

So Now What? A Message to Graduates

Transcript of Episode 372

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, why is it that so many people I know love the idea of graduation, but yet may not be inclined to want to attend a graduation ceremony?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, that's pretty obvious. Okay. It's tedious. Hmm. It's tedious as heck I would say. It's just one of those things that you have to do for friends and relatives because you are showing some level of support.

Julie Walker: Mm-hmm. Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: For them. But honestly, the bigger the school, the worse it is and. I remember attending University of Oregon, or is Oregon State? I can't remember my sister's graduation.

Julie Walker: Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: And it went on forever. And it was profoundly dull. And pretty much all the speeches just made me angry and I thought, what an idiot I was not to bring a book to read.

Julie Walker: oh.

Andrew Pudewa: Now, I probably would not have that same problem today that I had, you know, decades ago, because today I know how to occupy myself well in boring situations.

Julie Walker: Okay,

Andrew Pudewa: So you could put me anywhere and I can think, and I can practice and I can do stuff with my mind.

Julie Walker: and still look attentive.

Andrew Pudewa: You know, but 20, 30 years ago I didn't have that skill.

Julie Walker: right?

Andrew Pudewa: Now I have been to a few graduations that, you know, they had a high point. I remember, uh, one in particular, it was, uh, one of my daughters’ college graduation, and I had just read this article or blog post or whatever that I, I, it was in my mind and I was wrestling with it and figuring out what kind of response. The thing was.

This one, I, and you know about it, it was titled something like this, “if you are teaching or writing five paragraph essays, stop it now.” And it was a, a huge, long thing, about 2000 words on why five paragraph essays were so awful, how they were, you know, too formulaic and predictable and redundant, and became a crutch for the writer.

And nobody in the real world ever wants to read these things. And so, You shouldn't teach this to students. This was written by, if my memory serves correctly, the, some middle school Chicago city teacher of the year. Hmm. All right. So somebody, mm-hmm. And you know, in my mind, I'm arguing with this and I'm trying to formulate my response to all of his points.

And it was right about that time. That I sat through the university, Franciscan University graduation. Genevieve's.

Julie Walker: Yes, your daughter

Andrew Pudewa: And you know, I didn't really wanna to be there, but I had to. And then the commencement address. Very well known author, George Weigel. He wrote, uh, actually a biography of John Paul II, and his commencement address was organized exactly like a super essay.

Julie Walker: Oh, okay.

Andrew Pudewa: It had three areas and inside each of the three areas, there were three specific topics and it was mapped and I knew exactly what was happening. And at the end of it, I was so profoundly happy. Because he had essentially proved the opposite of what this Chicago teacher, the year who wanted to deconstruct five paragraph essays from the curriculum because he used exactly that type of structure. And I found it as a listener, very comforting. And I started to understand there's this overlap between speaking and writing.

And there are a few things that make it different. One is when you write something, people have the option to read it or not.

Julie Walker: Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: But when you're speaking, unless people are gonna be kind of across-the-line level of rude and stand up and walk out right after you start. They're kind of stuck.

So you have a bit more of a captive audience. But another difference is when you're reading something, you generally can kind of get a sense of how long this is and, and how it's organized.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: Does it have subheadings? About how many pages do you think it's gonna be?

You can. You can skip around a little bit. You know, when I read something, I usually read the beginning and then the end and then decide if I wanna read the whole thing or not. Well, you can't do that in a speech.

Julie Walker: No.

Andrew Pudewa: So that's why that kind of classical rhetoric idea of enumeration, which we put in our model, is state your topics,

Julie Walker: Right.

Duh, is so very helpful to the listener. Because then they get kind of the preview. And so I realized in that point that, you know, a five paragraph essay for all its strengths or weaknesses really is part of the training in how to communicate well, not just on paper, but verbally.

Julie Walker: Sure. Absolutely.

Andrew Pudewa: And uh, so it's funny, that thing which made me very irritated at the time, has become something that I can use to help people, you know, anticipate and understand objections to, you know, maybe they had a teacher who said, don't do five paragraph essays for these reasons.

Anyway, that was a little off the topic of graduations.

Julie Walker: Yes

Andrew Pudewa: But we do have that. And then there's that walking across the stage, one person at a time to get their little diploma thing. And I don't know, I, you know, as you get older, you can train yourself to notice and think about more things. So one of the things that I liked to watch is the facial expressions.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: Of the kids walking across the stage.

Julie Walker: Yes

Andrew Pudewa: Some are clearly happy.

Julie Walker: Yes

Andrew Pudewa: Some are too stoic to be happy.

Julie Walker: Probably, probably afraid that they're gonna trip or something.

