

Andrew Bennett

Life is a Precious Gift

When Andrew Bennett was three years old, his mother left him with his grandparents one afternoon. She was taking Andrew's seven-year-old sister, Kelly, to the dentist, and Andrew had a cold. "I'm leaving my boy with you," she told her mother. Later that day, Andrew's mother and older sister were killed in a car accident, the victims of a drunk driver. With their daughters' final words echoing in their ears, his grandparents chose to take him in permanently.

He was too young to remember his mother, but he heard stories of her growing up. So much so, that he feels as if he knew her. "I know when somebody passes, people can put them on a pedestal," Andrew reflects. "But my mom sounds like she was beloved. She was a really bright ray of sunshine in our community. I'm thankful that even though I didn't know her, she's been that positive, real, optimistic, joyful presence with me."

For about a year, his father and older brother, Brad, moved in with his maternal grandparents as well. But eventually, his father moved out and remarried, taking Brad with him. Andrew stayed with his grandparents, and for years struggled to understand why his father had left him behind. In retrospect, he realizes the situation was more complex than he could've understood at the time. "From my dad's perspective, my grandparents wouldn't let me go," he relates. "He came on the Thanksgiving after he'd remarried to collect me, and my grandpa and he had a fist fight. Grandpa cleaned his clock, and basically said, 'you'll never take our boy.' I think in a way, my grandparents needed me. I looked so much like my mom and my sister. They needed something to give them solace from their loss."

It was a dramatic start to life for young Andrew, but his childhood in picturesque Beulah, Michigan wasn't all tragedy. In fact, his youth

might best be described as both the best of times, and the worst of times." Once he was settled with his grandparents, the three moved from a little house in downtown Beulah to a 150-acre cherry farm a mile outside of town. Though it was more of a hobby than a money-making endeavor, the cherry orchards were fully functional, with migrant workers coming to pick the cherries every year. "Growing up there was magical," reminisces Andrew. "My buddies came over to play, and it was like we had our own park. We played in the orchard, and the empty farmhouse on the property became our clubhouse. We also had horses that we would ride. Those were the days when you could run out in the morning and come back when it was getting dark. My grandmother would ring a bell when it was time for dinner."



Growing up, Andrew called his grandmother "Nin," a baby's permutation of "Nana" that stuck. He was wonderfully close with both Nin and Grandpa, both of whom exemplified kindness, caring for others, and a wicked sense of humor. "They were characters," Andrew smiles. "They were funny as hell. I am so grateful that I got that sense of humor; it's been a big savior in my life." He remembers spending long hours with his grandfather in what they called the "fly-tying" room. "He was an avid outdoorsman and loved hunting and fishing. He tied his own trout flies," explains Andrew. "He would sit in the fly-tying room with a Tiparillo cigar in his mouth, listen to classical music, and make his own trout flies. I would come in, pull up a chair, and chew the fat. We did that all the time."

At the age of seven, Andrew got his first magic kit. He began doing tricks at school and became notorious as the local magician. By 12, he was doing shows at local venues like the grange hall. He had business cards printed up and would hand them out to anyone he met. Through it all,

his grandparents were his biggest fans, and his grandfather helped write his act. The family always ate dinner each night together, and Andy would show off any new tricks he had learned. In the morning, his grandfather would go to work; he was President of a local bank. But on the counter, he'd have left a script to accompany the new trick.

Andy's grandfather had a keen business sense. He had risen from janitor in the bank where he eventually became President, and he helped Andy manage his burgeoning magic career. "When I started to get paid for my magic, my first fee was \$25," recalls Andrew. "Grandpa taught me how to write contracts. He got a typewriter from the bank for me, and I converted my toy room into my office. How many 12-year-olds are writing contracts, promoting themselves, and putting ads in newspapers? I was never just an entertainer. I was a businessperson, too."

Andrew's magic business was taking off, and he was thriving in school. He did well in class and was popular with the other students. Everything was going so smoothly; then, tragedy struck once again. Andrew was 13 when his grandfather was hospitalized during a severe mental health crisis. "I saw him in the hospital," remembers Andrew. "I saw him literally fall apart. He went from being my hero to being delusional and hallucinating. I think that's when I realized I'm going to have to take care of myself." From that time, Andrew's grandfather never spent more than two weeks back home with the family before taking his life three years later.

"By that time, he had been in institutions all over Michigan," describes Andrew. "They tried everything including electroshock therapy and valium. When he killed himself, he had been home for two weeks, and he was the best he'd ever been. It was like we had him back. I've since learned that that is oftentimes when people take their own lives. Because they're terrified they might go back to that darkness. After he died, I had this feeling of the world collapsing. Like everything was closing in. My grandma was the rock. She was a tough, incredible woman. I put so much emphasis on my grandfather being my hero in my life, but my grandma was the foundation. She was always there, and, my goodness, she was tough."

