

Thinking Like Shakespeare Part 2 Scott Newstok

Transcript of Episode 399

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: Welcome back to part two of our conversation with Dr. Newstock. Last week, we ran out of time, and we launched part one of the series. If you haven’t listened to it yet, you can find the link to part one in our show notes.

Andrew Pudewa: Your chapter “Of Stock,” this one resonated with me the most. In fact, I stopped and I relistened to it a few times before going on. And one of the things I have said many times is, I don’t think I have personally ever had a completely original idea. And I usually say this in the context of parents who come up to me at a convention or they’ll say something like, I just want my child to be able to express himself. And I will challenge that and say, writing isn’t really about expressing yourself so much as it’s about expressing ideas. And if you live long enough and get lucky, you might have an original idea. I’m not sure I ever have. I think everything I ever thought came from somewhere. And you gave such great examples in this chapter “On Stock.” Talk a little bit about this idea because it’s not a word that I think I had ever heard before in the context of the ideas that make up the richness of the Western intellectual tradition.

Scott Newstok: I like that word stock because one thing I do repeatedly in the book is try to think of physical analogs or things that are more palpable to us before then making the shift to the intellectual or the cognitive analog.

So I think we can acknowledge that it’s good to have a lot of stuff in stock or in store if you, let’s say, want to build something, that you can’t build something from nothing. You assemble things from pre-existing parts and then your configuration of those things might become a new thing or it might be a novel configuration even if the parts preexisted you. So again, if you think about physical stock or things that you have in store that helps them with the transition to thinking about cognitive stock or intellectual heritage, even the stock of words, word stock, that sense of a resource or an archive from which you can draw upon in order to configure something new.

And again, it’s not, I mean, it’s interesting. If you look at the history of invention or you talk to inventors, they will often say, I didn’t make this, this new thing, all these parts kind of preexisted, but it was my putting them together in this way that led to the steam engine or led to the laser or whatever the case might be that it wasn’t making something from nothing as in the quip from King Lear. It’s actually synthesizing something from preexisting things. And this is another case in which there’s a wonderful word that kind of captures that fundamental duality in the nature of stock, which is the word invent or the Latin term *inventio*, which gives us both our English verb *invent* to make something new, but it also gives us our English word *inventory*, which is the inventory of all of our stock, the stuff that we have to hand already. And what’s fascinating to me is that in the history of rhetoric, the traditional five

stages in the history of rhetoric began with *inventio*, began with an inventory. The first thing that you do when you're trying to make an argument or a poem or a song or a letter is sit down and think about what's the inventory of everything that I know about this topic and then gather that material and then arrange it for the particular circumstance, whether it's a legal argument or a political discourse or whatever the case might be. You're not making something from nothing. You're sitting down, and you're pausing to make an inventory of what you already know. And that includes words and concepts and history and really the full range of the liberal arts.

And then you're bringing it to bear upon your circumstance or your situation to make something that's fitting and appropriate for that particular moment. But you can't do that without having the stock. And it's an argument for wide reading, and it's an argument for liberal education. I would say to be exposed to a lot of things so that you have them to hand when the occasion demands it.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, and I think for a lot of people, this idea of creative writing implies, or they infer from this, that somehow they have to create something from nothing, *ex nihilo*, like God, and we don't do that. And so you explain this in such an eloquent way, and I think it's a fundamentally freeing thing, especially for kids. You don't have to make up something that nobody ever thought of before. You just have to find something and play with it and the freedom that that engenders. So I was very excited when you talked about the origin of the meaning and the relationship between invention and inventory.

Scott Newstok: No, I agree. I think it is actually liberating. There is something kind of terrifying about the blank page or the blank screen that ends up feeling stultifying. Like, I have nothing to say. I don't know what to do. And again, it seems counterintuitive, but one of the ways to have something to say is to know what other people have said, and then think about how you can rearrange that and apply that to your own life into your own circumstances. But it's a time tested and longstanding technique of even the kind of prewriting techniques that we often have with writing of or free writing of getting a lot of ideas on paper, or literally just copying down what other people have said, and then looking at it and fooling yourself into a kind of a messy draft, that then you begin to refine and make your own.

Julie Walker: I have to jump in here.

Scott Newstok: Please

Julie Walker: Because the listeners are just thinking, "Oh, well, Dr. Newstock has taken Andrew Pudewa's writing course."

Andrew Pudewa: no.

Julie Walker: And it's not true.

Andrew Pudewa: No, but I'm sure you've seen the movie *Finding Forrester* where he says, just start typing this and then when you feel you can, take over. And I've used that as kind of an object lesson for the importance of being open to imitation and starting with something that is copying, just straight copying.

