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Charlie Mechem: Hello and welcome to 15 Minutes with Charlie. I'm your host Charlie Mechem, and I want to help you communicate more effectively. And I think that the use of anecdotes can get you there. Explore this with me as I share anecdotes from my recently published book, Total Anecdotal, and ask guests to react in relation to their own experience and careers.

My guest today is a talented family friend, Bill Barretta. Bill is an illustrious American puppeteer who has been performing with the Jim Henson Company since 1991. And this has earned him a position as one of the leading Muppet performers, and the producer of productions such as It's a Very Muppet Christmas Movie and the Muppet's Wizard of Oz.

So please sit back and enjoy my 15 minutes with this very talented young man, Bill Barretta.

Happy to have you, Bill.

Bill Barretta: Oh well, come on. I mean, come on. Thank you.

Charlie Mechem: Okay. The approach I like to use is to quote several anecdotes from my book, Total Anecdotal, and ask you to react as to how these might have played a part in your own life.

Bill Barretta: Okay. Can I just say one thing?

Charlie Mechem: And yes, of course.

Bill Barretta: I just want you to know, actually, that obviously without you knowing, and without me realizing until much later, that you played an important part in my life growing up; helping and being a part of providing the entertainment that I [inaudible 00:01:57] and inspired to do, was create characters as a kid. And that's kind of something I've always wanted to tell you, and I wanted to thank you for that.

Charlie Mechem: Thank you. Well, I'm sure you're referring to Hanna-Barbera, and that was one of the loves of my life and still is, so thanks. Thanks for that.

I've tried to choose, Bill, some anecdotes that might have particular significance in your world. And here's the first one that comes under the category of honesty in the book.

A truly great Peanuts comic strip has Lucy as the psychiatrist consulting with Charlie Brown. Her question to him is, "Which do you prefer, a sunrise or sunset?" When he answers, "A sunset, I guess", Lucy launches characteristically

into a diatribe. She points out that people who prefer sunsets always give up. They always move back instead of forward. And she just knew that he wouldn't prefer a sunrise, because those are for people with ambition. Therefore, she concludes Charlie Brown is hopeless. And in the final frame, Charlie Brown looks wistfully at the reader and says, "Actually, I've always sort of preferred noon."

I thought this was so funny. But my question to you is, have you considered yourself a sunrise or sunset person, or are you a noon person?

Bill Barretta: It's interesting. I think I might be a noon person, only because I think I'm not... I can't say that I'm necessarily an early riser, because I'm working and that usually calls for being up early and that sort of thing.

And with the Muppets and my career with Muppets, you know, we're not kind of constantly working 365 days a year, which is nice. And I feel fortunate for that. But when we do work, we work very long and very hard hours.

I guess I enjoy the day because it just feels new and you don't know what's coming, what the next thing could be. And I also enjoy the evening, because that's the time when you get to kind of relax a little more, not have to maybe think about all the things that you were thinking about all day long and trying to get things right, and do something with your life, as the they say. So me, I'm somewhere in the middle, I guess.

Charlie Mechem: Well, good for you.

Bill Barretta: I could be [inaudible 00:04:39]

Charlie Mechem: Right. The second anecdote comes under the heading of humility, and it goes like this:

If you are unable to keep flattery and praise from turning your head, you can rely on your family to keep your ego under control. A good example is this story.

A wife read a fortune telling cards that her husband got from a penny weighing machine and it said, "You are a leader with a magnetic personality and strong character, intelligent, witty and attractive." She then turned the card over and added, "It's got your weight wrong too.

What about humility? What's your attitude, and from your career, the importance of humility?

Bill Barretta: Well, I have to say it's been actually very important, because what we do with the Muppets is a very collaborative situation. We really rely on each other

because, you know, depending on which characters we're working with, sometimes they take two or three people to ultimately perform. And I think there needs to be a certain amount of humility in that process because it's not about one person shining, it's about doing it collectively and creating something, because you need other people to help you do that. And I think that's something that Jim Henson set up. He was a very humble fellow. You know, he wasn't the guy in the room who was talking loud and trying to get everyone's attention, or... I don't believe that flattery was maybe his favorite thing. And I don't think it's mine either, to be honest.

You know, maybe I can say just a real quick story. There was a guy named Jerry Nelson, one of the famous Muppet performers. He's passed away now, but he was one of the group that created the Muppet Show and he was a part of Sesame Street. And he took great pride in his anonymity. I think there's some humility in that. If he was on a plane ride from Los Angeles to New York City, and he happened to sit next to... This is during the height of the Muppet Show, and he was on a plane with Al Pacino. He happened to be sitting next to him. And of course Al didn't know who he was. And they started talking. And then once he realized... The Muppet show was a big deal. And Al said, Wow, this is amazing. I'm just amazed that you don't look for that... that people know who you are."