Andrew notes that it would be years before he fully grappled with the loss of his grandfather. At the time, his way of dealing with it was to keep his head down and throw himself into

work, school, and magic. By then, Andrew had already had a local TV show for two years. The opportunity had come about somewhat fatefully. His grandmother was getting new carpeting installed, and the worker happened to notice his magic props. It turned out that he was a magician, too, and was part of a club. Andrew was invited to join, and though he was the youngest by decades, he loved spending time there. One of the other club members, Jim Matthews, was a producer at the TV station in nearby Traverse City.

"He started saying I should have a kid's show on Saturday morning," says Andrew. "A local, live kid's show. So, *The Andy Bennett Show* was created. There was a live audience, and we would show cartoons. I was on for maybe five minutes during the show. But Traverse City was a big tourist destination in the summer next to Lake Michigan. So all these celebrities would come and appear on *The Andy Bennett Show*. Pat Paulson, Telly Savalas, William Shatner, Vivian Vance, and Christopher Reeve before *Superman* were guests."

Andrew also began working at Jim's tourist shop showing off magic tricks, and even opened at Louie's—a local strip club. The local paper ran a column called 'Andy Bennett Entertains' with a calendar of his live shows. And on top of all his success in the entertainment world, Andy was still thriving in school. His grades were average, but he was Class President every year and won Homecoming King as a senior. He developed a love of public speaking, a skill he continued to hone throughout his career.

Although his grades weren't stellar, he scored high on the ACT and got a full ride to Michigan State. Going into college, Andrew was considering a career as a radio broadcaster. His first job in college was with the campus radio station. He used the audio recordings from his show to get a summer job in his hometown radio station. He realized a career in broadcasting wasn't for him and switched his major from radio and TV to general communications. He knew he wanted to be a manager in the business world, and in 1983 he was recruited into the management training program at Joann Fabrics.

It wasn't a dream job, but it was a good training program and a decent job. During his 18 months with Joann Fabrics, Andrew ran a store in East Lansing and later another one in Northern Detroit. Then he met the mentor who would steward him through the next decade of his career:

Ross Perot. A friend was working for a Dallas-based company called EDS, a then medium-sized company with about 4,000 employees. "My friend told me, you have got to meet Ross Perot," relates Andrew. "Back then, no one knew who Ross was. But she told me she'd get me a conversation with him. It wasn't an interview, just a sit-down. So I went to his office in Troy, and we talked for an hour and a half. I just thought he was down-to-earth, relatable, and inspirational. He called the next day to inform me he was selling EDS to General Motors. He needed someone in Detroit to take care of his personal stuff and asked if I would be interested even though I wouldn't be a manager. I said, 'absolutely.' But it just so happens that I was open to a change due to a recent experience at Joann Fabrics. A \$700 deposit had gone missing. Even though I was cleared of any wrong doing, they insisted on taking the money from my paycheck. That hurt and left a bad taste in my mouth. Therefore, I was ready for a change."

For six months, Andrew worked directly for Ross as his assistant. Later, at the office Christmas party, Andy got out his old magic set and performed for his colleagues. Ross' reaction was one Andy took to heart. "He challenged me to use magic in business," Andrew recalls. "He told me he'd seen a side of me he hadn't seen before. He could see the authenticity of my love for magic, and he encouraged me to use magic in my business presentations. It's something I have done ever since."

After that, Ross began to rotate Andrew through all the divisions of the company. First, he was sent to HR, where he quickly picked up recruiting. EDS was hiring people hand over fist at the time, as they had been purchased by GM and were filling a large number of new support roles. While there, Andrew made a potentially career-ending mistake. He overlooked the fine print in a buyout clause with a contract programmer that required EDS to pay \$15,000 if we hired him. This was a fee we could have avoided because we had an abundance of candidates who wanted to work for us. Andrew knew Ross would be upset. The next morning, Ross called Andrew into his office. He offered Andrew his chair, then sat on the opposite side of his own desk. "You're me. What do you do?" he questioned Andy. Andy had been mulling it over all night and told Ross the business couldn't afford \$15,000 mistakes. He should be let go. "Ross slammed his fist on the table and said,

'That's exactly why I'm not going to fire you!'" remembers Andrew. "He told me he'd just invested \$15,000 in my education. My jaw must've hit the floor. That was the kind of leader he was."

On his next rotation, Andrew moved from recruiting to business operations management. He struggled to get his sea legs in the new department, but Ross continued encouraging him. EDS was a data processing business at the time, and Andrew's job was to liaise between the data processing centers and GM. Without a technical background, he felt adrift, but slowly learned the ropes. After that, it was on to a tenure in marketing from about 1987 to 1989. From there, Ross decided to send him to manage an account in Australia.

