

Podcast 484: Thinking with Famous Questions and Quotations

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: The challenge of life is indeed to figure out what do you really want? Because so often what we think we want isn't necessarily what our soul wants or.

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: It is July, Andrew Pudewa.

Andrew Pudewa: And getting hot where we are.

Julie Walker: It is probably getting hot although we're not recording this exactly in July. But our theme for the year is how to think.

Andrew Pudewa: Seems pretty ambitious to me.

Julie Walker: I agree. This month we are thinking about how to think as we consider people in history because for us, it's kind of like, yay, birth of the New Nation. July 4th is here. Let's talk about the people that founded our nation.

Well, how about let's go to all of history and talk about questions that they asked to help them think and by extension help us think better.

Andrew Pudewa: You have some questions that have been asked throughout history?

Julie Walker: I have a few. Yes. Actually before I start with a question that I could ask you and we could talk about. I thought it would be good to start with a quote that you shared with me at the beginning, before we turned on the mics, about taking time to think.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I found this very interesting because it seems like it would be a modern observation, so we'll see if the listeners can guess when it was written. "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability, sit quietly in a room alone."

Julie Walker: So of course that was probably written yesterday because we certainly have a problem with attentiveness, and we certainly have a problem with parents, and by extension, their children wanting to be entertained or busy all the time. This idea of mom, I'm bored.

Andrew Pudewa: We believe, even I believe, but children born in the world, living today, have absolute belief that they have a right to constant entertainment, constant amusement, that

if they're bored, this is a crime against them. And somehow all the adults in their world have to remedy this.

And I think we see it in schools. I was telling you earlier, I've listened to a number of little online videos of school teachers talking about how they can't teach anymore because the students are vacant. One woman said, "They look at you, they appear to be listening, but there's no one there." I mean, that's a scary statement for a teacher to make.

Julie Walker: So does that mean that they are in a room in their mind, kinda like your quote that you just read? Or is it that they're so used to being stimulated that they can't live in an environment that isn't high stimulation?

Andrew Pudewa: I think it is the latter. And I've been working on this new talk, as you know, called *Cultivating Attentiveness and Contemplation*.

Julie Walker: We will definitely be having conversations in the future podcast about this talk.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I find this to be interesting because it was written by Blaise Pascal in 1670

Julie Walker: Okay, so it wasn't written just yesterday.

Andrew Pudewa: So before internet, before electricity, before practically anything. It would be, I think, a perennial human problem. And of course, there's a lot of people that are talking about stress and how this constant stimulation that we're undergoing creates high cortisol levels and stress rates and inattentiveness, and frustration and anxiety.

Jonathan Haidt in his book, *The Anxious Generation*, also addresses this. I don't know. What can we do in our little corner of the world to help people calm down?

Julie Walker: Slow down and think. So just one more little story before I get into one of our first questions. Here is, of course, a grandparent here sitting behind this mic. I will often have conversations with my son and his wife about my two grandkids that they have, and I will suggest to them like piano lessons or gymnastics, and the parents say, no, they have enough, they don't need to fill every moment of every day. And I'm thinking, wow, how did my son and his wife become smarter, at least in that regard? Smarter than me because they're trying to be more intentional about not filling their days and letting them just have time to be alone in a room and draw or think, or read a book and not with a screen in front of them.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Although, piano lessons and gymnastics are two things that actually do cultivate an attentiveness because they require control, self-control over body and mind. So it sounds like a double-edged

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: But they are thinking the right way.

Julie Walker: They are definitely being more intentional...

Andrew Pudewa: and that's wonderful.

Julie Walker: about the time that the kids are spending in extracurricular. And probably because the pendulum is swinging a little bit because maybe my husband and I created more activities for our own boys that was not necessarily helpful to them in their growing up and that anxiety.