Charlie Mechem: Right.

Bill Barretta: And Jerry said, "Well, I really don't mind. I get to be a piece of cheese who's an opera singer, and I get to be a cat, and I can be all kinds of... " And so Al said, "Well, you know, I just mean this is part of my ego that that I wanted people to see who I am. It's part of what I do." So anyway, to make a long story short, they arrived in New York and they get off the plane, and they're walking out, and this mob stops Al and he can't get through. He can't get by. And Jerry calmly walked up to him and just tapped him on the shoulder and said, "It was nice talking to you, Al" and heads on his way.

Right there was the example of sometimes, I think, how humility and anonymity may play in your favor.

Charlie Mechem: I can share with you a story that that reminded me of... Neil Armstrong was a dear friend of mine and he was probably the most modest superhero that ever lived. And he and I were together one day, not long after the moon landing. He had come back to the Ohio area. And it was a big crowd. And this young girl came up to him, probably 16, 17, and looked at him and said, "Aren't you somebody I should know?" And Neil said, "Probably not." I've never forgotten that.

Anyway, okay. The next anecdote comes under the heading in the book of Passion, and it has to do with a speech that Neil Simon, the great playwright, gave at Williams College at a commencement address. And here's what he said.

"Whatever path you follow, from the moment you take off those long black gowns, do it as if Gershwin had written music to underscore your every move. Romantic and idealistic? Yes. But I can't think of anything worthwhile in life that was achieved without a great deal of desire to achieve it. Don't listen to those who say it's not done that way. Maybe it's not. But maybe you will. Don't listen to those who say you're taking too big a chance. If he didn't take a big chance, Michelangelo would have painted the Sistine floor, and it would certainly have been rubbed out by today."

So what's your view of the importance of passion in your work?

Bill Barretta: Oh gosh. Well, I think it's everything.

Passion, I think, is what drives all those little talented [inaudible 00:09:53] that you may have inside of you for whatever you're doing. I know that I am more passionate about projects that are closer to me as a person, that may be sometimes something that's been written by someone else that I'm interpreting, and I have to find the passion for that.

I think passion drives everything, and at least as well... not only, maybe it's just success, but just in being around your family and your friends and then having a passion. I had a dear friend named Francesco Quinn. He was the son of Anthony Quinn, and he took his father's passion and lust for life, and I've always kind of admired that approach; that whether you're eating a sandwich, or you were driving your car or taking a bike ride, I think there is ultimately... If you can strive... And it's not an easy thing to do, I think, but if you can strive to find passion in all those little things, I think you're a happier person.

Charlie Mechem: That is very well said. I totally agree with you.

Bill Barretta: Oh, thank you.

Charlie Mechem: The next anecdote of... Because obviously sense of humor is very important in your life. I happen to believe that a sense of humor is one of the most critical components of any successful individual. Those who don't have a sense of humor, I think are doomed to a rather unpleasant life.

In any event, here is a limerick that I ran across years ago regarding sense of humor, and it goes like this:

He was a very cautious lad who had never rocked or played. He never smoked, he never drank or even kissed a maid. And when he upped and passed away, insurance was denied, for since he had never lived, they claimed he'd never died.

I've always loved that, but I'd love your take on the importance of a sense of humor.

Bill Barretta: I grew up in a family that had, I think, a very good sense of humor. There was always time for teasing, playing, being silly, but trying to be clever at the same time. I think we strived to make each other laugh. It was important, I think, in my family growing up to see people smiling and happy. And I guess in my career, it's what I followed.

And again, going back to, you know, Hanna-Barbera, watching these things growing up. And Sesame Street. It's almost as important, maybe, as blood. You know? The blood that runs through your veins. Hopefully, humor is running through your veins, because there's a lot of hard things that we deal with that we don't realize as kids that we're going to go through. And if we can find some humor and kind of instill that, or find a way to instill that in others as young people, then I think we're able to handle the bigger issues as we grow older, I think maybe.

Charlie Mechem: I quite agree. I have found sense of humor to be critically important in diffusing difficult situations, either one-on-one or in a board meeting, or a management meeting. Oftentimes, tempers get a little short and if you're not careful, will get out of hand. So sense of humor, I think, oftentimes almost inevitably will help to turn the pressure down a bit.

Bill Barretta: Yeah, I think that's a great point. And you know, it's interesting, some people are, I think, able to do that more effectively than others, but I think it's always worth a shot to try and diffuse tension that way. I totally agree. And, you know, I think unfortunately, your son Dan just doesn't have a very good sense of humor, so I really try and help him when I can.

