish I had written that.

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, Andrew, I love monthly themes, and this podcast is about a monthly theme, and that is April is National Poetry Month.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, yes it is.

Julie Walker: Yeah. And so that, as we're talking about our overarching theme for the year, How to Think, somehow is going to dovetail with this idea of National Poetry Month.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and it does seem a little obnoxious to be out here saying, we can help you learn how to think as if you don't already know. Everybody thinks. So perhaps it should be "how to think better" since we all do it, but some days we would like to think better. And of course, writing is very much the distillation of thought.

And one of the things that you know that I have been preaching for a long time is you can't really get something out of the mind that isn't in there to begin with. And so, the furnishing is so critical. And we could look at a few different areas of that. First would be, I think, vocabulary. And one of the great benefits of poetry is that poets by the nature of the activity, are often using less common words in ways that you might not necessarily hear them used.

And with vocabulary, we see very clearly that when children have a larger bank of words available to them, they can apparently think more insightfully or more accurately into whatever they're trying to talk about. But if you just know the words *good* and *bad* and *cool* and *nice*, you get one level of expression that reflects one level of thinking, but if you have abundant synonyms, abundant other ways to express those modifiers, you can more insightfully and more effectively frame the ideas.

I can just think of so many words that I learned through poetry as a kid that may or may not have worked its way into my writing. But I view vocabulary as almost an asset that gives a return on investment forever. When I was very young, probably 10, 11, 12, I was quite enamored with a particular poem, mainly because it had all these words that nobody knew.

And I learned the poem, I understood the words. And of course at 11 years old, you're just showing off all the time anyway. But it was kind of fun to be able to recite this poem. Would you like to hear it?

Julie Walker: Absolutely.

Andrew Pudewa: I don't know where it came from, where I saw it, who wrote it. I knew nothing about it, but it's a retelling of a very common little nursery rhyme song that people knew. So, I will recite it for you

Julie Walker: Okay. Sounds great.

Andrew Pudewa:

Scintillate, globule vivific,
Fain would I ponder thy nature specific,
Loftily poised in ether capacious,
Strongly resembling a gem carbonaceous.

And not everybody gets that, but then if you sing it, then they make the connection right away. Scintillate, Scintillate, globule vivific. Fain would I ponder thy nature specific.

Julie Walker: I love that it rhymes.

Andrew Pudewa: It's a brilliant little construction. But for me, those words were fantastic. Scintillate. What a marvelous word to know. Globule. Fain would I ponder? These are very literary sounding words and expressions.

Julie Walker: Words that a 10 year, 10 year old would probably not ever use.

Andrew Pudewa: No, wouldn't even come across in daily life, but in a poem, then, wow, you can get it. You can learn it. You can say it. And it's interesting. I've had so many times when I would read something and kind of get it and kind of appreciate it, but then committing it to memory, it changed the entire relationship that I had with that poem, or that excerpt from a speech, or a quote, or a prayer.

It's as though memorizing it, you just take it into your soul. And of course, we've talked about before, that expression, "learning by heart." And memorize sounds so mechanical and tedious, but learn by heart. Something you bring into your mind and your heart and your soul. You have an ownership and a delight in the ownership.

It's almost like you could see a nice thing and say, well, that's a nice thing. But if you save up the money and buy that thing, you now own it and you can appreciate it and you can share it with other people. So memorized language is a little bit like a treasure. And you gain that. And I'm also reminded of how poets, as they struggle to find just the right word to fit the meter, to fit the rhyme and to convey the accurate meaning, it's a challenge.

And yet it's of great value. You probably know the story of Roget, who wrote the Thesaurus, right?

Julie Walker: Peter, Peter Roget

Andrew Pudewa: yeah, as a child, he somehow got the habit of collecting words. So as he was reading or listening, and he'd hear a word, he'd write it in a little notebook. And he did this for years. And then as a young adult, he organized all these words, and thought this would be maybe helpful to people, and published a thesaurus, which I understand in Greek can mean treasure box.

Julie Walker: Yes, I love that.

Andrew Pudewa: So a thesaurus is like a treasure box of vocabulary that is enriching to the mind and the spirit. And I would just encourage kids, everywhere, to do that, to collect words. It's a great hobby, like, collecting. I think, I collected stickers in school. And you, you had various companies that would make stickers, and you could write letters and they would send you stickers back, or you could write a letter and send a couple dollars and they'd send you, and so I had this vast collection of stickers.