Okay. So I'm just looking at some of these famous people from history and some questions they asked, and we may not get very far beyond the first couple of them. Francis Bacon, who is kind of the guy we keep going back to this year because of the article you wrote with his quote. I'm going to have you say that quote, and then I'm going to read you his question.

Andrew Pudewa: In the article, I didn't use the exact same words, which is probably okay given the fact that it was translated into English, presumably from Latin, but I believe the most accurate rendition is "Reading, maketh a full man, discourse, a ready man, and writing an exact man.

Julie Walker: You didn't use discourse, you said speaking.

Andrew Pudewa: Speaking in the context of purposeful speaking—meaningful, focused conversation, which is an art that many of us are trying to hang on to, and some of us have lost completely. Reminds me of the podcast we did with Scott Newstok, *How to Think Like Shakespeare*, and he did talk about how people would get together with a very specific intention to debate things in a congenial, productive way.

Julie Walker: Yes. This is actually a Francis Bacon quote—not a question, but it's about questions. "A prudent question is one half of wisdom."

Andrew Pudewa: Well, that does remind me of the idea often attributed to Socrates, which is "the only thing I know is that I don't know that I need to know." And so the question is the beginning of the pursuit. And of course we've talked about many times in our writing methodology, we start with a very simple question: what are the key words in this sentence? And then we move through all of the units with increasingly difficult questions up to inventive writing where it's just you and your brain and whatever you carry around in it, and how do you access that? And so I would agree with Mr. Bacon on that one.

Julie Walker: Yes. Okay. Here's another quote by Confucius. "The one who knows all the answers has not been asked all the questions."

That would be a 17-year-old, because 17 year olds seem to know it all.

Andrew Pudewa: I think maybe by 17 there's a modicum of humility that starts to come in. But that certainly would be true for a few 12 year olds that I know right now.

Julie Walker: “Only the one who does not question is safe from making a mistake.”

Andrew Pudewa: Ooh, who said that one?

Julie Walker: Albert Einstein.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, that's a good one. Einstein also talked about the school system. Of course that was way back in the forties. And he was talking, I don't have the exact quote myself, but he was talking about how the way schools operate is they stifle what he called the holy curiosity. And you don't think of curiosity as being holy in the sense of sacred, but in the sense that there's this power to it.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And I think we often see the teachers. That do engage the students are the ones who can awaken and cultivate that curiosity. And yeah, you go to school and they tell you everything you need to know before you even ask the first question.

So we are a little upside down on that. And I also find it so interesting that Confucius and Plato lived about the same time on completely opposite sides of the world, no connections. And yet they came up with some of the most significant and timeless observations

Julie Walker: I'm trying to see if I have another quote by Confucius or Plato. I don't. But I have one from Martin Luther King Jr. And this one actually is not just a quote, it actually has a question in it. All right. “Life's most persistent and urgent question is ‘What are you doing for others?’”

Andrew Pudewa: Well, people often have asked, “What is the meaning of life? But it's funny 'cause all these new kind of cutting edge wellness, mindfulness, how to have success, how to use money well, et cetera, et cetera, they all do come back to that point, which is true happiness really is living a life of service to others, and that is not something that the consumer-based economy and the phenomenal energy that's put into marketing addresses very well.

Julie Walker: We can hardly talk about Martin Luther King Jr. and his famous quote, without acknowledging JFK's, John F. Kennedy's famous quote, which was, “And so my fellow Americans ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” So there's definitely a relationship there. What are you doing for others?

Andrew Pudewa: And it is a very timeless thought. What are we doing now in our tiny little corner of the world to make our community a better place? And we, of course, are doing what we can. And I think all of our listeners, this probably resonates with them very well. And mostly because we want our children to grow up and be happy. And when we see people actively engaged in serving in some capacity, that does bring that inner peace and that inner happiness that everyone wants.

