

IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

BY BRANDON COLE

I have always wondered why God didn't create us with the ability to fly. As a kid, I always liked being in an airplane. I loved the way they took you high above all of God's created earth and the freedom you feel as you gently lift off from safe solid ground. I loved the excitement in the air and thrill of reaching a new destination. The privilege of flying was an indescribable feeling. I even wanted to be an aeronautical engineer, even though I didn't really know what one was. I loved everything about airplanes until the day that I found myself strapped into a small Cessna on my way to the middle of nowhere. The pilot had a twinkle in his eye, as if he knew the inexplicable horror that awaited me in the air. The loud hum of the propellers in front of me eventually signaled the start of the flight as the plane jerked forward in preparation for takeoff.

To the east lay the beautiful coastal terrain and rugged mountains, while to the west, the direction that I was heading, lay the dense tropical rainforest. The tiny six-seater plane bounced up and down the tarmac, if you can call a semi-paved runway with potholes and dirt mounds the tarmac. The pilot then proceeded to laugh as he said something into his microphone. I glanced at my father with an uneasy smirk, and he grinned back at me with a look of exuberance. I always wanted to be like my dad. He was my hero, but sometimes he scared me. My dad was a daredevil, a roller coaster tycoon, and a crazy man. One year, my grampa gave him a picture with a sailboat on it. On the picture, my grampa wrote this great poem talking about how my dad was like a captain of a ship. I, of course, being his eldest son, was his first mate.

In this particular instance, however, I felt like a sea-weary sailor and my dad wasn't even the captain of the "ship." I was trembling in my seat as I clutched onto anything I could find, which didn't amount to much. I found that I could put push my hands against the ceiling, which relieved some of the stress. The pilot brought the Cessna to life and we rocketed out of the small town of Shell-Mera. As I looked back over the Ecuadorian terrain, I began to seriously wonder if I would touch solid ground ever again. The plane flew over a murky river down below and into the unknown. Toniampade was our destination, so I was told, yet I was beginning to wonder if such a place even existed.

The first ten minutes of the plane ride, to my surprise, were quite enjoyable and turbulence-free. But then, in a moment of pure insanity, the pilot looked over at my dad and asked him a question that I couldn't hear. My dad then asked the rest of the plane if they wanted to have a little fun. The plane consisted of me, my dad, my sister, and two others from one of our home churches in Michigan. I wasn't so sure about what kind of fun

we would be having. My idea of fun was to build a model car or kick around a soccer ball. I liked safe activities that I knew I would enjoy from prior experience. For my dad, his perception of fun was totally different. Then the actual “fun” started, and my stomach felt like it was about to turn inside out.

For the next minute or so, which seemed like an eternity, the tiny Cessna transformed into a fighter plane in World War II that was flying through enemy airspace. The pilot proceeded in making the tiny plane do a variety of barrel rolls, drops, and G-force games. I don’t remember if I was conscious or not, but at one point the plane was perpendicular to the ground, and we were flying straight towards the sun. The rule of gravity did not exist up there and the dirt was sticking to the roof of the plane. Then the engine stopped and the plane dove straight down towards the forest floor. My stomach came out of my mouth and I got it back only when the engines roared back to life and the pilot leveled out the plane so we were flying normally again.

It turned out that Toniampade did actually exist, and it seemed like the whole village was out to greet us on the dirt runway. We were met by laughter and smiling indigenous faces. I jumped out of the plane immediately as soon as the door opened and I could have kissed the ground. Everyone else in the plane seemed to have enjoyed themselves during the flight and to my amazement, some were even a little hungry. The pilot turned the plane around and took off back to Shell-Mera. As I watched the plane leave, I felt weird inside. The only way back home was drifting away, and I hoped that it would return in two days like my dad said it would.

I was always taught that honesty is the best way to go. So I’ll be honest and go ahead and say that the two-hour hike that followed was brutal, especially since I had left my breakfast in a puke bag on the plane. I had on rubber boots that came up to my knees, and I noticed that a lot of the Indians walking with us didn’t even have any clothes on. I kept on walking, and my legs got heavier while my stomach got lighter. Along the way, a little boy pointed out a snake and a massive spider. I thanked God for my rubber boots.