Scott Newstok: Literally copying you're right. We have, and we have so many examples of writers who'd say just that, but I quote a few of them, but there are, there are scores of writers who say, I just wanted to sit at the typewriter and type like Hemingway. So I just typed out Hemingway. Or Jed Apatow says, I wanted to learn how to be funny and I would just transcribe *Saturday Night Live* skits. And this goes back to the Benjamin Franklin anecdote that you were bringing up earlier. He wanted to be a better writer. And he'd been pulled out of school by his brother. He wasn't able to complete his education. So he sat down and looked at a good model of writing from Addison and Steele from the 18th century great British periodical series. And he just copied them. And that's exactly what Shakespeare was forced to do as well. Sit down with Cicero, copy Cicero, translate it from Latin into English, then translate that back into Latin. And then look at how well the copying had been produced. It looks, it looks old fashioned. It looks rudimentary. You would think that it wouldn't, it would lead to the most kind of slavish form of imitation, but it actually turns out to be strangely liberating.

Andrew Pudewa: I had an experience many years ago. I heard someone talk about the benefits of copying scripture. And so, as an experiment, I decided that I would try to copy by hand, on paper, the book of John. And what I discovered was that I was noticing a whole lot of things that I never noticed, even having heard or read it many dozens, hundreds of times. There's this slowing down and this apprehending of detail that happens. And I don't know you get that any other way, or at least not as efficaciously as you do by copying something beautiful.

Scott Newstok: That apprehending is a great verb because it is about the kind of grasping of it in a way. And it's also about, it's almost as if you're embodying the position of the writer. I like to tell students to do that when, for example, they're examining a sonnet by Shakespeare, one that they've already memorized. I say, sit down and write it and pretend that you're writing it for the first time and ask yourself at the end of that first line, why did I say that? And what might I say next? And why does it, why does it make sense for me to invoke this word at this juncture? And that's true of any great writing.

It's interesting you bring up scriptural transcription. One of the 613 mitzvahs of the Jewish tradition is to copy them by hand, and most people don't do that. But I think the premise is exactly what you're describing there with your experience with the book of John, where you begin to think your way into it. At first glance, it looks like a mechanical process, but it actually turns into almost like you're revivifying the text. And as you said, you're slowing yourself down, or you're forcing yourself to have a different kind of relationship to it than just letting your eyes skim over what you thought was familiar.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, I love that word, revivifying the text, bringing to life again. You mentioned sonnets and you talk about sonnets as a form in your chapter "Of Constraint." And this was of particular interest to me because our whole system is based on models and checklists. So when we start teaching writing to children, we give them various models to follow for structure for the arrangement side, and then checklists of specific word usages and grammatical constructions and literary devices, if you will, to use on the style side. And that's where we get our structure and style. And one of the things people worry about if they don't have any experience is, well, won't this stifle creativity? But in your chapter "On Constraint," and specifically you talked about the form of the sonnet, which is very specific as actually engendering a level of creativity that is greater than you would ever expect by that constraint.

Julie Walker: Well, and that constraint idea is—my undergraduate degrees in recreation. We've talked about this before, but fences on the playground were a big topic of conversation and turns out they're a good idea because kids feel more free to play within the fences.

Scott Newstok: I love that. I think the beauty of constraint, again, to make the sports analog. If you know, part of the beauty of a baseball game, let's say, is that it's nine innings long. And ever since Abner Doubleday in the 19th century, it's been nine innings long. And if you suddenly change it to three innings long, it would just be a different game. And the beauty or the elegance, or the achievement, the grace of doing well in baseball is working within that constraint of nine innings. Or, we even like this with the kind of competitive cooking shows where you're given seven arbitrary ingredients, and it looks a little bit bizarre at first, but all of the teams end up coming up with something wonderful based on that set of constraints. And it's not that you gave them access to an infinite grocery store, infinite stock of food. You said, here's the seven ingredients that you have. Now go see what you can do with it.

And in some ways, the sonnet is a very quick and apprehensible example of that larger dynamic of writing within constraint. It's just arbitrary. It's fourteen lines long. It doesn't, it didn't have to be fourteen lines long. Initially sonnets weren't fourteen lines long, but at some point that constraint became a pattern. Everyone's followed it since, or if they've not followed it, that's been a deliberate strategy to write a thirteen-line sonnet or a double sonnet of a twenty-eight line sonnet or whatever form you're playing with, even when you're pushing against the constraints, you are still working with them in a productive way. And you have something to push off of, if you want to think of it that way, going back to your boundaries of the playground, that it's the boundedness is actually a helpful and productive human dynamic.

