

TRANSCRIPT It's Not All Billable – Episode 3

Jonathan Bench: Today, Kato and I discuss my origin story. Kato, I'm going to turn it over to you as fast as I can because I want to see where we're going with this. You have not prepared me at all, but I'm excited about our conversation today.

Kato Aerts: So am I. No need to be nervous though, Jonathan. I think I'm more nervous than you are to have this conversation as the actual interviewer because you do such an excellent job at it. But here we are. Time for your origin story.

Jonathan: Let's do it.

Kato: And I want to start with first impressions. My first impression when I first met you—and that was, for the audience here, at the New York City Bar Association for an AIJA seminar where you were a speaker—I saw you enter the room and you had the biggest bow tie I think I've ever seen.

You were very, very funny on the panel. I didn't know you beforehand, and I really thought your interventions were smart, witty. So I thought, huh—who's this new lawyer? Where is he coming from?

And then afterwards, I heard that you're a father to five kids. So all of that prompts me to ask you the very first question: who is Jonathan Bench?

Jonathan: I'm still trying to figure that question out myself. I feel like it's a good thing we have some time together and I have a lot of runway ahead of me to figure out who I am.

It was a great conference in New York, and that was my first AIJA experience. I really had a big deer-in-the-headlights moment. I'd done a lot of panels and presentations before that, but AIJA was new and very intimidating. I could tell the group was full of very high-powered lawyers, and I felt like if I could contribute a little bit—and learn what to do, how to engage in a big organization like that—that I could continue to figure out how to travel and how to be the kind of international lawyer my clients would want me to be by being connected to lawyers all over the world.

We do have a very interesting vantage point as lawyers at the nexus of so many different businesses. We talk to finance professionals and other lawyers and government officials, so I think it's been very fun.

And maybe this is a little preview for where this episode's going: I find that the most value I have for my clients is being at the nexus of so many things—at this intersection of law and business and finance and government—and, for me, other things that make us whole

individuals. The intersection for me of religion is important, but also these freedom rights that we have that we as lawyers want to espouse.

So like you said, I'm still trying to figure out who I am, but hopefully together we can figure that out.

Kato: Yeah. So how—let's maybe start at that very first moment that we met. How did you find out about AIJA? How did you learn of this conference in New York, and what prompted you to attend it?

Jonathan: I had been at a boutique international firm in Seattle, Washington. It was China-focused. We had a lawyer from Germany who was living in Spain at the time, and she had been an intern or an employee at our firm before I joined. She said, "There's this organization of young lawyers, and you should think about having someone at the firm attend." That was all we knew. And so I started looking into it.

My kids joke when I tell them I'm in the Young Lawyer Association because for my kids, I'm old and I've always been old. So they joke with me whenever I mention the name of AIJA.

But it was an intriguing prospect that there was this organization dedicated to young lawyers and growing their careers and building the network. And I'd found that so many people need mentors, including me. I'd been looking for a mentor basically my whole career—12, 13, 14 years in now.

I feel like I had been looking for the right type of mentor pool for many years and didn't really know where to look. And I felt like AIJA was, in some respects, the answer to what I'd been looking for.

Kato: Interesting, because I think the way you explain it actually says a lot about who you are — or at least how I know you. You're very much oriented toward the world. You're interested, curious, and you want to connect and meet people. And that all links to deeper values: finding a good mentor, wanting to serve your clients well, even connecting it to your family — like your kids making fun of you for joining the Young Lawyers Association.

So what made your firm decide that you would be the appropriate person to send to that conference?

Jonathan: This firm that I was at was very interesting. We got almost all of our clients through online activities. In the marketing world, it's called SEO — Search Engine Optimization. That's somewhat become a dinosaur term now that AI has taken over how we interact, and I keep learning more and more about how that works.

But the fundamental part of the firm — and the genius behind it — was a partner named Dan Harris. It was his namesake firm. Dan was a consummate marketer. He had been a litigator at a big international firm and then started his own firm in the early-to-mid 2000s.

He started blogging very early on. He had a project called the *China Law Blog*, and for years he — or someone at the firm — posted articles about the business of China and Chinese law, and how it was practically done. Not theory, but really: how do you get business done in China?

I joined that firm about six or seven years into my career because I had been looking for a place where I could practice Chinese business law. That's what I had studied. I had spent years in China learning the language. I had been looking for years and years — like I said — for a mentor in this very specific space, somewhere I could use my Chinese and connect China and the U.S. and other countries on projects.

Dan taught me how to be a marketer. He told me he liked my energy, but that I needed to do more. And he made me do some very uncomfortable things.