The next phase of the journey brought us to the riverbank, where two dug-out canoes awaited us. The seats were simple, made out of a slab of bamboo cut at an angle to fit inside of the canoe. As I took off my hat to wipe the sweat from my brow, I heard a friendly noise that resembled the word “hola,” the Spanish word for “hello.” I turned around to find a small green parrot perching on one of the indigenous men’s shoulders. The people laughed when they our small group look around in confusion. It turns out that the people of the village had taught the parrot some Spanish words as well as the native Guarani tongue. In effect, the bird was bilingual. I thought about trying to teach him a few English words to make him the first trilingual bird on the planet, but I didn’t know how. Languages are fascinating, and even in this little small dot on the world map, three different languages were represented.

I like the way that foreign languages sound. They sound so fluid and amazingly interesting, even though you can't understand a word that they're saying. Foreign languages cause us to sit back and listen, something that we can very easily forget to do in our lives. There are so many languages in the world, and what's even more amazing to think about is that God can speak each and every one of them.

We reached Toniampade in the late afternoon after a very long time sitting on a slab of wood, and I decided to explore the village for a while. It didn't take very long. There were a couple of huts here and there made out of bamboo and jungle grass. In the center of town there was a big fire pit, and the river surrounded the entire village. The women were starting to prepare dinner, and I was excited about that. I saw a bunch of the kids playing and swimming in the river, so being a ten-year old boy, I ditched my shirt and joined right in.

When it was time to eat, I jumped out of the river and took my place beside my dad. By this time, two more planes full of people had landed in Toniampade, and the remainder of the church group from Michigan had arrived, including my mom and my brother. The Guarani people did not speak much Spanish, so one translator translated from Guarani to Spanish, and my dad translated Spanish to English. One of the old men in the village prayed a blessing for the food and we all sat down to eat after a long day of sweating and scratching mosquito bites. Some of the insect bites were more than just mosquitoes, though I had no idea what kind of creatures were eating me alive. Dinner was served, and I was somewhat disappointed by the miniscule serving of rice and fried plantains. To drink, we were served some sort of exotic fruit juice called naranjilla. The juice had a strange taste yet was surprisingly satisfying to my taste buds. I think that God rewards us and blesses us in life when we try new things, when we risk our own comfort zones for His sake. With my personality, it is very hard to do, yet it is necessary for me to experience uncomfortable situations in order to grow. Toniampade was definitely not a comfortable place.

After dinner, my dad sat down with the group from the church in Michigan and explained a little bit of the history of the Guarani people. About fifty years ago, five missionaries landed on Palm Beach, which is located about a mile away from Toniampade. These missionaries attempted to make friends and spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the indigenous people. In that time period, the indigenous people were called the Aucas. The Aucas attacked the "gringos" (foreigners) and killed all five of them on Palm Beach. The impact of the five missionaries, however, led the Aucas to eventually changing their name to the Guarani, which means "the people." As a result of the missionary's impact, the majority of the Guarani people are now believers in Jesus Christ. I decided that was one of the coolest bed-time stories I had ever heard.

The jungle moon glowed overhead, and I was exhausted. My hammock was waiting for me in the "bachelor" hut of the village. Before going to bed, we were told to sleep with socks on... especially if we did not want

vampire bats to suck blood from our toes during the night. I immediately put on my socks and was out the moment I lay down. I awoke in the middle of the night to the sounds of bachelor Guarani snoring profusely. The plane ride earlier that day did not mix well with the rice and plantain I had eaten for dinner. Somehow I found the “bathroom,” which consisted of a hole in the ground. After emptying out my stomach once again, I drifted back to sleep upon return.

The next day I awoke to a breakfast of... more rice and plantains. I began to realize how many things I take for granted each and every day. It’s the simple things in life like food and health that make a big difference in our lives, yet frequently I forget about them and label them as routine. The plan for that morning was to visit Palm Beach, the very place where the five missionaries were murdered half a century ago. I hoped that it wouldn’t be like a graveyard. When we arrived, all I saw was a beach, simply a small segment of sand that meets water. It was here that the lives of the Aucas were changed forever simply because five men dared to make a difference in a dangerous place. As I walked on the sand, I thought about life-changing instances in my life, particularly the time I first accepted Jesus during Vacation Bible School when I was five and the time when I decided to recommit my life to Jesus during Summer Camp of my seventh grade year. Although these instances may be forgotten in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, their impact continues to affect me, even today.

