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My Time in the Dugout  
  
My dad is and engineer and my mom was a microbiologist. They always had plans for me to complete a 4 year degree. I felt a tug on my heart to attend bible college but I was afraid. I put it off for a year until I couldn’t bear it anymore. My parents weren’t thrilled at my decision to drop out of college. The program I chose wasn’t even accredited and they planned to send students abroad for an internship after completion. All of this seemed crazy to my parents and it took every ounce of courage to pursue it. After much prayer and deliberation, I decided to intern at a bible college in Lima Peru.    
When I took the intern position at Calvary Chapel Bible College Peru I was 20 years old. I thought an intern would be grading papers and running errands for the professors. Turns out I was to become a teacher myself, and play in integral role in the leadership team. I was only 20, I had only been to a very small vocational Bible college, and I didn’t even have an associate’s degree, but I would be teaching in an accredited college! Just a few days after my arrival we experienced an earthquake that registered an 8.9 on the Richter scale. We all huddled in the courtyard that night watching the lone tree swaying back and forth. I heard a boom and then another boom and watched sparks flying into the air as transformers blew around us. The next morning, I hopped on a bus with a few other interns and rushed to the epicenter to help with recovery efforts. It was as if God was showing me what kind of chaos I might expect to encounter in this strange new place. That earthquake set the tone for my yearlong journey in Peru, and especially the trip we took to some of the remote villages in the Amazon jungle.    
After the school year had finished I went to join two missionaries stationed in the city of Iquitos, Peru. The plan was to spend the summer with them helping at the church and ministering to some of the surrounding villages. Just a week after I arrived we planned to head out to some remote villages upriver and invite some of their pastors to a conference we would be hosting. Most of those pastors had very little training and were pretty isolated. So our plan was to host a conference with some experienced pastors to give them some guidance and encouragement. The only problem was that these villages were so remote we had to invite them in person. They had no phones and no internet. That meant we had to go there. Sounds simple enough, but in Peru nothing ever is.    
Scene 1  
So we made it halfway there, but I decided to turn back. I sat up on the bed that night wondering why I couldn’t sleep. I was in old hostel in Requena, Peru. It was dark in the room, but the streetlights outside shown through the curtains. The dirty stucco walls reminded me I was a long way from home. I was out of my element, very sick, and I didn’t belong there. I was one of only three gringos in a city of 25,000. The trip there took us three days, and I didn’t sleep a wink.    
Scene 2  
Our hammocks hung in three rows. We were packed in like sardines, shoulder to shoulder. It was noisy and chaotic, with chickens and livestock wandering around the deck. I dared not fall asleep. My backpack would undoubtedly be gone if I did. People were hopping on and off constantly and it would be easy to swipe the gringo’s stuff and be gone at next stop. Going almost 72 hours without sleep did a number on my immune system. Americans are not exposed to all the bugs the locals are, and we don’t have the same level of immunity. By the time we arrived in Requena I was sick as a dog, I knew I had bronchitis, and was afraid I might have walking-pneumonia. My cough rattled in my chest, sometimes making it hard to breathe. To make matters worse, I couldn’t take the antibiotics I had with me because you must avoid direct sunlight while taking them. We were on the equator in the middle of the Amazon jungle, you can’t get more direct sunlight! My anxiety grew as we waited for the next boat to arrive. I ran through all the possible scenarios in my head and my muscles neck and shoulders felt tense as I considered all the possibilities.    
We planned to stay in Requena a few days and then catch another boat. We were another three days boat ride away from the villages we wanted to visit. They have no phones, no running water, and they can only be reached by boat. The nearest doctor or hospital would be anywhere from 3-6 days away. I decided it wasn’t worth the risk, so I planned to head back to our home base in Iquitos while the other two missionaries went upriver. That night I couldn’t sleep. Some might think I’m crazy, but there are times God offers me guidance. It is not an audible voice, but it is one I know and understand all the same. That same voice once led me out of the woods when I was completely lost, and it has helped me to avoid many pitfalls. Here it was again, warning me I was making a mistake. “I have chosen the day you die, and now is not the time. Until then, nothing that can touch you. Don’t go home. Get on that boat with your friends.”    
The boat pulled from shore the next morning and my throat was on fire, but I understood something I never had before. Fear had limited me so much until this point. If I was concerned or afraid I changed course. God was showing me how much he hates fear. Hate sounds like a strong word, but fear is the opposite of faith. And fear had caused me to miss out on so much in life. I came face to face with many of my fears that week. I had a fear of water (more like what might be lurking in the water), any type of venomous insect or arachnid, and of course the underlying fear of death we all face.    
I went another 72 hours without sleep to reach the village. Without medication or rest, my condition showed no sign of improvement. We made our way up the Amazon to one of its tributaries called the Ukayali River. I remember looking out over the railing and watching the surface of the water churn as people threw food over the side. The piranhas didn’t waste any time devouring the scraps. When we finally got to the village we desperately needed a bath. Our only option was to hop right in that muddy river. They say the Amazon River and its tributaries have more species of fish than some of our oceans. The locals assured us the piranhas would leave us alone, and that all the anacondas, Cayman, crocodiles and alligators local to the area had been pushed out by hunting pressure. But that water was so muddy we couldn’t see a thing. There are many times in life when our only option is to jump in. We may not know what lurks beneath, what challenges we will face. All we know is things cannot continue as they are, and jumping in is the only way to become clean. The same is true when we decide to trust God. Our faith is sure to be tested, but how refreshing is the result. There is no greater way to conquer anxiety than to face the thing you fear, and see how God faithfully protects you through the experience.    
Scene 3  
After our bath we made our way to the village to get ready for bed. I held the flashlight while my friend tied our mosquito nets to the rafters. My flashlight revealed a spider the size of my palm sitting on the wall three feet from the spot I planned to sleep. (This was not a tarantula, but a regular spider the size of a softball.) The kid next to me mused they liked to bite, and it was very painful. An insect continued to land on my flashlight, and I kept slapping it away. Finally, I swatted it to the floor to see what it was. It was some species of wasp over an inch long. The missionaries laughed and said, “we are breaking you in hard on this one”. During the middle of the night a woman went into labor in the shack next to us. She experienced some complications and passed away. Her family buried her and began cooking breakfast before we even woke up. It was a stark reminder that we were far from medical assistance, and how different life was in the jungle.    
The next few days we spent with the locals getting to know their way of life. We fished in the river using hand lines and chopped bananas, and played around with the dugout canoes. (They were so heavy I couldn’t believe they could float.) A couple of us decided to hop in a dugout and head upriver to connect with another pastor in the village not far away. Our 9 year old “river guide” laughed hysterically as we struggled to keep it straight. We watched as freshwater dolphins surfaced around us. I couldn’t help but think how lucky I was. How many people get to experience something like this? My trip into the jungle was an experience I will never forget, and I am so glad I didn’t let fear stop me. We made it home and of course I made a full recovery. Something shifted during that trip in the jungle. Before that trip I always played it safe, but now I often see fear as an opportunity, and I run toward the things I fear most. Many people told me I could never go back to college at 35. How would I support my wife? How could I ever afford the mortgage? What if I wasn’t cut out to be an engineer? I had the same fears. But God was showing me the path. It was time to go back and finish my degree. This time I jumped at the opportunity because I was afraid. I learned something about buoyancy. No matter how impossible it might seem for those dugouts to float, the weight of water displaced was greater than that of the canoe. In the same way God is greater than any difficulty, and I can always trust him to keep me afloat. No matter how impossible it may seem. I knew he would do it again if I took the leap to finish my degree.