

Introduction: Hey y'all. My name is Garrett Turner. I graduated from Emory College in 2011. I double majored in music and creative writing.

Question 1: Can you tell us a little bit about your journey (and where your headspace was at) from your Emory graduation to your current role?

Response: It was a process. But I ended up pursuing a career in performing. I am a professional actor, and I like to tag onto that writer and storyteller. When I got to Emory, I was thoroughly undecided. The way that I ended up coming to my majors was really just focusing on things that I truly love. I sang throughout high school, I sang in church, and I was co-president of show choir in high school. And so I just love music, and I knew I wanted to learn more about it. That's how I ended up choosing music with a vocal performance major. I was like, *I just want to get better at this*. After I picked that up freshman year, I was like, *I should probably have something else to go along with this*, because I have no idea how this will translate into a career. So again, instead of thinking about career, I just thought of the next thing that I love the most, which is words and writing and finding a way to sculpt my own voice. And so I ended up picking up creative writing. I wrote a lot of poetry, spoken word poetry, and was in that circuit in Atlanta during undergrad. And also took a couple playwriting classes while I was there. And yeah, just really allowing my creative self to flow, which I think is much the purpose of a liberal arts education. But where it led was, and I got to senior year, I was like, I still don't know what I'm gonna do for a career. I know all these things that I really enjoy, I seem to have a proclivity for. I think I could fashion some manner of career within these varied interests.

Senior year, I applied for a bunch of different things. I applied for TFA, Teach for America. I applied for City Year, I applied for the Bobby Jones scholarship. I was thinking about different grad schools, but I ended up getting the Bobby Jones scholarship and going to Scotland. And right before I flew out to Scotland, I also applied for another scholarship called the Marshall. Now, the Marshall scholarship is nationally competitive for generally two years of grad school anywhere in the United Kingdom. When I was applying for both the Bobby Jones and the Marshall, what I was saying I was going to do or had in mind for a career was to be a professor, because in my mind, like, I loved a life of the mind. One of the things I enjoyed most about college was just having these intense discussions about all these different issues and unpacking and unfolding. And all of that was like my jelly jam. I figured academia was a space where I could continue my very creative interests, but also, say, live in the same place and have a sustainable wage. So that's what I said. But basically, after I got to the UK, I spent a year in Scotland traveling around, which was incredible. And then about five or six weeks into my time in the Marshall scholarship, I was like, *Yeah, I don't want to get a PhD*. The last thing I want to do is write a PhD dissertation. Because to me, poetry always felt like the playground for language, whereas academic writing was the most structured. I have to cite everyone and my grandma every other sentence for everything I ever thought. I'm like, *Why would I want to do this?* So basically, what getting those scholarships allowed me—or opened up within me—was the courage to say, *Actually, what I want to do, what I really want to do, is perform*. So I switched. Masters degrees in the UK are generally one year and for the UK, for the Marshall scholarship, people do one, two year masters back-to-back often. So I switched what I said I was going to do for my second year of the Marshall, which I think was to get a masters in creative writing, leading potentially to a PhD in creative writing. And instead I did a masters

in music theater, which was singing, dancing, acting training. And that sort of jettisoned me to the career I have now.

Question 2: What were things that were unplanned/unexpected but meaningful to your growth?

Response: My entire journey has been unplanned. When I was growing up in a small town in Alabama, I never thought about living abroad. Then I moved to Atlanta, I went to Emory, and I met all these really smart people who had been reading *The New York Times* and thinking about things that happened outside of the southeastern United States. And I was inspired by them to look at all these other options. I mean, the reason I applied for the Bobby Jones was because my friends Riley and Davis were looking at applying for the Bobby Jones. And I was like, *They're brilliant, maybe I should look into this, too. Perhaps there's something here for me as well.* You know, and then I ended up in Scotland. None of that was in the plan. But it was incredible. I mean, I moved down to London for the Marshall. And really, it has been the people along the way who have inspired me to... it was an exponential growth that came from living elsewhere and encountering a new society. But it also came from my cohort. And all these folks have a bunch of disparate fields. I mean, they are folks who are dead set on being the governor of Indiana, in aerospace in, you know, environmental sustainability issues, or all these kinds of things. And we're constantly having these conversations and learning from each other. And so I thought all of that was like an incredible opening up that was continuing to show me different doors or pathways or ways forward. I think that links to, like I was talking about earlier, finding the courage to really go after what I wanted to do.

I moved to New York City in 2014 and I had been living abroad for three years. I had never lived in New York before. I'd only been to New York once my senior year of high school to go see *Phantom of the Opera* and *Lion King* on Broadway. But I was only there for two days. I took a flight from Heathrow to JFK and just moved to the city not knowing anyone. I crashed on the couch of the one person I did know who was the Emory alum, who I hadn't seen in three years in Brooklyn, until I found that apartment of my own that first week that I was there. And after I found a place to stay, my next goals were to make enough money to pay the rent, but also have enough time to audition. So I worked like eight different day jobs. And the first two months that I was in New York City, I worked the phones at Manhattan Theatre Club. I was there for maybe two weeks. And then I was out of there. I just walked around Harlem, dropping off my resume at different restaurants. I worked at this one restaurant as a runner for maybe three weeks. And I was like, *This is deleterious to my mental health.* And so I left.