Andrew Pudewa: And that leads into one of the last chapters, "Of Freedom." And again, you said in a more elegant way than what I have tried to point out to people is that the liberal arts are the arts of free people, that we study grammar and logic and rhetoric and arithmetic and geometry and astronomy and music so that we will be able to preserve our intellectual and spiritual, if not also physical, freedoms. And as we lose that intellectual freedom, we become vulnerable socially. We become less able to contend with those things that threaten our well being. I would like you to comment a little bit on how your students at the college level, at the university level there, how do they change as a result of being with you? Because I know you must have a very transformative experience on the students that come out of the public high schools and into a college and then they would sit in your classroom and start reading Shakespeare. And just share a little bit about that because it must be an incredibly fulfilling work that you do.

Scott Newstok: Oh, I certainly love my work, and I feel like it's a blessing, and I come from a long line of teachers, so in some ways it's in my bones. It's hard for me, it's talking about assessment. I think it's hard for me to gauge what happens after three months in the class together. I often like to say that it probably would be more accurate to check in with students five or ten years after the class is concluded rather than the immediate evaluations that are submitted. At the end of the semester, sometimes when they're frustrated with the teacher for good reasons or and sometimes for bad reasons.

I think students are in a really difficult situation these days. I think they're inundated with all kinds of competitions for their attention. They've gone through the pandemic. Many of them

have felt socially isolated as a result of ways in which they've been educated at home or elsewhere. So I feel incredibly sympathetic to the incoming generations of students. And I guess I have a kind of a dual sense of what their arrival in my class entails these days. I think what I like to do is something that many of them have not done in their classes before, and that often is initially frustrating because I don't like to use a rubric. I don't like to follow what they would expect for kind of conventional templates. But I think that those that are willing to stick with it and willing to kind of go through the quirky things that I'm doing really end up enjoying it and feeling enriched by it. And it's not like what they've had before in previous classes. And I would hope that every stage of education would be like that, that it would not be like what you've done before. It would be an outgrowth of what you've done, or it would be an elaboration of what you've done before, but it would have a new quality to it. That's pushing you in new directions.

Andrew Pudewa: And you have students memorize poetry. Is that correct?

Scott Newstok: That is correct. Yes, that's also old fashioned. But again, something that is still effective and there are many reasons why, why that's so effective.

Julie Walker: And absolutely something we advocate here at IEW.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, actually, have a program I wrote many years ago, still something we sell. It's called *Linguistic Development Through Poetry Memorization*. And it's for children, and it starts off with simple two, four line poems, and moves up, there's five levels, the fifth level is excerpts from famous speeches. And I just feel as though you must be just a kindred spirit in this way of understanding that when you take, when you memorize something, it's more than just words. It's more than just mechanical. My mother, who is a music teacher, used to always, she never said memorize, she'd always say, learn by heart. Learn by heart. And I can think of nothing better to take into one's heart than the distilled beauty of the past as we find in Shakespeare.

Scott Newstok: Yeah. And in countless writers and countless creators, it's in a wonderful way, it's a way to own that. It's a way to make it your own. It's a way to not feel like it is something that's outside of you or that's alien to you or that's oppressive to you, but it actually is part of your heritage, and you deserve it, and you have a birthright to it. So, I end the book, that chapter "On Freedom" that you were mentioning, I felt I knew immediately when I was crafting the chapters that's where I wanted to go. That was my telos. That was my end. That the ultimate goal of an education like this is a high level of freedom. It's a form of human flourishing.

And I also knew that I wanted to end with the amazing essay by James Baldwin that he composed in 1964 for the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. And it was a magazine that had asked a lot of contemporary journalists and intellectuals to reflect on, on four centuries of Shakespeare. And most of them are forgettable, the submissions that were made, but Baldwin's is just incredible. And I recommend it to everyone. And if there's one thing that anyone gets out of the book, I hope they go and read that James Baldwin essay, which has this amazing title. The title is "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare." I love that title because it immediately captures your imagination here. He's being asked to celebrate Shakespeare on his 400th anniversary of his birth. And Baldwin comes back with a title that challenges you to think, wait, why, why did he hate Shakespeare? And when was that, and when did he stop hating Shakespeare and why did he stop hating Shakespeare? So it's an

amazing, short, brilliant essay, but it captures that sense of Baldwin moving from feeling like, as he says, Shakespeare was an architect of my oppression to feeling like I own Shakespeare. He's as much a part of my heritage as he is of anyone's on this planet, and he belongs to all of us, just as all of cultural and intellectual history belongs to everyone. It's often hard to access, or it's hard to achieve that connection or to make it your own or to learn it by heart. But once you do it, it is a part of you. You've ingested it in the best sense, and you've incorporated it in the core of your being.

Julie Walker: Andrew, whet our appetite. You've got the book in front of you. Read the first couple lines.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, this is so good. Uh, you quoted this here. "My quarrel," this is from the Baldwin essay, I believe. "My quarrel with the English language has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter in quite another way. If the language was not my own, it might be the fault of the language, but it might also be my fault. Perhaps the language was not my own because I had never attempted to use it, had only learned to imitate it." And that just struck me. So, this has been so awesome, and we could go on for hours, I'm sure, and maybe someday we will meet in person. I hope so. But I do have one question I would like your input on because people ask me this.