Julie Walker: When I think about just raising children and being a school teacher, giving the students chores brought so much joy to them. And that seems counterintuitive. No, you're making 'em work. Oh, you're stifling their creativity. You're teaching them how to unload the dishwasher, for example, this particular way. Well, no. It often allows them to feel like they're contributing to family goals, family life. In the classroom the person that erases the board at the end of the day, the person that takes out the trash every day, the line leader—ohh there was an important job— to make sure all those kids were in line. This is so valuable for kids to have chores and feel like they're contributing. So I like that idea of asking yourself the question, “Hey, wake up in the morning and ask yourself this question. What am I doing for others today?”

So Winston Churchill. He actually had a four-question knowledge audit.

Have you heard of this before?

Andrew Pudewa: No, but it sounds like a good idea.

Julie Walker: It does. It sounds like this is the makings of a new unit for us, or maybe it's a unit eight. It's a knowledge audit when things went wrong. Here it is. Why didn't I know? Why didn't my advisors know? Why wasn't I told? and Why didn't I ask?

Andrew Pudewa: My mind is trying to reach out for some immediate real life application to that. It's pretty big.

Julie Walker: Yes, it is.

Andrew Pudewa: It's a very big, kind of the CEO 30,000 feet level, but I suppose it would apply just for the mom and teacher.

Julie Walker: Well, anybody who's in a position like Winston Churchill was as the prime Minister of England during a very turbulent time. There's a lot going on and he can't possibly know it all, and he is relying on his advisors to bring him the most important information so that he can execute appropriately. And I think the advisors were probably, when he asked them, how come I didn't know about this? They might say, great question. And then they go to their advisors and say, how come I didn't know about this? That whole filtering thing. You can't know it all.

So Shakespeare, we talked about Shakespeare in a little, a little bit. He had a lot of questions in his plays, right? The most famous being “to be or not to be.” That is the question, right?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, what's really interesting about that is he didn't really completely invent that because when he was in school, and this is according to Newstok's book, that was a writing prompt: to do something or not to do something. And that would be an exercise that I'm assuming teenagers, plus or minus a little, would then have to write an essay.

And it's such a great habit because every day we have to make even very small decisions, should I do this or should I not do this? Or should I do this now or should I do this later? Or the extension of that, if I should, why am I not? And if I shouldn't, why am I likely to? And so you get right to the core of the human problem. So when Shakespeare put that into Hamlet, most of his educated listeners would probably have kind of chuckled, recognizing that as a standard kind of rhetoric-based training that they would have to undergo

Julie Walker: A couple other things I, I like this one. "Is this the dagger, which I see before me?"

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, the denial of the obvious?

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. How, how often do we do that?

This is the obvious thing, but I don't like it. So I will question

Julie Walker: Mm-hmm. And then I like this one too, because I'm a romantic at heart. "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" And of course the answer is, yes, you should, because a summer's day is beautiful and whoever you're speaking to wants to hear beautiful things about themselves.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and it's a love sonnet and you would assume it's a male voice writing or speaking to a female. What females would not like to be compared to something beautiful and enjoyable?

Julie Walker: So obviously Shakespeare uses a literary device of rhetoric. What do they call that? A rhetorical question. He puts a rhetorical question in his plays, and the answer is, duh, yes, you should compare me to a summer's day.

Andrew Pudewa: The whole thing is a simile/metaphor idea. And one of the things, I was just talking with someone about this recently, like, why teach that to kids? Because when you compare two things, you understand them both better because you're looking into it and saying, well, what is similar? What are some differences? In what way are they similar? You get into this deeper, almost contemplative relating and understanding to things.

Julie Walker: So I have a whole bunch of quotes from fairytales that I want to run through real quick just to emphasize the power of asking questions in terms of how to think.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and fairytales are not exclusively aimed at children. In fact, originally they weren't really considered for children in the same way that we would categorize them today, but yeah.

