

On the boat ride back to La Libertad, in the little canoe on the Amazon river, I kept thinking, "This is my real life. I am really in a canoe on the Amazon and I really just held a baby sloth and shook hands with a manatee. Look what happens when you can change your mind and get focused. I went from growing up poor (relative to the States) to teaching English and holding a sloth in the Amazon, walking through Peru, and drinking a \$1 bottle of Brazilian cachaça in good company last night. Who gets to do this if they don't have a travel show on TV?"

In the afternoon I taught one class since we skipped the morning class while I was in Peru. The markers Ben got helped SO much as I was able to write out specific words the kids wanted, and they were able to write both the words and translations. They were also doing really well remembering words from previous lessons.

After class but before dinner I played catch with some of my children – ages probably from about 5-8. The older kids played soccer with David at the base of the hill and the little ones and I tossed the ball around at the top of the hill. After basic catch got boring I introduced them to the brilliance that is "monkey in the middle" and they got a kick out of that. We ended up playing for hours. Then the really little girls – about 4 years old – came to sit with me and slowly started gathering flowers and leaves from nearby plants. I don't remember who started it but one of them tied a leaf around my head and they all began sticking flowers and grasses into the "crown." One put tiny flowers in my empty earring holes and another put a tiny flower on the bridge of my sunglasses. When they decided I was finally done, one announced, "You're the queen now. The Queen of the Amazon!" I was blown away by the love and kindness shown to me by these tiny humans. Queen of the Amazon is quite a title and I was honored to have it bestowed upon me, so we made sure to get photos of me with my "subjects."

While playing, kids would occasionally step out of the circle and climb to the top of a tree to pick some fruit. I was the only crazy person cautioning them to "be careful, be careful!" and everyone looked at me like something was inherently wrong with my way of thinking. I realized these kids are far more self-sufficient and strong than I imagined. They're adept at climbing and will often climb up a tree, get the fruit, and jump down from the top of the tree, no harm done. They're very athletic and they know what they're capable of. The kids shared the fruit with me and once again I was struck by their kindness. They have so little – they pick the fruit because they are hungry – and yet they wanted me to have some of everything they had. I would generally take a bite or two and pass it along to a smaller child because I didn't want to eat all of their food. I did get to try some really crazy fruits unlike anything we have here though.

After playing it was time to cook dinner. Ben and David handled the cooking and I sang while they cooked. I actually had children request a song I'd written myself and played a

couple of days before. The chorus has the words “baby, baby please don't, baby don't bring me down” in it, and two children said to me in Spanish, “Sarah, sing the baby song.” I was utterly confused and asked them what baby song a few times before one started singing and it hit me that it was my song – MY song, a song in English that I had written – that had made such an impact on them that they remembered it and wanted to hear it. That one word stuck out to them because it's repeated over and over and they latched onto it. Amazed and humbled once again, I obliged them, feeling more appreciation for my craft than I'd felt in a long time, and they sang along with me, making up words to the English ones they didn't understand.

Not only did I have children singing along with me, but at one point, Yuki, the motherless baby monkey, climbed into my lap, and actually started howling along with me. I was shocked. It had taken him a little time to warm up to the three of us “outsiders” and now here he was, sitting in my lap, singing along with me. A wild animal of a different species who doesn't speak English and isn't a pet had willingly and of his own accord climbed into my lap to sing with me. Even now, writing this entry in my apartment months later, I feel the same sense of surprise and unity I felt then with him in my lap.

I want my life to be full of such adventure always. I realize how much I missed out on because of my mindset. And it's not just about music and my tunnel-vision way of life for the past ten years. I will always be a musician. Now it is time to be a human too. To experience, to love, try, take risks, explore, throw caution to the wind (within reason – I still take my malaria pills and wear bug spray, but if the kids hand me food, I eat it. They don't have much so it's a big deal).

It is time for me to keep living and enjoy and embrace life.

Sarah Blackman, USA