For the past 30 or 40 years, rote learning has been maligned by us erudite educational types. It’s an affront to our delicate intellectual sensibilities. We react to it about the way we would to an old sweat sock in our bowl of clam chowder. But there’s something to be said for rote. And here it is.

Mainly I was blessed to have a mother with a Victorian worldview. Mainly, I’m thankful that she taught me important biblical values while instilling semicourtly manners and an aversion to bad grammar.

Like many Victorian mothers, she believed that “children should be seen and not heard,” with one exception. She had a penchant for training curly haired, bow-tied four-year-old boys (me, for example) in the fine art of memorizing and reciting semifoolish poetry to “entertain” church basements full of friends, ministers, aunts, and other long-suffering detainees. This sort of thing was a jolly pastime for British Empire mothers a century and a half ago, but my mother decided to drag its moldering remains into the mid 1950s, and she thereby transformed me into one of the world’s youngest antiques.

The opus that I often inflicted upon my audiences was called “Here, Mark, You Get the Neck!” It was a boy’s complaint in rhyming couplets that he always got the worst part of the turkey at dinnertime. (I don’t think Shakespeare wrote it.) The dramatic climax came when the boy’s mother cooked an ostrich. As I unshipped the last line, “Here, Mark, you get the neeeeeeecck!” I stretched out my wee arms to show the colossal length of the thing. Then I bowed and the audience clapped, probably because they were thankful that one of life’s little ordeals was finally over.

Ordeal or not, early rote memory training has been a lifelong blessing for me. For one thing, that mental exercise prepared my mind to store six decades worth of
poetic doggerel, pithy quotations, obscure facts, enigmatic concepts, diverting anecdotes, and some useful stuff that I can call to mind on short notice. Much more important, when I became a Christian at age 23, my rote-trained brain could learn and retain Scripture verses pretty easily. From then on the Lord used those verses to guide the best of my reflections, decisions, and actions. They have genuinely been “a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Psalm 119:105, KJV), and they’ve taken up near permanent residence in the Kennedy gray cells, thanks to rote learning.

The Psalmist affirms the “rotification” of Scripture: “I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11, NLT). Maybe it’s time for us to rethink the value of rote.

At this point I can sense a whole lot of frustrated “ya buts” in the minds of my antirote friends.

“What about all the higher-level thinking skills?” they’re saying. “That’s what our students really need!” And those folks are right, up to a point. Students whose only method of learning is memorizing facts and then regurgitating them on demand are just marginally better off than well-trained budgies ... except that almost nobody does that—only memorizes things I mean. Sooner or later, people—even our students—take a stab at thinking. And when they do, it’s the stuff they’ve unwittingly memorized, often by rote, that both guides their thinking process and gives them something to think about.

A favorite “ya but” says that today’s students have almost no need for memorized facts because they have access to a world of information as near as their smartphones. There’s no denying it; technology provides astonishing resources and does so with the utmost convenience. But it also can give the false security of “facts at your fingertips” indolence that tends to diminish human mental development rather than enhance it.

The character Sherlock Holmes believed that the mind is more like an attic than a muscle—that it has a limited storage capacity. And so he avoided knowledge that didn’t enhance his standing as the world’s greatest consulting detective. It’s gratifying to know he got some things wrong.

Truth is, the mind does act like a muscle; the more you exercise it the greater its capacity, agility, and functional ability. And rote memorizing is, in itself, a valuable mental exercise, sometimes much more valuable than the words that are memorized. (After all, how much intellectual worth is there in “Here, Mark, you get the neck”?) And while I’m making mildly outrageous statements, here’s another: One of the great things about rote is that you don’t have to understand everything you’ve memorized—not right away anyway. It makes room for the aha moments. Isn’t it terrific when you recall and suddenly “get” some aspect of Scripture or literature that you previously found inscrutable? That’s called “growing in understanding,” and if we regularly take time for reflective thinking (dog walks are excellent “RT” venues), it can happen throughout our lives.

The character Sherlock Holmes believed that the mind is more like an attic than a muscle—that it has a limited storage capacity. And so he avoided knowledge that didn’t enhance his standing as the world’s greatest consulting detective. It’s gratifying to know he got some things wrong.

Truth is, the mind does act like a muscle; the more you exercise it the greater its capacity, agility, and functional ability. And rote memorizing is, in itself, a valuable mental exercise, sometimes much more valuable than the words that are memorized. (After all, how much intellectual worth is there in “Here, Mark, you get the neck”?) And while I’m making mildly outrageous statements, here’s another: One of the great things about rote is that you don’t have to understand everything you’ve memorized—not right away anyway. It makes room for the aha moments. Isn’t it terrific when you recall and suddenly “get” some aspect of Scripture or literature that you previously found inscrutable? That’s called “growing in understanding,” and if we regularly take time for reflective thinking (dog walks are excellent “RT” venues), it can happen throughout our lives.

Of course, there are a lot of other ways to exercise the mind, and although Bloom’s taxonomy says rote is not an advanced learning skill, it is foundational. That’s how classical educators have seen rote for many centuries. They identify it as the critical component of the grammar stage, the first and most basic of their three stages of learning. In the grammar stage, primary and early elementary students internalize a sizeable body of factual knowledge through memorization. The next two stages—the dialectic, or logic, stage and the rhetoric stage—develop advanced learning and thinking skills, but both are built upon the solid substructure of that grammar stage.

So maybe we should revise our opinions of rote and even celebrate it. After all, even folks without a Victorian mother or a dog can reap its benefits.

Mark Kennedy is the regional director of ACSI Eastern Canada.