For someone like me — and like you, Kato — as extroverts, we're used to being on stage. We're used to directing conversations. Most of that energizes us. But he had me host hour-long webinars on topics where I didn't feel like I was the smartest person in the room. I had to blog about business issues in ways that forced me to clarify my thinking.

Over time, I could see there was a great network effect to all of this. As you try to build your expertise as a lawyer, you have to be visible. You have to be willing to say something publicly.

That was a very important point in my career — marrying my love of being on stage and meeting new people with the idea that, at some point, you have to believe you are one of the experts in the room and you have something to share.

Kato: So that made you join the Association for Young Lawyers. Let's go back to when you were really young — an actual kid. Tell me more about your childhood. Where did you grow up? What did your family look like? What were you interested in? Did you like school?

Jonathan: I think I liked school because of the social element. School came fairly naturally to me. My parents were both teachers, so learning was always a big part of our lives.

My parents read a lot. We spent time together doing theater — musical theater and plays. I joke that my dad never taught me how to shoot a basketball or throw a baseball, but he did teach me that when I'm on stage, I need to project my voice to the very back corners of the room, because those are the people who need to hear what you're saying.

Church was also a big part of my life. I remember being about three years old, and my dad holding me up to the microphone in our congregation and having me sing. I was terrified — but somehow I got through it. And after a while, it became easier and easier.

I'm the 11th of 12 children. That meant we didn't have much money. It was a single-income family for much of my childhood. We had a lot of work to do. It was very clear that if I didn't do my part, something would fall through the cracks.

My parents taught us the difference between work you do because you're part of a family, and work you do that you get paid for. Both were important.

Education was important. Work was important. And because we lived in a small town, everyone knew us. There aren't many towns anywhere with 12 kids in one family. We were known not because we were wealthy, but because we were hard workers and pretty strong academically.

I lived outside in the 80s — riding bikes, exploring, dreaming about the bigger world. I got into books early. Fantasy, mysteries, adventure-driven stories. At first, I thought I was interested in imaginary worlds. Later I realized I was actually interested in understanding the real world.

This was pre-internet. My friends and I would go into the library during study hall and pull out the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. We'd look at headlines and try to make sense of them. But I wasn't smart enough then to ask mentors what was really going on.

That's something I've noticed my children do better than I did. They ask follow-up questions. They want context. They want to understand how events connect. It took me a long time to realize I truly was interested in the world around me.

I was also a fairly lazy student for a long time. School came easily to me, so I didn't always develop good study habits early on. But toward the end of high school, when classes became more demanding, I realized I couldn't just sit there and absorb information. At some point, I had to actively pack information into my brain in a way that would allow me to retrieve it later.

As I did that more and more, I began to see something I shared with my father. He was very interested in everything. He was a speech professor, taught public speaking, worked in television — not famous, but certainly prominent in our small town and in our religious community. People knew him. People respected him.

I started to realize that this curiosity about the world, about how things work, about ideas and systems — that was something I had inherited from him.

For a long time, I assumed I wasn't good at math or science because neither of my parents were particularly strong in those areas. So I gravitated toward literature and language and understanding people. Government and politics sounded boring to me back then. And of course now, as a lawyer, I see how deeply government and geopolitics shape everything. The first waterfall effect in business is always how governments react — and then the trickle-down from there.

At some point, I realized the world is big. There is so much to learn. You will never understand all of it. But it's worth trying. It's worth digging in and staying curious and learning from as many people as you can.

Kato: I love that. And it makes me smile because when I think back to my origin story, curiosity and learning are themes we definitely share. And also the fact that we both grew up in big families.

But tell me — were you a happy, energetic, outgoing child? Because I know you now as someone who walks into a room and immediately starts conversations with anyone. Were you like that as a kid, or were you shy?

Jonathan: I was like that as a kid. In fact, I'm raising myself right now. My ten-year-old son is exactly like I was. He climbs trees, bounces off walls, can't sit still for five seconds — but he loves life. He loves people. I was very comfortable in rooms full of adults, probably because I had so many older siblings. I didn't always understand the jokes, but I could follow conversations. And at some point I realized something powerful: everyone has something interesting to share. Even people who don't think they do. That realization changed everything for me. I figured out that asking questions wasn't just a way to learn — it was a way to make other people feel seen and valued. That gives me deep satisfaction even today, as a lawyer and as a person.

The only downside of being that way is that eventually you have so many friends you can't keep up with them all. I first felt that in high school, and then even more when I went to Hong Kong at 19 and got involved in nonprofit activities. I couldn't remember everyone's names anymore, but I could remember the connection. And that felt like a good problem to have.