And in general, I will say I believe that children should read the books before they see the movie. The book is bigger than the movie. The movie is always a summary. It's a chopped down version. So a lot of parents be like, Okay, if you read the book, then you can see the movie. I have a ten year old grandson right now who's finally finished *The Fellowship of the Ring*, just sweat blood reading this thing for months, and we're going to watch the movie this Sunday, a big party at the big screen in our house. But with Shakespeare, I actually suggest the opposite. I suggest that you see the play or see a film version of the play before reading it. Would you agree that that's good advice to give to parents I talk to?

Scott Newstok: I think that's good advice. I'm kind of agnostic about which way you approach—if it's text first and then performance or the other way around, in the best circumstances, those are mutually reinforcing I read a play and then I see it perform, then I have a better way to think about the play, or I go to a performance and then I'm excited and I want to go and read it more slowly and in my own head. I don't think there's a hard and fast line about a rule about that. I think it, especially for children, it's often easier to access through a live performance first before they struggle with the words, but I don't have a, I'm not strict about that in any way. They're both mutually reinforcing the page and the stage.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay, good. And then one last, this is a horrible question, not even fair, you can refuse to answer if you want to. But, I meet people, honestly, I meet young moms, mid thirties, and they have no exposure. They have zero experience with Shakespeare. Somehow they finished high school or college and just never read a play, never saw a play. So I have been asked, what is the best Shakespeare play to start with? Like what is your favorite?

Scott Newstok: Oh, that's tough.

Andrew Pudewa: I know it's tough.

Scott Newstok: Those are two different questions. You asked two different questions there. You said, what's your favorite and then what's the best to start with? Those are, those are very different questions.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay, well you, give me two answers, yeah.

Scott Newstok: Sure, I'll give you at least two answers here. My favorite is *The Winter's Tale*, a wonderful late play that is a kind of marvelous blend of everything he did across his career. It feels like a horrible tragedy for the first maybe three acts, three, four acts. And then it suddenly pivots, and it feels like a wonderful restorative comedy. And somehow it all comes together in the end, though it is shadowed by genuine loss. So I love that play. It's really hard to perform. But when I've seen it performed well, I've been really blown away. I don't know in terms of first play for someone—*Midsummer Night's Dream* is very accessible for all kinds of audiences. The histories are often initially difficult to read though I think once you kind of get past a certain stage, they're just as powerful and compelling as anything else. It's the tragedies that tend to be taught in American high schools, *Julius Caesar* and *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*.

In some ways, that's kind of a curse in the larger sense. Shakespeare is cursed by being or sorry, cursed is the wrong word—it's not to his benefit to be the only non prose pre-twentieth century writer in a lot of high school curriculum. That's an enormous moat that's around his work, and it's a disservice to hundreds of intervening writers, writers that came before him and writers that came after him when a lot of the curricula in our high schools has collapsed into contemporary prose. And that's a disservice to the wonderful long history of writing. So it makes Shakespeare especially intimidating because you're trying to read something from four hundred years ago. You might not have experience with reading poetry or reading drama. So that's another reason why seeing a performance can draw you in before you need to start to wrestle with the words on the page.

Julie Walker: My son, when he was in college was in the play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and that was just so, so much fun. I like Shakespeare's comedies.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and my favorite is *Twelfth Night* because I was in *Twelfth Night*.

Julie Walker: Oh, there you go.

Scott Newstok: You have it by heart.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it was many, many years ago, but 'some are born to greatness, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.' I remember that very well. I have an idea for you. I think you should start doing what Jordan Peterson started doing many, many years ago. Record your classes and post them all on YouTube because I'm not going to get to Memphis any time soon and for any significant length of time. But if I could somehow be a virtual student of you, that would be kind of a dream come true. So consider whether you might put more content out for the people who, who love the way you think, who love the way Shakespeare thinks, and who want to become better at that.

Scott Newstok: Well, it's just a real pleasure to speak with both of you, Andrew and Julie. So thank you for the time today.

Julie Walker: It's been a pleasure and listener, let me just direct you to scottnewstock.com.

Andrew Pudewa: And that's without a C. N E W S T O K.

Julie Walker: And that's where you can find his book and learn more about him. And perhaps maybe Andrew, one of your little pithy statements about how much you love this book will show up

Scott Newstok: That would be a delight. I would love that.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm going to carry this around to every convention I go to next year and hold it up and tell everyone to buy it, so.

Scott Newstok: Just stay on the road. Don't veer off the road.

Julie Walker: Well, Andrew, I can certainly see why you have encouraged us to have him on the podcast. And again, Dr. Newstock, thank you so much for joining us today.

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.