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my time in the Garden
an interactive reflection with Brendan Abernathy

Close your eyes and imagine the most peaceful place you can create. Take 90 seconds. Breathe. Exhale. Breathe. See it. Color it in. Hear it. Smell it. Feel it.

What do you see? Tell me about its beauty. _____

What does it mean? Tell me about its purpose. _____

How can you get there? Tell me. _____

I will tell you mine –

It's a garden of sorts, by the side of a river. There are trees with clean, old, wise trunks. The trees are so old and so pure that the engravings left by voyagers long ago have faded to scratch marks in the bulging, knotted bark. This line of old, wise soldiers creates a filtered canopy, where sunlight dances through like a barcode ballerina, revealing the trace dust that floats in the air.

I'm sitting in the grass, I guess you could call it. Perhaps it is too green to be grass and too soft to be clovers. Interspersed are lavender wildflowers. Not big bulbs. Little tiny ones, too numerous to count, oozing of aroma sweet like a honeysuckle and distinct like a summertime concrete-rain shower.

There are only two sounds – the gentle breeze blowing outwards from further within the garden, and the steady quiet of the peaceful river to my right. The river comes touches the bank, if you can even call it that. It more gently fades into the garden than anything.

This garden is inside me, so it seems. It is the place I reach when I am most still, most at peace, a state I only experience **when I abandon my cravings to compare, to succeed, to move on up.** That's always been my struggle hasn't it? Being content? Accepting my current lot?

But I had finally seemingly entered the garden of my dreams. I was in Washington DC, on tour. If you were at any of my Washington shows and you're reading this, you saw me in culminating contentment! I felt so alive, so at peace, so in line with my purpose. Months of hard work – to build momentum, to understand house shows, to plan a tour – were culminating and exceeding my expectations (rare cookie! rare!).

Washington in the moment was like a romanticized story is 5 years after its first telling. In my days, I accomplished the classified-necessary-and-urgent logistical and social media work, I

BRENDAN
ABERNATHY

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wrote for a couple hours, I met up with people, and I explored our nation's capital, the whole time brainstorming and dreaming and praying. **I was finally living the life I had planned to live when I set out to be a musician a year prior. I've described my feeling in DC to some as being "on Cloud Nineteen."** It felt as if I was knocking on the door that could open to my realized dreams.

Then, I drove to Philadelphia, where on the Thursday after playing the world's largest pipe organ at a Sofar Sounds show, the world fell apart. It felt kind of like Thanos had snapped and we were just waiting to see who would disappear next.

Apparently, my tour was the next Avenger to vanish. Seemingly overnight, 13 shows were cancelled, my hopes of seeing Niagra Falls out the door, and my plans to stuff my face with bagels in New York City swiftly shut down in perfect rhythm with our nation.

It took me 21 days to arrive in Philly. My drive home took 2 days. As I drove past the exit for Capital Hill, an eerie feeling rose my little neck hairs – 10 days prior, all was so perfect by my own plans and standards. Now, the world I drove through was a Completely. Different. Place. Filled with fear, anger, disappointment. And just as the drive home was far quicker than the drive North, I feared my momentum as an artist was taking a proportionate fall. 8 months to build it. 8 hours for it to be destroyed. I was pissed. Slamming my wheel. Cussing at drivers going too slow. Exasperating at those who forced me into the right lane. "The whole world is going on pause. Maybe you can, too," my dad told me over the phone.

I found no peace in that. **Overnight, I was taken from my garden of tranquil water in daylight, to a forest of a raging river in the dark night.**

As I wrote in a song – that I planned to post and then figured out social media is obnoxious as hell right now – "I can't slow down... but I can't go home cause my dad's got diabetes and I am a slave to success." I couldn't go home. I had just interacted with 1500 people over the last 14 days. My grandma was (and is) on hospice, and I wanted to see her without fear of costing her life.

So I isolated alone in a cabin in North Georgia for 12 days. It was here I learned that **what I thought was my perfect peaceful garden in the Northeast was incomplete.** Over the 12 days I sat beneath many burdensome emotions. I wondered both "how can I capitalize on this situation" and "how can I serve people" (see the Smeagol/Gollum battle there!). I felt defeated and I felt driven. I felt altruistic and selfish, tired and energized, alone and supported.

Alone at the lake I saw that while I sat in the proper garden in the Northeast, **my plants were withering in an undetectable autumn. My foresight still green from summer, the leaves at my back began to turn, and suddenly – it was winter.**

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But the garden that God promises us is a garden of eternal Spring, constant rebirth. A garden of resurrection. At the lake, Jesus walked into my garden and sat with me as I learned how to be content in my new normal. I hear you now, my friend! I know. I abhor reading stuff that acts like everything is so simple and the answers are readily apparent, too. I'm not claiming that. You can hear it in my music – I'm full of doubt and fear and confusion and indecision. That hasn't changed. **I'm just trying to be faithful, and I'm starting to see I can't be faithful without my hand being held.**

Now, I'm back home in Dunwoody with my family. I'm so privileged and blessed: I sleep in my childhood bedroom. I eat homecooked meals for free twice a day. My office is an Eno. I have a bad ass dog. I get to see my grandmother every single day as her life nears its end on earth because my Dad wisely placed her on home hospice instead of in a nursing home. I get to facetime some friends, zoom with others, and interact with many more on social media.

I'm struggling, too. I miss touring. I miss meeting new friends and crashing communities. I miss exploring new cities. I miss the feeling of watching a song I'm long tired of be written anew in a new listener's eyes. I miss hugs after shows with people who are impacted. I miss goodbyes. I miss the feeling that I'm being productive. I miss every day feeling like a study abroad. I miss spontaneity's uncertainty. I miss the future's certainty. I miss the puzzling hell of booking. I miss in-person rejection. I miss people laughing at me (and with me I hope). I miss sports. I miss queso with my friends.

I guess I miss a lot more than I've gained. But what I've gained is what is real. It's what is present now. And "the present is where time touches eternity." **It's where my garden is. And for right now and for always, that garden only *needs* one thing.**

So let's go back to your peaceful place? What's it like? What season is it in? And what does it need that it may not have?

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