

What if...



A conversation about fundraising,
craft, and the nerve to do better.

Todd Bemis

Let's talk.

I've been in this business for over 25 years. I've watched our work change in ways that excite me and ways that keep me up at night.

I don't have a deck full of solutions. I have a point of view and a deep respect for anyone still trying to do this work with integrity.

If anything in here feels true to you — or frustrating, or worth arguing about — I'd love to have that conversation.

Today (as in today) we need to figure out what AI actually is — a tool that can either **accelerate “the formula”** or help us **finally escape it**. Depending entirely on who's driving and whether they care about the difference.

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What if we already know what to do?

We've been here long enough to know what real fundraising feels like — we know the difference between something that lands in a mailbox and something that hits us in the chest.

“The formula” works. Is it everything we want it to be?

It's reliable. Scalable. Defensible in a client meeting.

But here's the thing:

We know there's something better.

The question has never been about expertise.
It was always about nerve.

Here's what we are all watching.

Donor rolls shrinking. Response rates softening. Good clients quietly shopping for something that sounds more like them.

What's interesting is how comfortable we've gotten with it. We cite the data. We nod thoughtfully. We blame the economy, the political climate, the death of the third-party cookie.

And then, oddly, we send the same package we sent last year.

The. Exact. Same. Package.

We do this while simultaneously yearning for bold creativity. We do it while our clients clamor for new ideas. **C'mon, let's do new together!**

How we all got comfortable.

Look, we all know nobody set out to make boring work.

The co-op model made sense. Pool the data, share the learning, spread the cost. Real ingenuity solving a real problem.

If it worked for a food bank it would surely work for a shelter. Those defensible results have a remarkable shelf life.

The casualty — easy to miss in a performance report — was specific emotional intelligence. The thing that makes a donor feel like someone is actually talking to them about things they actually care about.

All our data lets us target precisely. But, we're still talking at donors, not with donors.

But mass has gravity.

We have so many tools now. Let's build some deep humanism!

What it's costing us.

The revenue looks “fine.”

That might be the problem.

Fewer donors giving more. The math works.
The budget passes. Nobody panics.

But somewhere out there a donor who has given faithfully for eleven years is opening another envelope that treats her like a transaction. She feels like an ATM with a conscience. None of us wants this.

And giving — which should feel like the most human thing a person can do — starts **feeling like a bill she forgot to cancel.**



**What if we can fix this?
I know we can fix this.**

What if we treated donors like the people they actually are.

Donors choose to give. Nobody strong-armed them into caring about hungry kids or abandoned dogs or families sleeping in their cars.

They found something that matched something inside them and they said, "YES."

What if we spend our energy filling their hearts to keep them saying it.

That feels better than industrializing compassion.



Joy. Belonging.
The electricity of actually
changing something.

Turns out that's the whole game.

What if we're brave?

The brief nobody writes.

And the only one worth following.

Trust donors with complexity. With nuance. With joy.
We know fundraising isn't a highlight reel. But, it
shouldn't be a guilt-ridden horror film either.

Let's embrace the radical notion that donors are
smart enough and generous enough to handle
the reality of the work.

Maybe all we need is the truth...and some bravery.



Let's be brave together.

What if we just **do** this.

I know you're really busy, so thanks.
Thanks for the time.



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