Julie Walker: Well, a lot of these that I mention right now, "What is your name?" shows up in so many fairytales: "The Frog Prince," "Beauty and the Beast," "Pinocchio," Well, "Rumpelstiltskin," she doesn't actually ask him what his name is because that would be the

problem. Right. But “The Emperor's New Clothes.” I mean, this comes over and over again. “What is your name?”

Why do you think that's such a powerful question, Andrew?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, we could go all the way back to Genesis. Kind of the first job God gave to Adam that we know of is name the animals, and of course, you would assume or speculate that Adam was speaking the language that God was speaking. And so to name things was to combine their nature, their purpose, their essence, into a sound, into a specific, concrete, communicable word that opens up the meaning.

And we name children sometimes with great angst because yeah, they're going to have to live with it their whole life. So what is that?

Julie Walker: We want to give them a noble name, right? Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: But even more so the name is kind of the first part of identity, right? That a child knows like, who am I? And they'll use their name. And of course, pretty much all of life is really about figuring out who you are.

Julie Walker: Right, exactly. Well, and I've read fairytales where if you know that character's name, you have power over them. And so they don't give them their real name initially. They just give them their faux name until they are worthy to hear what their real name is.

Andrew Pudewa: It reminds me of the mom who needs to be a little stern with the child and will use all the names, right? Or add the middle name. Like I'm really talking to you very specifically, who you are as close as I can get, “Do this.”

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly. Exactly. Well, and I know you know this, Andrew, but listeners, my name is not Julie. My first name is Juliann, all one word. No e's. And when I was in trouble, my mom would call me Juliann Ruth, very much so. And so, but my dad shortened it to Julie.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and I grew up with Andy. I think it was around eighteen, I got this idea that I didn't want to be called that, that I wanted the full name: Andrew. And I never went back. And if people say “Andy,” I don't even look, I don't respond. I don't identify with it at all. But it's funny because occasionally people will, I don't know, make an assumption and say that to me, and it's a little bit jarring.

Julie Walker: Right. Yes, exactly. Well, I know it's a salesperson when they ask for Juliann. Because they don't know what my real name or Julian they think. I dropped that in. Okay. Two more quick questions and then we've gotta wrap this up. “What do you want?” comes up in Goldilocks It comes up in kind of in a different way. Aladdin says, “What is your wish?” What do you want is another question that is asked in Rumpelstiltskin.. So that reminds me of when you talk about the story sequence chart, that's part number two. What do they want or need?

Andrew Pudewa: Because that creates essentially the conflict and the challenge of life is indeed to figure out what do you really want? Because so often what we think we want isn't necessarily what our soul wants or needs.

Julie Walker: Yep. You've got to think about it. Alright, and then the third question that comes up in the "Three Little Pigs" and "Hansel and Gretel", a variation of this question: "What will you do for me? What do you have to offer?" So the antagonist is saying, okay, what are you offering to me so that I won't do this huff and puff and blow your house down? So what's in it for me kind of question, which you know that is an important question when you're considering options for buying something. What's in it for me? That's something that we often ask in marketing. We know that the consumer is thinking, what's in it for me? Why would I want this particular product?

Because if it won't actually help me do what I'm wanting it to help me with, then why bother? So honestly, that's when I say, well, IEW—and this kind of encapsulates the whole theme of how to think—we are teaching how to think because we are teaching students and by extension their teachers and parents how to ask good questions.

Andrew Pudewa: One year I wrote a short little essay. "What are we really doing here?" And that question plagued me for a while. I think it's in the book, right? *However Imperfectly*.

Julie Walker: Yes, *However Imperfectly*. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Each one of these could be an hour or more discussion, but.

Julie Walker: Well, we will link to that talk: "What are We Really Doing Here?" that we recorded last year at our annual educators conference. That will probably help to answer that question that we should be asking ourselves. What are we really doing here?

Andrew Pudewa: We have a vague thought about what we are really doing here.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: We won't really know what we've done until the drapes are opened and the veil is cleared, and then we can see all things clearly.

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.