Andrew Pudewa: Probably, you, you never know. And, uh, some kind of look distinctly unhappy.

Andrew Pudewa: And so, you know, then you can kind of speculate what would make a person happy or less happy or even unhappy, about that moment.

Julie Walker: Well, graduation is a rite of passage in our culture today. And so, you know, I think people that are arranging graduations, whether it's high school or college, are mindful of that. Can we say something? Can we have the students do something that would be impactful? Do you know, I was not actually at this graduation, but I heard of my father's college graduation when he graduated from the University of Minnesota.

Shortest commencement on record.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow.

Julie Walker: Because in the middle of the commencement speech, it started to rain and it was a Minnesota thunderstorm, and basically the president of the university got up and said he conferred all the degrees.

Andrew Pudewa: We're, we're done,

Julie Walker: run for cover. Right.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Well, I've had invitations to speak

Julie Walker: Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: At commencement, uh, for homeschool organizations. And I, I pretty much always say yes. And then as soon as I say yes, I, I kind of have this background level prayer going. What does God want these people to hear?

Julie Walker: Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. What? And, and I, I hope the Holy Spirit will inspire me and I will at least say one thing that is meaningful to at least one person and knowing that pretty much no one's gonna remember much that that's a task for a public speaker.

Julie Walker: Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: When you address a group of people and you know that they're not really interested in hearing what you're saying, they are unlikely to remember much at all.

So can you embed one thing that's dramatic or significant enough that they might take it away? Otherwise it's just all blank.

Julie Walker: Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: And why did you do it to begin with? It's, it's like a, it's like a ceremony and you just have to walk through all the aspects of the ceremony knowing that the whole thing is just gonna be a fuzz in the end.

Julie Walker: Yep. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: And, um, you know, they'll oftentimes they'll have, uh, one or more of the students, the, the valedictorian or

Julie Walker: Oh, sure. Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: That kind of thing. Again, nobody remembers. But I have always thought, okay, if I can just say one thing and then make it short. Because the longer it is, the less likely they'll remember even that one thing.

Julie Walker: Sure, sure. So what would you say today, Andrew, to the high school graduates? The college graduates who are listening to this podcast? Because this is May and we have many who are graduating.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, so I of course like to inject a little bit of humor. You have to have a hook. You've got to, you know, get people to think that at least this isn't gonna be horrible. So one of the things I like to start off with is this, um. Supposedly, there is an ancient Chinese curse that says, may you be born in interesting times.

Andrew Pudewa: There is no evidence that I could find that this is either Chinese or ancient, but the best that I know, John F. Kennedy claimed that this was an ancient Chinese curse. And of course he was president during very interesting times, and in a way, everyone's born during very interesting times. It just did sometimes seem a little more tumultuously or dangerously or frighteningly interesting than others.

And you know, so you can build on that a little bit, but not too tedious cause you can't get too depressing. Right.?

Julie Walker: Right,

Andrew Pudewa: You can't really point out to all of these happy faced new graduates, how desperately dangerous and horrible is the world that they have been born into and now have to enter. Right?

So you, you have to couch a little bit, but, you know, okay, so a little bit of humor, a little bit of serious, and then I, I guess you, you kind of think, what do I wish I had thought about more when I was that age? Right? And the one I really like to focus on is, Your only real asset is time. People have different amounts of money and some people have a little bit of money and use it

well, and other people have lots of money and use it badly and other people have lots of money and don't do anything with it and you know, so, but everyone has the same amount of time.

It's the great equalizer.

Julie Walker: Yes.

It's the democratizer of humanity, right?. And that this is how you. You will invest in yourself. So that's point one is to kind of say, you know, this is your asset, right? And whatever you do, go to college. Don't go to college. Get a job. Don't get job volunteer. Don't volunteer st.

Stay at home. Don't stay at home. Get married. Don't get married. It doesn't even matter.

Andrew Pudewa: Where you are. You'll have the same amount of time and you will have to make the choice of what to do at that time. And then I like to point out, The thing that will have the greatest impact on you is the people you spend time with and then, injecting a little bit of humor, there are two types of people that you have an opportunity to spend time with, living people and dead people.

Julie Walker: Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. Which immediately like, ugh, what? But then I will point out what I mean here is the people that you can actually be with right in the same room or virtually people whose wisdom is accessible to you through conversation.

And the dead people are those people who've left a record. Those are people whose whose wisdom you can access primarily through books.

Julie Walker: Oh, okay. Right,

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And then we could say peripherally through perhaps recordings of some sort, but books, books are in a way, as Chesterton said, the democracy of the dead. And you know, if you are thinking of a democracy, ideal circumstance. We have a room of people, we have to make some decisions. Right? So to make the best decision that would benefit all of us the most, we would want to give everyone who has input and opportunity to give input, but we wouldn't necessarily want to rule out those who came before and faced a similar time or similar circumstance or similar quandary.