The worst, which was certainly both unexpected and unplanned, was working out in Long Island, on foot, going around to different rich people's houses, trying to get them to donate to a children's fund. Straight up door knocking six-two Black brother in a rich Long Island community going like, *Hey, give me your money.* One day, I was on the Long Island Railroad. And this is like December. Headed out to go walk around for three or four hours. And as we were on the train, it started like sleeting/hailing/just this wintry hellscape outside of the train. And I was at this point two months into moving to the city and I reached a point of despair. Right there on the train. I was like, *I can't do this.* Right within that moment, while I was on the train, I got a call from the New York Film Academy. I had interviewed for an admissions officer position at the New York Film Academy about a month before then. I got a call from them on the train. They were like, *Is this Garrett Turner?* I was like, *Yes.* They were like, *Do you*

want to come in for a second interview next week? I was like. Yes!. Hung up, walked out in the snow wintry freeze for three hours, quit that job that day, had that interview that upcoming week, and got the job. And that admissions officer position ended up being my first stable day job in the city for about six or seven months until I booked my first acting gig. And it was the kind of job where there were actors on staff so they understood the need to maybe run out for lunch to audition. They had practice rooms at the school where I could warm up before I left if I had to sing or what have you. It was like a salaried position, which was great. But also, I could potentially change my hours from like 12pm to 8pm, instead of 9am to 5pm, if I needed to for callbacks in the morning or something. The doors that have opened for me to make way for me to just be able to live and do this career. I think one, being a person of faith, I believe it's a true stamp of God telling me this is where you're supposed to be. And this is what you're supposed to be doing. But two, you know, they have all been some crazy, uncanny set of circumstances that have worked out in some way or another just to be able to keep going to keep the artist's spirit alive, to stay in the place where I need to do the work.

Question 3: What does creativity/creative exploration/living a creative life mean to you?

Response: Creativity is keeping your spirit channel open I think is how I think about living a creative life. And one thing I'll say to everyone is that you have a story. And whether you have written it or not, or acknowledged it or not, you do have a story. And it is voluminous. And it is multifaceted. And it is ever growing. And as much as you are able to tap into that, to be intentional about how you're going about the story, I think the more you are able to tap into a creative way of being. I even think about that across privileges. Because, you know, some people certainly have less control of a lot of different factors in their lives because of a lack of privilege. But even within that, I mean... There's a portrait of Langston Hughes sitting on my wall that I actually had done for my senior year project at Emory. I wrote this play called "[I Dream A World: The Life and Work of Langston Hughes](#)", and Hughes sings the blues of Black folks. He turned the blues into this lyrical form and poetry. And he minds the depths of our suffering, while also acknowledging the ways in which we are able to persevere, to yet still dream, to turn our circumstances into art forms. And there's a genius to that you know, for my people, that there are possibilities for everyone.

When I booked a tour--this was maybe 2016, end of 2015/beginning of 2016--I booked a tour of "Sister Act: The Musical" that was headed to Asia. I think it was China, Taiwan and Singapore perhaps. And I moved out of my apartment in Harlem because I was going to be gone for like seven to nine months or something. And we had a couple weeks of rehearsal in New York City before we took off on the tour. And three days before rehearsal started, they canceled the entire tour due to chemical explosions in Tianjin, China, which is a major port city in China where the set of our show was docked. And so I don't think the set blew up, but it was stuck there because of volatile chemicals everywhere. And so they just canceled it. And there was no clause or part of the contract that allowed for a week's pay or anything. So I was just living in New York City without a job. And now, without a place to stay. And so looking at that moment in the face, it was like, *Well, I could move home*. You know, there are a number of different options presented to me. But I, partly because I had made this choice for myself to survive as an artist, that this is the thing I want to do, I hung around the city, and I just made use of all the network I had allocated up until that point. I think I crashed on like four different people's couches over the next ten days until I found a sublet in Washington Heights that I had for a couple months, until I found my place

in Queens, where I lived for about four years. And the brother whose room I lived in Washington Heights, he and I ended up doing a show together in Baltimore two years later that was one of the most beautiful experiences I had had. And it was just a full circle moment of like, him almost like giving me this point of resurrection of me just finding a room of being okay to us being able to work together and then being a part of our network in that way.