Children are naturally attracted to collecting things: stickers, shells, sand dollars. I had a collection of sand dollars that ranged from the tiniest little quarter inch size, you could barely tell what it was, to big round ones, three or four inches in diameter

Julie Walker: That crumble so easily. How did you preserve it?

Andrew Pudewa: I had a tray and a display and I had to keep them and then I'd get a new sand dollar and I'd have to figure out where did it fit in the size sequence.

And my, one of my kids went to Thomas Aquinas which takes a rather different approach in studying natural philosophy. And one of the things they have all of their freshmen--and these are 18, 19 year old college freshmen--is they have them go and collect insects.

Julie Walker: Oh,

Andrew Pudewa: around the campus, around the area there, and then they have to organize and present these insects in some type of logical way. And I think that just, it's a natural inclination. So let's encourage kids to collect words, and the best way to organize and store them, I think, is in memorized poetry.

Julie Walker: I wonder, Andrew, I'm thinking of a product as you're talking about collecting and storing words. We have a product called *A Word Write Now*. And there is, and listener, if you don't have one of these, I encourage you just to look at our website and see if this is something you want to add, because on every page is a list of words that go along with a certain character quality, but there's a place for you to collect your own words that match that. And I love that. And I wonder how many parents dismiss that as something that their kids

wouldn't be interested in doing. But I bet they would. I bet they would love to collect words and organize them according to character quality.

Andrew Pudewa: It is a brilliantly well-organized product, and I don't know anything else like it. I have not seen anything else. And of course now, books like a thesaurus and a dictionary are rarely found. We go online for everything. But there's this ownership of something. These are my words. I've got them. I can use them. They are my tools. They are my joy. So, I think we can, we can do that.

Julie Walker: Well, as long as I'm mentioning products, I want to mention a couple other things that almost seem disconnected to what we're talking about. Specifically, furnishing the mind with vocabulary and poetry so that we can think better. Some of the products that we've done, *Linguistic Development through Poetry Memorization*, which when I started 18 years ago, was something we were already producing as a company.

So that's the oldest one on my list of products to mention, but of course the whole purpose of that product is to help students have a way. To memorize poetry in a systematic, organized fashion, we have taken. That product, an embedded level one of *Linguistic Development through Poetry Memorization* in our newest app, Memory Mentor.

So you go to IEW.com/memory. You can learn more about this new app that includes ways to help you memorize whatever it is. It could be your own content. It could be content that we've preloaded in there, including the poetry. We've got some things there, like the planets. We have some things in there about famous quotes, and

Andrew Pudewa: And, and anybody can add to that collection. So if there's a particular poem that a student likes and it's not in ours, you can record it and upload it and then they can practice and learn along with the app every day till they own it.

Julie Walker: Until they own it, right, exactly, because the whole idea is mastery. And the nice thing about people uploading their own content, we don't have to worry about intellectual property because we didn't put it in there, you did, which is great.

Andrew Pudewa: The next thing you might look at in terms of poetry is the unique combinations of words.

Julie Walker: And then another course that we have, *Introduction to Public Speaking*, some of the first exercises these students are asked to do is to memorize and then recite the poems that they've memorized to help them refine their elocution skills, which I love. Like, you don't find that too often in a public speaking course—to memorize and recite poetry, but they're learning the words, they're learning the vocabulary, and then they're learning how to enunciate and project and doing all those things that are important to public speaking.

And then another product that we have is our *Structure and Style for Students: Year 3, Level B*. We spent weeks actually, learning to write poetry.

Andrew Pudewa: It was magnificent.

Julie Walker: It was.

Andrew Pudewa: It turned out way better than I imagined it would. It just shows that kids have a tremendous facility. If you give them the tools, they can put things together in ways you would never imagine. Sometimes I'm, I'm kind of in awe, like, I wish I had thought of that. I wish I had written that.

Julie Walker: But you teach the students something as basic as the haiku, another form called the cinquain, which our listeners may not know what that is, but you can look it up. It's a real form of poetry, but then you get into more technical things like the sonnet and we get into iambic pentameter and those kinds of things.

And so speak to that and how does that help furnish the mind and help people be better thinkers.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, so vocabulary is one thing, but then combinations of words in unique and effective ways. We, in our daily conversation, speak in pretty predictable English grammar patterns. We don't generally, in a conversation, stop and take a minute or two to construct a sentence in the most beautiful way we could, just because conversation doesn't really allow that in a comfortable way, but poetry requires that.