Julie Walker: Oh, interesting. Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: And, and so, What has been said and written in the past that might bear upon our decision making in the present? And I think this is one reason why politics has become, in many ways, just so profoundly shallow,

Andrew Pudewa: Is the number of people educated enough to bring in the wisdom of the past into the conversation is minimal. And, and even worse than that is the number of people willing to even listen to the wisdom of the past. And, and so, you know, where are we going with that? So anyway, focusing back on the, on the young people, so those are the two most significant things that are going to affect. The type of person that you continue to become is the people you spend time with and the books you read. And you have total control over

Andrew Pudewa: You don't necessarily have control over all sorts of things in your life, and you have to learn. To deal with it, but you get to choose your friends. You get to choose who to converse with, and that's the biggest shift that happens when you change environments.

So if you're, you know, finishing high school and moving out of your home and going off to live somewhere else, either to work or go to college or whatever. This is a kind of a clean slate opportunity. You're gonna meet new people and you know, for many kids their experience of friendship has been somewhat random, determined by circumstances.

Julie Walker: Sure.

Like, you know, for those of us who went to schools in high school, pretty much all our friends were people that we met. In a fairly random case. Mm-hmm. High school happened to be doing the same sport or happened to be in the same class, or in my case, we, we played war games and that those were my friends, but I didn't really choose them.

It was circumstantial.

Julie Walker: Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: But now you have an opportunity to look for people who are smarter and better than you. And you can choose to befriend someone who has strengths and virtues and character qualities. The whole trick of becoming a better person is to try to hang out with someone who's better than you in some way.

Julie Walker: That's true.

And then of course, an ideal friendship is when you have things to offer. And your friend has things to give. And so you can, you, you have that exchange of virtuous influence. But if you don't consciously do this, it's very easy to either fall into the, well, these are just the people around me so I'll hang out with them. And random groups of people very often tend to sink into kind of the lower common denominator of language and attitude and behavior, whatnot. So, you know, that's one point I that I try and build in is you get to, for the first time, really. You get to choose who you want to influence you.

Julie Walker: Right. I like

Andrew Pudewa: And, and that goes true with, you know, you go off to college, you, you really for the first time have more influence on who are the teachers, right? So who are you gonna sit

under? And, and then who are you going to spend time with and study with, and what kind of groups or clubs or organizations or service activity, right? You get to choose all that. So choose. Well, The other thing is, you know, you've spent most of your time being told what to read,

Julie Walker: yes

Andrew Pudewa: The other thing is, you know, you've spent most of your time being told what to read, either by your parents or the curriculum in the school or whatnot, but now you have a chance to decide what to read, and that's a tremendous investment of time.

When you think about the hours it takes to read a book or listen to a book or whatever you do with books, you know, I. The older I get, the more I realize, well, I want that time to be redeemed. I want it to have value. And so, you know, the things that I used to do when I was younger, which were of value because they are fun don't really have the same lasting impact. So I'm less interested in fun or entertaining or amusing things, and I'm more interested in things that will give me ideas or insights that I can apply. I can apply for my physical, spiritual, mental, professional wellbeing. So trying to, you know, shift kids that way.

And so just, that's the basic message I like to focus on is you get to choose and, you know, depending on the audience, I may touch a little bit at the end on some of the challenges that you will face in the coming decades.

Julie Walker: Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: Some of the uncertainties. And how to best be prepared for these uncertainties. And I don't have all the answers, but Right. You know, I can point, I, I think one person who is particularly good at this kind of talk, and I know he's done some of these and they're available, YouTube and whatnot. But just his whole style of teaching fits very well into this exhortation on how to live better. And that would be Jordan Peterson.

Julie Walker: Oh, right, yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And so, so many young people have felt such tremendous value from hearing Peterson's, basically exhortation on how to live better. Right. I mean, what was his first book? *Antidote to Chaos*; *12 Rules for Life*. Next Book Next book, *Beyond Order*; *12 More Rules for Life*.

Andrew Pudewa: And you know, I think sadly in today's world, most kids kind of default into thinking the fewer rules I have to operate under the more free and therefore the more happy I will be. Well, Peterson has, I think, done a great job as well as others. I'm thinking of certain leaders in the military. I'm thinking of biblical content.

Julie Walker: Mm-hmm. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm doing the Bible in a year podcast

Julie Walker: Oh, nice. Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: I got really kinda. You know, stuck in Numbers and Deuteronomy and Leviticus. You're just thinking

Julie Walker: These are a lot of rules.