Andrew's time in Australia was another case of growing into his role. Initially, everything was going wrong. The client, a breakfast foods' business called Uncle Toby's, was furious with his management. Andrew's crime was saying yes to everything they requested. "The client would come to me and say we want this and that and I'd say, 'Yes,'" laughs Andrew. "The list kept growing. They kept changing priorities. Every day the wind was blowing in a new direction which meant we got little done."

"At one point, Ross met with them, and I thought I'd be going home on the next flight," continues Andrew. "Instead, he sat me down and said, 'I know you're trying to make them happy. But trying to make them happy is making them very unhappy. When you start telling them 'no' because it's in their best interest, then we stop being a vendor and start being a partner.'"

After their meeting, Andrew apologized to his team. He described the situation, acknowledged what he'd done wrong, and any tension was immediately released. His Australian team was more than happy to help Andrew rectify his mistakes and build a healthy new culture. What began as a failure became an unmitigated success story; the contract grew from \$5 million to \$65 million in just two years. By the time Andrew left, Uncle Toby's was a \$3 billion company.

Andrew was a hero when he returned to the States. He began consulting internally at EDS and helped other account managers restructure their contracts.

Around this time, Ross left the company. Although he'd achieved success by every possible metric, Andrew felt restless. "Up until then it was all about the bottom line; work hard, climb the

ladder, get the titles. But I wasn't happy," explains Andrew. "I asked myself, 'Is this all there is?' I've had so many great opportunities. Why am I not happy? So I made a change in my career to pursue other interests. I had learned that leadership and culture make a huge impact on a team's quality of life and on whether they lead a compelling life. So there was this connection to me: how do we make the work part of life more meaningful? My definition of success shifted from money, titles, car, and house, to how do we make a difference?"

Andrew decided he wanted to work in leadership development and organizational culture. He took a job with a consulting firm in Seattle and promised himself he'd only stay for five years before going out on his own. About four and a half years, he got laid off. "It was a blessing, because I don't know that I would actually have gone out on my own," says Andrew. "I was comfortable, making a good living, and doing good work. Then it ended, and I thought, 'This is God's way of saying that I'm moving you on.'"

Thus, 23 years ago, Bennett Performance Group (BPG) was born. From the ashes of tragedy, Andrew became an entertainer. Now, on the foundation of his first career, Andrew built another. As the President of BPG, Andrew spends much of his time in speaking engagements and conducting workshops. He also conducts consulting engagements and coaching to leaders to hone their leadership skills, management teams to create harmonious balance, and companies to provide an enjoyable and productive culture for all employees. He has worked with over 120 organizations including Google, Microsoft, Ford Motor Company, and the U.S. State Department.

Generally, his consultancies last at least a year. He'll work independently, or he'll draw on a small team of trusted fellow coaches to fill out his roster. BPG has done 39 long-term projects over its 23 years in operation, for clients of all sizes. Their largest was Sun Microsystems; their smallest, a family-owned commercial coffee roasting and distribution business in Detroit. They have clients everywhere and have worked on five continents. Largely, Andrew attracts new business through word of mouth.

"I help people thrive," Andrew says of his work today. "I help people lead fulfilling lives. I started out climbing the corporate ladder, but as time went by and I got experience, my influences led me to care more about people and their lives.

Life is really, really precious. I want to make the most of this precious gift. And I want that for everyone. I want people to feel fulfilled."

Today, Andrew is living a life of fulfillment. He has a strong faith, and a wonderful marriage. He met his wife Jennifer in a leadership program, and she has been a wellspring of support since their marriage in 2013. Andrew considers his wedding band to be his most treasured object. "She's a superstar in business and she's the Chief Learning Officer for the National Credit Union Administration," Andrew says proudly. "She has her Master's degree in Leadership, so she and I are peers. I admire her tremendously as a colleague and as a person. I just can't believe I'm married to her. My wedding band is my most treasured object, and I never take this ring off. There's nothing more important to me in my life."

Along with Jennifer, Andrew notes that he finally, once more, feels at home with a family. "Jennifer came with a family. I now have a family," he smiles. "Her mother and I in particular developed a bond. I feel like I got a second chance at having a mom. She's an incredible, good woman. I've had so many great things in my life, and I've had a lot of really tough things in my life, and I think those tough things made me grateful. I always say, I'm grateful to be grateful. I'm glad I don't take for granted that I get to experience this amazing gift of family. Most people love and appreciate their family, but I treasure them."

As a leader, Andrew emphasizes lifting others up. "It's continually acknowledging people for their strengths and really calling that out publicly and privately," he affirms. "I want to make people strong in terms of belief in themselves. I want to do what Ross did for me." To young people today, he advises working for a purpose. "Life is a precious gift," he repeats. "You never know when it could be your last day. Mom never suspected, when she was 33, that that would be it. So make sure that your life matters. There's only one you, and there will only ever be one you. How do you bring all of who you are to bear and make this place a little bit better?"

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