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A Letter From Julian Taylor

Being human is complicated and it's beautiful. In a world of negative political, emotional and spiritual turmoil, being a part of a community that is forward-thinking, inclusive and celebrates diversity is of cardinal importance.

Right now, I'm sitting in the forest chilling in a ravine that falls behind my house. I find being here inspiring and quite comforting.

Most mornings I do my best to get up and go out into the wilderness. Sometimes I read or listen to music and go for a hike, other times I just sit and contemplate.

I wasn't always the kind of person who'd get up and go sit in the forest. As a child it's what I did, but as I got older I became a little jaded. I had my head so far up my arse for such a long time. My ignorance and my ego seemed to always get the best of me during my teenage years and then well into my twenties. I was insecure and to be honest, there's a part of me that still is. Growing up as a mixed minority was unsettling at times. I never felt like I fit in anywhere so I over compensated and pretended to not be affected by it.

When I think about fitting in I feel very lucky to have been welcomed into the beautiful community that is *FMO* and by extension *Music Ontario*, *Folk Music Canada* and *Folk Alliance International*.

If I hadn't met *Jory Nash* backstage at *The St. Lawrence Center for the Performing Arts* when we first performed together, I'm not sure if I would have known about *FMO* at all. I suppose that I would have eventually found out about the conference, the organization and everyone who's a part of it but without him the story I'm about to share would be very different.

That encounter helped open mind and as a result eventually my soul. I hadn't picked up a guitar in years when we first met. I wasn't able to. I was pissed off and scared. My band had been picked up and dropped and I was hurt. It ended up hurting some of my friends so badly that they never got out alive. Music was and had been my life. It had given so much to me but at the same time it had also taken a lot from me and I was burnt out.

Burnt from trying so hard to make it, burnt from believing in myself and others, burnt because I thought that I had something inside me and felt like that light was dimming. So, I became a full-time bartender and quit music.

If you're an artist then I am sure you know exactly what I'm talking about. It ebbs and flows and it's tough, but life has a plan and leads us where we need to go at exactly the right time. We have to listen to what the wind is telling us at every turn.

There's always a moment in time that essentially transforms us and sometimes we are lucky to live long enough to get more than a few. If by happenstance and if by extraordinary chance we are tuned into a particular frequency, we sometimes get lucky to have those moments connect us to others who are going through similar experiences. It's as if we are one body, mind and spirit, which I already know in my heart to be true. That's the feeling that I got when I first attended the conference in 2015, when Treasa Lavasseur graciously asked me to be a *FMO Youth Mentor*.

Becoming a mentor in 2015 was a life changing experience and a huge lesson in gratitude, humility and compassion. That email from *Treasa* asking me if I would like to be a part of the *FMO Youth Program* was a note that helped change the course of my life. As the story goes, Jory had recommended me and I admit that I was pretty shocked by it but super honoured and agreed to do it. It was such a wonderful experience, one that has left a huge impression on me. It is one of the reasons I continue to teach music to this day.

When I first showed up at the conference we had a meet and greet with all the young aspiring artists, all of whom are exceptional in their own special way. I met the other mentors that day and they too are some of the most amazing people I've ever had the chance to meet.

I was given the task of mentoring *Sydney DeLong*. She's a great talent and we had a lot of fun. I remember taking her out for dinner to talk about music and her aspirations. I thought it would be nice to treat her to a meal at the Keg. I can't tell you how embarrassing it was when we sat down and she told me she was a vegetarian. Those are moments that you can't make up.

To *James Keelaghan, Amélie Lefebvre, Rosina Kazi, QuiQue Escamilla* and *Treasa*, thank you for making my first *FMO* so special.

There are so many special *FMO* moments that have happened over the years; performances that made me cry, encounters that have made me laugh and conversations that have inspired me. Everyone in the folk community is so connected to each other and shares a bond that resonates with one another.

I literally had nowhere to stay the first year I came to the conference and, because I had met *Jory* and knew *Aengus Finnan* from my days working as a bartender (we literally played *Fools Gold* to death at the pub), I somehow got the unique opportunity of rooming with *David Newland*. He was someone who I had just met. I cherish the moments we've spent together a

lot. He's a brilliant mind and someone who always stands for something. He's helped teach me how to stand for something and I am grateful that he's always been so supportive and understanding since then.

In 2016 my full band was invited to do an official showcase in Ottawa. We had a couple other shows in the area and took a tour bus to the conference. I didn't think it was necessary to but the band insisted. I get it. There were no rooms left at the hotel and we had stops in Montreal and Quebec next.

When I could have stayed with my band mates I opted to stay with *David* in his room and sleep on a cot. I had had such a great time being his roommate the year before and was actually rather embarrassed that we had taken a bus to the conference in the first place. I expressed my concerns to him and anytime I've divulged how I am feeling, whether it's bad or good, he's been a friend that cares and has always been there for me. He even calls me when he's heard me on the radio to tell me how I did. That's something isn't it? That's kindness.

It's quite amazing the kindness that permeates through the halls of the conference and that translate through all the musicians, all the music festivals, the radio programmers and everyone that is a part of the community. A new artist can walk through the conference door and just say hello and talk to a radio programmer or the artistic director of a festival and have that be cool. It's amazing because everyone there wants to help one another. They actually care. It's a great feeling.

It's that feeling that you get when sitting with a bunch of people singing and playing at a campfire at *Shelter Valley* or *Blue Skies*. It's the reason I started playing in the first place. It's being with other people who share something in common. It's sharing each other's stories. It's lifting each other up and picking up others who have fallen as well.

I guess what I am trying to say is unless you put yourself out there, you never know who you're going to meet or who you have affected in a positive way. How cool is that? You just never know and it's the beauty of the unknown.

Thank you to *Alka*, *Jennifer* and everyone at *FMO* for always being so kind, welcoming and supportive and thank you for giving me this opportunity to write down some of my thoughts down I really do appreciate it very much.

To all the aspiring artists out there please know that what you are doing is one of the most difficult things to do in the world but it's worth it and will always be worth it. I salute you all as brothers and sisters and I hope that everyone has a wonderful *FMO* this year.

Respectfully yours,

Julian Taylor

