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Sing Your Song

By Mat Scullin

After a particularly hot and long day earlier this week, Amanda and I, laid down by the bonfire gazing at the pines as the sunset. For 10 minutes we let our ears take in the chorus of birdsong in the trees above and it was lovely. That concert; the myriad of bird calls swirling around us is present in practically all moments of each day here. It's such a constant that our brains deceptively begin to tune it out. But if we all close our eyes for a few seconds and listen intently, you'll hear them right now on this very ridge.

As much as I recommend finding empty pockets within your days here to appreciate that natural beauty, this talk isn't about slowing down and taking in moments like these. Instead, I want to treat this birdsong as a metaphor for camp and the community we have here. The trees above us are home to a wide variety of species. Each one projects its signature call, sharing it with its surroundings and listening to those who respond. This lush musical backdrop would lose its magic if every bird conformed to a singular call or worse chose not to sing at all.

Camp is not that different. We come from various parts of the world, span a variety of ages, and draw from different life experiences. We hear a lot about striving for our best selves at Pasquaney. I hope another thing each one of us has felt here is the ability to share your authentic self. Our summers here are so rejuvenating because we learn not to be emotionally guarded or feel the need to model ourselves after some popular archetype. A core reason I believe we are able to do that is thanks to the kindness and support shown to us on a daily basis. We lead a simple life void of various identifiers

and technological distractions that often lead to snap judgments or insulate us from the people by our side. From the moment Reveille blows to when we shake Mr. Michael's hand before taps, we are constantly with one another. We eat meals together, challenge ourselves in the same activities, and engage in lengthy face to face conversations. We talk openly about our emotions, insecurities, mistakes, and things we're working on. By doing this, we see people for who they are and how they make us feel; not for superficial achievements. There is a collective curiosity and desire to take a genuine interest in the folks around you. We are eager to hear everyone's song and in turn, we feel comfortable sharing ours. It's not always like that at home, it's much much easier to hide and turn inward.

This past May I finished my last year of college. Over the past 4 years, I pushed myself academically, met ambitious and brilliant people, and learned how to live independently. Yet despite my several achievements on paper that showed a thriving college student, for much of my time at school, I struggled heavily and in many ways failed to open up to others. As a freshman who was leaving my cherished high school friend group for a sea of 15,000 unfamiliar new faces, the whole process of finding new social footing terrified me. The last thing I wanted to do was be open and be vulnerable in such a vast community of extremely talented strangers, despite all my summers at camp teaching and showing me the exact opposite.

So what did I do? Well, I made the extremely rational decision to load myself up with strenuous course schedules semester after semester, work a part time job, and join demanding extracurriculars. Maybe if I could just grind hard enough and achieve enough,

my social insecurity would take care of itself. Let me be clear, I was enjoying each of these pursuits but I foolishly thought a preoccupation with my work would absolve me from my inability to be vulnerable and befriend new people. The inner monologue of my head became dominated by the next deadline, work shift, or team meeting. It didn't take long before that inner monologue turned outward, occupying much of the conversations I had with folks at school. I knew plenty of people but felt an immense distance to everyone. My mind went in circles about my stress and my performance. I didn't want to really tell my high school and camp friends or family about my social struggles, so I stopped sharing a lot with them too. I drifted towards a reclusive lifestyle where my days and thoughts were defined by my workload and where my sense of self felt elusive. In the expansive exciting forest that was supposed to be college, I was a bird not bothering to sing.

So with no song to share and often feeling alone, I turned heavily to music. I would listen carefully to various artists and admire how they poured their hearts out with such rawness and honesty. Certain songs would speak to my deepest fears and insecurities, revealing the walls I had built up for myself socially. One song verse in particular by one of my favorite songwriters Andrew Marlin, depicted the way I had been living those first years of college with painful accuracy. The verse goes, "Every man bears a burden / His own beast by the horns / That he hides from the world / When he's young and strong / Looking over his shoulders / Half tattered and torn / Still standing tall." I covered up my own feelings of loneliness with busyness and acted as if none of it

bothered me. That way of living just isn't sustainable. No amount of academic or professional achievement can remedy that behavior.

I distinctly remember one night my Sophomore year, a friend and I were cleaning the Dining hall after a long work shift. We were talking and after a lot of "I don't know"s and "It's been a long week but I'm fine", she eventually said "Mat, you're such an enigma." Which means a person that is mysterious or puzzling. That comment was made as a casual passing observation but it lingered with me. It was the first time at school someone vocalized my tendency to conceal what was actually on my mind and it sparked a realization. If I wasn't able to share and engage with people in a meaningful way, why would they have any reason to open themselves up to me?

Soon after that night, I started to write my own songs. My constant suppression of insecurities made it hard to be transparent even just to myself. I often analyzed my lyrics through the lens of how they would outwardly be perceived. Oscar Wilde's powerful words took time to seep in, "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken." But through repeated exposure to the visceral emotions I was experiencing, I slowly learned to be vulnerable with myself. Over 2 years and change things began spilling onto the pages and I began to not only understand but accept aspects of my personality that had puzzled me for years. Writing songs allowed me to identify the harm of my reclusive behavior and brought me back into touch with my authentic self.

Yet a song only comes fully to life when it's shared and in that spirit, we as people become fully alive when we are able to share about ourselves. I came to terms that having a strong sense of connection to others meant bringing down the walls I had built for

myself and proactively taking an interest in who they were. Singing my song and listening to theirs. It hasn't been entirely smooth sailing since then but from my Junior year onward, I began opening up to friends more and more, got to know ridiculously awesome different people I wouldn't have otherwise and redefined my relationship with academic excellence. The distance I once felt to those around me collapsed and my sense of community quickly blossomed. The forest that was college was no longer dead silent.

This is one of the biggest reasons why I wanted to come back this summer. To re-internalize all the good that comes when we open up to others and the connection we feel when others open up to us.

Take a moment to realize that this season is the only time all 111 of us will be here together. I don't say that to scare you, but rather to help us collectively realize how precious these next 3 weeks are. What would we lose this summer if we guarded and concealed our emotions? How much fun would we miss out on if we were too busy worrying about how others perceive us? Whether in circles, walking up from soak, or walking down off of a mountain, I implore you to share with and listen to those around you. Pasquaney's way of life rigorously strengthens our emotional intelligence. The conversations we have here will continue to serve us long after we leave this hillside. Rather than close off ourselves and be fixated on what others might think, bottle up the kindness and openness you've experienced here and be the one to bring it forward to wherever you go. There are plenty of people at home and new communities we will venture to that need it desperately. Staying in touch with your authentic self and bringing

it out of those dear to you is not something that just happens. It is a hard fought endeavor with no inherent finish line. Pasquaney simply asks us to run the race.

Close your eyes again and listen to the birds one last time. Like them, let us continue to search for and compose our songs, share them with one another, and rejoice in the wondrous music that will be made.