That afternoon after another meal of scrumptious rice and bananas, a group of Guarani took us out to the river. Since the river winds in one big circle and surrounds the village, the current was very strong. All I really had to do was put my feet up and keep my head above water. However, this was no ordinary swim. The Guarani people told us that there were piranhas along the way, so I was a bit preoccupied with the thought of strange fish nibbling on my flesh. I like to think that they weren’t joking and that I survived piranha-infested waters.

Later that afternoon it was time for target practice. The Guarani men use a blowgun to hunt animals in the rainforest. The blowgun measures about twelve feet in length and is very difficult to aim. The ammunition is a small, sharp stick which contains a tad of cotton on the end of it in order to help it fly straight and accurate. The target consisted of a banana hanging down from a tree. To show us the “proper technique,” a young Guarani hunter stood about thirty feet away from the target and pierced the banana in his first try. The “gringo” group applauded in amazement. Then it was my turn. I had trouble even lifting the blowgun, and when I did actually aim in an attempt to hit the target, I could not get the “bullet” to travel the right distance. I came up short time after time. I was an asthmatic when I was little, so I blamed it on that.

The afternoon turned to night, marking the end of our group’s stay in Toniampade. To commemorate our time with them, the people prepared a feast that night, complete with remnants of a cooked wild bird shot with

a blowgun earlier that day. As I sat down to eat, I grabbed the first piece of meat I could find. I yearned for food that tasted like something other than rice or bananas. It was dark outside, and I couldn't really see what I was eating. I took a bite of the wild bird, expecting a succulent piece of meat. I took out my flashlight to discover what I was eating. There, in the dim light, the dead bird was staring at me. Unfortunately, I realized that I had picked the head of the bird, and all that remained was bone and tissue. I gave the piece to one of the Guarani people, and they gladly ate it as if it was a normal piece of meat.

That night, I noticed something peculiar about the actions of the people who were sharing their homes with us. The Guarani were eating the leftovers from our group's meal. What a picture of sacrifice. I could envision Jesus blending in right along with them, especially with this extreme act of servant hood and love.

After dinner, the people participated in a number of tribal dances and songs. The singing sounded like annoying, monotone music to me, but who am I to decide what music is supposed to sound like? During the singing, a young Guarani boy grabbed a tarantula that was the size of my hand and flung it into the fire. The spider hissed in the fire and its legs crinkled up like an open hand turning to a fist.

Then, it was Kimo's turn to talk. Kimo was a very respectable old man with a warm smile. Through two translators, our group was able to understand Kimo's pathway to salvation. Kimo was one of the Aucas who helped kill the five missionaries some fifty years ago on Palm Beach. Yet there he stood, confident in Jesus Christ. I have always had problems with my testimony. It does not seem as glorious or interesting as Kimo's or other people's testimonies. I grew up in a Christian home, accepted Jesus at a young age, and have been a church-goer all my life. Woop-di-doo. However, at that moment I realized that my testimony was significant simply because it is telling my story of how I made the most important decision of my life... to follow Christ. The details don't really matter, and I'm sure that Kimo would have thought that my testimony was just as interesting and impacting as his was.

Later that night, as our group was packing to leave in the morning, I glanced across the river and saw two beady eyes staring at me. Then the eyes disappeared, and the owner of the eyes, a large caiman (or crocodile), swam away. I also heard the call of a jaguar, the buzz of the mosquito (repeatedly), and the call of a toucan. As I flew home in the small Cessna the next morning, I thought about everything that had happened within the last few days and the impact that my trip to Toniampade had made on my life.

Our world today is a jungle out there. I had lived in a real jungle, full of dangers, risk, and adventure. In this habitat, wild animals fight to survive in a cruel environment. This survival of the fittest mentality should not exist among Christians today. We live in a wild world, full of false love, injustice, and hostility. Our culture tells

us that we are to fend for ourselves if we are going to survive in the real world. This couldn't be more untrue. God calls us to care for the weak, for those who would otherwise perish without our help.

We can learn a lot from the Guarani people. They live in community and take a genuine interest in those living among them. The Guarani live a simple and content life, one in which worry is of little concern to them. The people and the wild live in accordance with one another, and there is mutual respect. In the same way, as Christians we should respect the "wild people" who do not know Christ. We may not agree with them, but accepting them as people is the first step in developing relationships that could possibly lead them to Christ. I hope to always remember that even the wildest of animals can be tamed and saved, especially with God as the guide.