I mean, it's all that interconnectedness. It's a resiliency of sorts. It's a sort of wearing a kind of glasses through which you see the world and see, okay, you know, how many different ways might it be possible to go about this thing. For instance, I did my Master's in music theater, and started my career doing mostly musicals. I did "Passing Strange" in Connecticut, I did "Holler If Ya Hear Me", which is a two-part musical that is in Atlanta. I did "Memphis: The Musical", I did "Dream Girls", I did a bunch of awesome Tony award-winning shows. But I started to look at the check, even though I was booking work, which, I mean, is the main goal—to actually find work—and I was like, *This is not enough. And this is not sustainable.* So I started thinking, *What else is there?* So I started to branch out into TV and film. I got into a couple of student films. I wrote some scenes, filmed them with a camera that I rented with some friends of mine at my friend's apartment, made a film reel, got that out to my agent, ended up getting more TV/film auditions. And then the same year I did "Law & Order: SVU" and I did "Madam Secretary". I also hit up some photographer friends of mine. I was like, *Hey, can we do some shoots where you can use my material on your social media.* And then I'll have some stuff and put together a "modeling portfolio" of just me in random rooms in New York City, wearing different shirts that I happen to have. I sent that around to different agencies, I ended up freelancing with about four different agents for commercial print work, on-camera commercial work. I looked up scripts, looked up how to put together a voiceover demo, asked a brother at the church I was going to at the time, who I knew as a voiceover actor, went to his apartment, read the scripts into his mic. He edited it together with some music in the background to make it seem like I had done like five commercials or whatever, sent that out to different agents. Next year, ended up booking a national campaign for Vitamin Water, playing the main character through voiceover. So I mean, part of it is a hustler spirit, I think, but also part of it is just like wearing those goggles, seeing what could be the different opportunities and keeping that artist's channel, that spirit, open within us.

Question 4: What advice do you have for your younger self?

Response: What I wish I had was a mentor early on. Or even if not a mentor, an example of someone to whom I was close to within the creative industries. And growing up in northwest Alabama, I never conceived of acting as a possible career or how one would even go about that. And I was watching actors on TV all the time, but that never translated to me as like, *Oh, that's something maybe I can do.* And there weren't big regional theaters very close in my area, that kind of thing. So I think it's that, but also, I wish I had had more of a mind to reach out to the resources around me at Emory. And not even in terms of traditional networking that leads to a job, but really just being able to learn from people because there's so many amazing opportunities in Atlanta, particularly connected to Emory to learn about numerous creative industries.

Being an artist is hard, particularly in the way our capitalistic system is set up. Certainly during this pandemic, it has exposed the pitfalls of being someone who moves from gig to gig. I mean, in terms of

health insurance, in terms of a lot of things. One year, I had like seventeen W2s from all the different shows that I worked on, the things that I did. Being an artist is hard and there's a wide gulf between pursuing a particular artistic discipline as a hobby and as a career. To me, there's kind of this threshold, I don't know, jump you have to make over into the career side of things that's an all in mentality. I mean, I think about the mentality in terms of longevity. I know that I want to be acting when I'm in my late 60s. And with that view of a career, you know, I can see myself as 31 years old now, what I've done, what might be coming in the near future, but also take a long view. And just to say that, like, *This is who I am, this is what I do, and I'm going to be in this*. So I can start planning, start thinking about what this will look like for all those years. One of my mentors in New York City is André De Shields. André De Shields is, I believe, currently 74 years old. And just last year, he won a Tony Award for his role in the "Hadestown" musical. And he's been doing this for decades. He's been trooping across the country working in all different theaters. And even within the past two years, I saw him in a show in D.C., I saw him in a show downtown in Manhattan. He went out to Houston, Texas to do a Shakespeare piece and then got himself back on Broadway. So it's like, being able to vision that for ourselves. And if we want to be doing musicals when we're 74 or just what that might be. I think that the long view, that idea of survival, of continuing, of growing, of evolving, of finding different ways to make it as an artist, is a huge part of making that jump. Of being all in. This is what I'm gonna do. And at the same time, you know, there are people who transition in and out of it. And a lot of people have a lot of different journeys. Constituent to my journey will be acting, as well as writing, as well as teaching. I mean, I've been an adjunct lecturer at Emory, at Hunter College in New York, at other places. But they all exist within this creative sphere. So I think it's helpful to make some of those considerations and thinking forward about whether or not I really want to take this jump. But it's going to take that kind of commitment to find a way.

I have sort of avoided the question you asked in that I think I knew what I knew at the time that I knew it. And I've learned the lessons as they've come. And the ham-handed ways in which I went about undergrad was somewhat unavoidable because I only knew as much as I knew then. I actually, one time, after graduating from Emory, spoke to Natasha Tretheway at an event, some event where we found ourselves in the same place. This was like years after I graduated. Natasha Tretheway is a two-time poet laureate of the United States, who used to be on faculty at Emory University. She was there when I was there. And I started—I didn't even know this was in me—but I started crying in front of her, speaking to her, telling her lamenting that I had never taken a class from her. And I felt like I had let myself down. I felt like I had let Black folks down. I felt like I had let Black poets down. Of just like, *How can I be so dull headed as to not take advantage of this eminent, just wondrous resource who's right before me?* And it's just, it's because I was who I was then. There are some things you can only know what you know as you go along. So you just hope to take as much as you can from each lesson that you learn along the way. And so what I would hope folks would give themselves along that process is grace within the growth. To not allow those things to crush your spirit as you go, to breathe through and take what you can with them, and to continue to move in what, you know, whatever seems the best direction. So yeah, I think I was able to afford myself that at critical points along the way. And I hope folks would also, particularly in pursuing a life of an artist, give yourself grace and the room to grow.