Andrew Pudewa: This is just weird. But fortunately, the guy who's doing it is explaining. Okay. So why these laws?

Julie Walker: sure, sure.

Andrew Pudewa: And I, I would say that is the, that is the demarcation point between basically a condition of immaturity. And the condition of developing maturity. Is when you reach the point where you realize that rules set guidelines and boundaries that make you more free.

Julie Walker: Well, and you mentioned boundaries, and I can't help but think of the boundaries books. Henry Cloud, he wrote. A bunch of them. One of them that I found really helpful to me was the *One Life Solution*. It's kinda like all of them put together, but one of the things he talks about in terms of boundaries and that's setting your own boundaries.

So you talk about these rules that Peterson has set. I think they're self-imposed. We make a decision to. I have a rule, and that's what Cloud says in his book, *One Life Solution*. I have a rule in that I don't. And then fill in the blank. Exactly. And that's a boundary. And now you're not allowing someone to, metaphorically speaking, throw trash in your yard.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And, and that's, that's the big difference is when you're at home growing up, parents and teachers and, and schools and whatnot are setting your rules.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And when you leave that environment, there's a tendency to, I think, say, Hey, I don't have to follow rules anymore. I can do what I want. But the really happy people are the ones who say, aha, I now have the options to continue to follow this rule or to change it, adjust it or ignore it, depending on where's the guidance coming from? Right. And, you know, that's a, that gets back to, you know, the quality of friendships and influences that we have. And, uh, there's, there's so much to unpack in this world of the rules you set for yourself.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And you know, I think most young people, it, it's really hard for them to think that far ahead.

Julie Walker: Right. I love what you say to a group of teens when you say to them, do you wanna get your parents and teachers to stop telling you what to do?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Yeah. The, the way to stop being bossed around is to boss yourself around.

Julie Walker: exactly

Andrew Pudewa: The only reason people tell you what to do is cause you look like you don't know

Julie Walker: exactly

Andrew Pudewa: And it is, it's, it's very true. I was having a conversation with the XO, I think means executive officer, maybe second in command of a large marine base in Southern California.

Julie Walker: Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: Homeschool dad, oh. Came to one of my talks and we chatted for about 15 minutes, and you could tell this was I, I don't know what his rank, he would've had to be pretty high up. Captain, lieutenant, colonel, somewhere in that zone. Not old. You could tell just a model person in every way, and we kind of got into this and he said, that's the biggest thing I try to teach my soldiers,

Julie Walker: right,

Andrew Pudewa: is, these rules are for your freedom.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: When you know what to do or not do, then within that, we want you to be as creative and as individual as possible. And these rules are for not just for the benefit of our unit or our base or the Marine Corps or the security of the country. These rules are for your personal growth. And that's the hardest lesson there is to teach the recruits.

Julie Walker: Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: And I, I just love the way he put that though.

Julie Walker: That's great. Okay, so to summarize your advice to any person ready to commence commencement, I think it's interesting. Commencement,

Andrew Pudewa: right,

Julie Walker: is a speech at the end of graduation, but it's at the beginning of their lives, right?

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, cuz you're, you're going out into something new and there, there is a problem that is associated with any kind of accomplishment and that is, the realization that

achieving the goal does not make you happy. Right? So you could have a goal to be the valedictorian and work super hard for two or three years to get that 4.0 with all those extra, you know, things you did.

And then you stand up there, you give your speech. You could easily fall into depression after that. Because what happens is you've peaked out and the dopamine and endorphins are gone and it's, it's almost like coming off a high.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: And so you, you kind of have to go into this aware that the accomplishment is not what makes you happy.

Julie Walker: That's right.

Andrew Pudewa: And so it's a good thing that at the end of the thing you've accomplished, you're also aware that there's the beginning of the next thing because that's what starts then a more positive dopamine release cycle.

Julie Walker: yep. What I used to say to my kids a lot of times is check, done, next.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes.

Julie Walker: And that's exactly right. So, in your next phase of life, students. Andrew Pudewa says, choose what you do with your time wisely, and invest in good people. Invest in yourself by hanging out with good people, either dead or living.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I, I think, you know, that is a good general statement. And then, I mean, good heavens, we could get into the nitty gritty of go to school, don't go to school. What kind of school? Take loans. Don't take loans, go into a trade, volunteer for a couple years. I mean, there's so many possible options. And of course we all maybe have an opinion based on our experience as to what is the best approach there.

And um, you know, we've talked to some guests here about different options that are kind of apart from the conveyor belt system

Julie Walker: Sure. sure

Andrew Pudewa: that everybody gets on, but that's another subject for another day.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Well, 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, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just

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