And so when you memorize poetry, you may get a line of a poem that puts words together in a very unique and stylish way that then affects your templates, if you will, the templates of language that you are comfortable using. And I think this follows into say excerpts from famous speeches or quotes. And when kids can use a line of poetry or a quote or a memorized template and change some of the words that need to be changed to say what they want to say, but in that more eloquent, artistic way, it comes across as very winsome, very attractive. And so there's the grammatical templates that poetry provide. We really don't encounter that in daily life, but it's so, so valuable.

Julie Walker: Yep. Exactly. So, there is an article that one of our own staff members wrote and she actually used to be a middle school teacher and used our materials in her classes. I love this quote that she included in this blog post, and we'll put a link in the show notes so you can read the whole thing. But what she said is "the key to helping young people develop mature ideas is furnishing their mind with great ideas. Writers can only write about what they know."

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, so that would be the third element. You've got vocabulary, then you've got syntax, and then you've got the thoughts. And poetry, by its nature, requires a distillation of thought. It requires an economy of words to express a maximum of impact of imagery, of reflection, of contemplation. And that isn't really something that's easy to lecture someone on how to do, right? You can't just say, here's how you do it. You have to learn. By models, you have to learn by taking examples into your mind and contemplating them. And

when you read a good book, kids read books, and they see something that makes them laugh, or they see something that was well done, but what they're really reading for is the story,

They don't generally have the habit. of, say, stop, read it again, think about it a little bit, read it a third time, appreciate it. No, they're, they want to see what's going to happen next in the story. And that's natural. We all do that.

Poetry is meant to be contemplated. You don't just read it for the story. It's nice if it has some humor, some adventure, something to it. But as their aesthetic sense of language improves, then they can read the lines or be read to those lines, memorize those lines, and the depth of the thought, the refinement of the thought, the economy of the use of words to express the thought has much greater impact.

And the more you know, the more you've memorized, the more you've taken in, the more the richness of that empowers the imagination. I've been thinking a lot recently about the relationship between memory and imagination, right? And we love imagination. When kids write something, we think, Oh, that's so creative. Where did that come from? Had to come from somewhere. And we can't really imagine something that we have not experienced to some degree. If we don't know the meaning of a word, we can't imagine anything connected with the word. If we don't understand the essence of the thought, we can't really then use that.

And poetry lends itself toward contemplation of ideas. And I think this is why English teachers throughout history have been very excited about introducing the poetry they love to the children they teach, because that richness of experience that they've experienced, they want to pass that on.

I think we kind of lost a joy and a love of poetry somewhere along the line. And it might've been, we had to kind of hyperanalyze something. And so it took the love of the thing and kind of made it too mechanical, too analytical, too chopped up in a way. And there's value in that, but I would hope that we would nurture kids on the love of the thing, of the joy of the thing, of the beauty of the thing, before we get too deep into analyzing the thing.

Julie Walker: Well, and you've mentioned this before, as adults, we reflect on a recent experience, and we think we can teach that to nine year olds. And what the nine year old wants to do is just to revel in the beauty and the joy and not get into literary analysis that we might have loved when we were 18 or 19. So much later.

So, age appropriate.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. So, the furnishing of the ideas is more of an organic process, a natural process. And to the degree we can discuss a poem, then that helps, and we move a little bit towards analysis. But really, the first thing kids are going to relate to is what they remember that's connected with that idea. So you read a poem about sailing. If they've been sailing, there's more meaning to that.

If they've never been sailing, they still get a taste of what it's like to be sailing from reading the poem. And that builds their imagination of what it might be like to go sailing. And I think that, as a culture, we would do well to cling to the wonder, the awe, that poems can inspire. The problem is all of us are very distracted by high intensity visual hyper simulation, the video universe that we live in, the screens, the everything has to be fast.

And you look at rap, and rap is a valid form of poetry, and some rap is quite impressive in the way that it's put together and the spontaneity that people have, but it doesn't lend itself quite to the contemplation of the beauty of the language and the ideas the way memorizing a poem that was created by a master wordsmith.

Julie Walker: Yes. So, furnishing the mind contributes to vocabulary,

Andrew Pudewa: vocabulary, broad level of syntax and application of grammar, and then the images and the concepts attached to those images. We're enriched in all these ways when we dive into a poem.

Julie Walker: And as a result, we're better able to think.

Andrew Pudewa: I hope so.

Julie Walker: 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.