Kato: Growing up in a family of twelve — how did you find your own identity? I see that with my kids. They're constantly trying to figure out their place. What was that like for you?

Jonathan: All of the above. There were only two boys in our family — my older brother and me. He's fifteen years older than I am. There were six girls between us. So in some ways I was spoiled — the younger boy. In other ways, I was just another Bench kid in a very large family. My grandmother made me feel particularly special, and I'm sure that gave me a bit

of a chip on my shoulder. But my siblings set the bar extremely high academically and in other achievements. I benefited from walking the road they had already paved.

At one point, a school principal called me in for doing something stupid and said, “I can’t believe your last name is B-E-N-C-H.” It made me think about what I was contributing — or detracting — from that name. Even now, in my mid-40s, as the youngest brother with accomplished siblings and brothers-in-law, I still sometimes feel like I’m proving I belong. I don’t know if we ever outgrow that.

Kato: And yet you built a big family yourself. How does that connect to your legal career? How do you balance being a lawyer and having a large family?

Jonathan: Family has always been central to my life. My wife is one of seven children. We got married very young — 21 and 22 — while still in undergrad. We went to China together to teach English. We started having children while I was finishing school and continued through graduate school. It was very hard.

But having a family that young gave me clarity. There was no alternative. I had to succeed. I had people depending on me. That kind of pressure was motivating for me. I remember nights when I worked long hours and came home to an empty house because my wife and kids were traveling without me. And I would think, “What am I doing this for?” Coming home to them — even briefly — kept me grounded.

Now that my oldest son is graduating and preparing to leave home, I feel deep satisfaction seeing the kind of person he’s becoming. I can’t take all the credit, but I know we contributed. And honestly, my family is fun. We laugh. We play games. We joke. They’re some of the most engaging people I know. It’s a blessing to be their dad.

Kato: From small-town Midwest to China — what happened there?

Jonathan: That’s when my brain got blown apart. Through our church, young people can volunteer for service missions. You don’t choose where you go. I was sent to Hong Kong. Going from small-town Wisconsin to Hong Kong in 2001 — just four years after it was handed back to China — was culture shock.

I had to learn Cantonese, one of the hardest languages in the world. I didn’t know that at the time. I just knew it was difficult. We worked 15–16 hour days, seven days a week. It forced rapid growth. The smells, the sounds, the density, the cultural differences — everything activated something in me. I realized I loved international cultures, languages, food, people.

Later, I pivoted from Cantonese to Mandarin. And eventually I realized that understanding China — at a time when China was becoming central to global economics — could be

meaningful. Even if I'm just one person, maybe I can help companies understand each other across borders. Recently, I hosted three Chinese exchange students in my home for a week — the first group since COVID. Those kinds of people-to-people experiences matter. They cut across political barriers.

That's meaningful work to me.

Kato: So how would you say *It's Not All Billable* in Mandarin?

Jonathan: I might have to get back to you on that. You can't literally translate it word for word. It would be something like, "Not everything can be billed." Which is kind of the point — some things matter beyond money. And learning languages teaches you that not everything translates directly. Language shapes how you think.

Kato: That brings us to law school. Why law? Why business law?

Jonathan: I ran out of ideas. I studied English literature. I thought maybe I'd write. Then I considered the CIA — I liked the intrigue. But I realized I couldn't build relationships based on deception. That didn't sit right with me.

During law school, I added an MBA. When I stepped into business school, I felt at home. These were my people — decision-makers, builders, people moving things forward. So I backed into business law. I wanted to use Chinese. I wanted to understand geopolitics. I wanted to sit at the intersection of law and business. And I haven't regretted it.

Kato: Before we wrap up — what's your real business card? What do you want to be known for?

Jonathan: I want clients to feel that I genuinely care about them and their success. Not just transactionally — but personally. I want to be unfailingly supportive of their goals. Willing to work late. Willing to sacrifice. But also human. The small conversations at the beginning and end of calls — those bind us. If I can help my clients succeed, help their businesses grow, help their families thrive — and if together we can make the world a little better — that's enough for me.

Kato: And that's exactly how I would describe you. You are someone who puts others first. You bring out the best in people. You do it with your clients, your friends, your children. It's a fantastic experience being your friend. If that's your business card — you're succeeding.

Jonathan: Thank you. I'm excited about this podcast — hearing other people's stories, their failures, their vulnerabilities. I think many people wish they had mentors. Wish they knew they weren't alone. If we can create a space where people can be real and grow — that's worth it.

Kato, thanks for interviewing me today. It's been fun sharing this with you. And thank you to everyone listening. We look forward to talking again soon.