Charlie Mechem: I work with him a lot, but he's so down most of the time.

Bill Barretta: [crosstalk 00:14:12].

Charlie Mechem: That'll be fine, but I do think back to Joe Barbera and Bill Hanna, because they radiated the joy of laughter and the joy of smile, and their characters exuded that. And I think that's one of the reasons they were famous, is that their

characters were fun and happy. And I thought, as you pointed out, they created that same attitude in others.

One thing though about sense of humor, I don't want to leave it as that. The importance to me of sense of humor is never make fun of someone else at their expense. Sense of humor should be about making fun of yourself or the human condition, but not ever making fun of other people.

Bill Barretta: I agree. I think in the times that we live now, with the internet... I think the lack of personal connection, you know, kind of one-on-one in front of each other, I think people don't realize how insensitive sometimes they're being, even though they find it to be funny. Whether they're online sending a little quick message or a text, I think if your intention is good and you're not trying to hurt someone, I completely agree. It's very different. I mean, Don Rickles was a master of knocking them down, but lifting them up at the same time. And that's, I think, very rare. I totally agree with you. It shouldn't be a sword.

Charlie Mechem: He made it work because everybody knew that was his shtick and he didn't mean any of it to that. That was what was so funny about it.

Bill Barretta: But how did he start off? I mean, it couldn't have started off with people knowing that it was a shtick.

Charlie Mechem: That's a good point. [crosstalk 00:16:08] A very good point. I don't know.

Bill Barretta: How did you get through that period? That must have an interesting.

Can I ask you a question about Hanna-Barbera?

Charlie Mechem: Yes, of course.

Bill Barretta: As a team, were they kind of... I mean, could you compare them to any of the characters? Would they'd be a Fred and Barney in any way, or were they like... Were they like any characters that they created?

Charlie Mechem: I'm not sure they were like any characters, but the reason they were so successful is that they... and remained partners for years, is that their roles were totally different. Joe dreamed up and came up with the characters and the stories, and Bill executed them, made them happen.

And in those days, it was hand-animation where you created cells and artists colored in the cells. Making an idea, bringing an idea to life was an incredibly complicated procedure. And so, the two of them really made it work because they were not getting in one another's way.

Bill Barretta: Tell them the story about Bill and the computer animation.

Charlie Mechem: Two other stories quickly. I think if there was a pioneer and inventor of computer animation, it was probably Bill Hanna. He was incredibly talented. And one day I was at the studio, and this was probably early '70s, and he said, "Charlie, I want to show you something."

So we went in his office, and on a computer screen, as it was in those days, he had a Fred Flintstone sketch and he said, "Watch this" and he pushed one of the keys and the the sketch flooded with the orange of Fred's tunic. Then he punched another one, and the buttons flashed, filled out with black, and several others, so that before we knew it, Fred was standing there in full color. And I had never seen that done. He said, "Charlie, this is going to be the beginning of an incredible..." And, by god, Bill would have no idea. But I think maybe Bill started it.

Bill Barretta: So interesting. I asked that initial question just because I think of Jim Henson and Frank Oz, and how they, in a way, are similar to some of their character pairings. And I was just curious, you know, with great teams like that, how they operated and how they collaborated.

Charlie Mechem: Their secret was not getting in one another's life, and creating and executing. And I'll tell you a great story that I happened to be present at. They received a lifetime achievement award from the Television Academy back in the '80s, I think it was, at a big dinner in Orlando. And my wife and I were living in Orlando at the time. Joe invited us to come over and join them for dinner, and so on. When the award was announced, Joe went up to get the award, because Bill never did things like that, and Joe loved it. And Joe said, "Well, this is such a special night. I'm going to share with you the answer to a question we've been asked thousands of times, and we have never ever answered, but I think tonight is the time to answer it. And the question is, 'How did you and Bill manage to stay together for 50 years in a world where... in an industry where 50 weeks is big, 50 months is even bigger. How did you do it?'" And Joe said, "The answer is, and I'll share it with you tonight, Bill and I had a huge argument the first week that we met, and we haven't spoken since."

He had brought the house down. But there was an element of truth, in the sense that although obviously they spoke constantly daily, they never went into the other guy's area.

Bill Barretta: Right.

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Charlie Mechem: Well listen, thanks so much. This has been fun. We could go on here for a couple hours, I think, easily.

Bill Barretta: Oh, I could easily. I would have to talk with you anytime in the future. Hopefully, we get to meet in person. I would love that.

Charlie Mechem: I would too. And thanks for taking the time and showing your interest. And I hope you enjoy the book and hope we'll talk again soon.

Bill Barretta: Thank you. Thank you so much.

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