

“Most importantly, I’m a child of God and I know where I’m going,” penned John in his journal on November 19, 1999 as he counted his blessings. Those words hearkened back to a decision he made when he was just a child – one that he chose to walk in as he grew older.

When John was 4 years old, we lived in Samo’s village in the jungles of the Amazon. We were there to learn the Banawá language from Samo’s wife, Joana, the only Banawá speaker in the village. Our eventual goal was to translate the New Testament into the Banawá language; a goal which our colleagues later accomplished. As we lived and interacted with the Indians of Samo’s village, John learned much about life in the jungle. He watched children who were barely able to walk, handle a knife better than he could. He watched the Indians impale fish accurately time after time with their long bows and arrows. One day he came to us and asked if he was old enough to use a machete. After contemplating for a few moments, we granted his request on the condition that he wear long pants whenever he wanted to use the machete. So on went the long pants in the stifling tropical heat and he promptly began to chop a branch with the machete. Just as promptly, he came running to us with a gash in his leg near the knee, not too deep since it had cut the pant leg first. We doctored his wound and then asked if he now understood why he was required to wear long pants in order to use the machete. By the way, he never again cut himself with a machete – at least not to our knowledge!



John observes bow making in the village

Life experiences are the incubator of faith

So he learned much in that short time we lived in Samo’s village. He watched our faith in action, observed our responses, saw how we cared about the Indians, even at the times when they were less than loveable.

One day after the Indians had been cooking over an open fire on the ground, they all left the village. We were left there alone. I (Sharon) sternly warned John not to go near the Indians’ fire because there would be hot coals and he might burn himself. No sooner said than done. Curious John was drawn like a magnet to those coals to see if they were really hot like Mom said they were. I heard his yelp as he felt the heat of the coals on his feet. I bolted over, scooped him up, raced down to the stream with him and plunged his feet into the cool water. Amazingly they didn’t blister too badly. But a few days later he began to have a fever. As the fever got higher, we wondered whether it was possible that his

burned foot could cause such a fever. As the fever rose, I spent a sleepless night in prayer. With many tears, I committed my 4 year old son into God's hands. The question arose in my mind; was it worth losing my son in order to give the Word of God to a tribe of Indians who, at the time, didn't even know how to read and probably could have cared less about reading it even if they could? As I wrestled, I was reminded again that God didn't spare even His own dearly beloved son, but freely gave Him as a ransom to deliver us from the dominion of darkness and transfer us to the kingdom of light and life (Colossians 1:13). And my answer had to be a resounding, "Yes." At peace, I finally slept.

The next day, Bob and Barbara Campbell, our colleagues in a nearby village assured us they didn't think the fever was a result of John's burn and that it was probably malaria. As soon as we began to administer the proper treatment, he began to get better. What a relief!

But something even more significant than this occurred while we were in Samo's village. Something that was to change the destiny of both of our children, 6 year old Krista and 4 year old John. Since the house we lived in didn't have walls in the true sense of the word, we had constructed a room-sized mosquito net in which we all slept. One night after we had gone into our mosquito net bedroom to escape the bugs, we began to talk. The topic turned to spiritual things and Krista and John asked many questions about God, about life, about death, etc. These were the piercing and perceptive questions that even small children can ask. As we talked, we began to explain the plan of salvation to them. We told them that because we all stray away from what God wants us to do (called sin), He sent His only Son who lived with all the temptations we have, but didn't sin. Because Jesus was sinless, He didn't have to pay for his own sin, but instead could pay for our sins when He died on the cross. He could forgive us and make us God's children, pure and spotless in God's eyes. We asked if they wanted to have God's forgiveness and become His children. They did. So we prayed. John prayed out loud and Krista prayed silently, making the most important decision that was to mold their futures in ways that no other decision possibly could.

Later when John was older, his dad decided to take the Evangelism Explosion¹ training course that was being held for pastors in our city of Porto Velho, Brazil. Our son was about 14 at the time and not very fluent in Portuguese because he had grown up living and studying primarily among other English speakers. But when Rick asked him if he wanted to take the course with him, he decided to do it. The Brazilian pastors took special interest in him and helped and encouraged him as he struggled to memorize verses, and to write and tell his testimony of what Jesus Christ had done in his life -- all in Portuguese. But he stuck with it and made it through the course with all of the pastors cheering him on.

Yes, John knew where he was going. Heaven was his destination and his heart longed to tell others and to know that those he loved best would one day be there with him. One of his greatest frustrations in high school was that the very year he started attending boarding school; the decision was made that the students would no longer go out to do evangelism in the local community. The school was isolated and he had very little contact with non-Christians so he threw himself wholeheartedly into his studies. Doing well in them later opened the door to a scholarship to study at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois.

His frustration with his inability to communicate his faith to friends, family and co-workers reached its peak during his internship in Hawaii. He wrote in his diary,

"I feel like a helpless observer watching a plane full of people spiral to their deaths. It's painful living here. Next week is Thanksgiving week; there will be another big party on Thursday. I won't be there, just as I haven't been to any of their parties. I feel like a kill-joy, and I don't know how to tell people that I really do enjoy having

a good time, just without alcohol, pot, sex, and gossip...I feel like I am worthless here as an example of a Christian. I don't know what I should be doing differently. If this is anything like what life would be like as a tentmaker.2 I don't know if I could do it."

Throughout college as he had worked at various summer jobs, the habits and lifestyles of those around him seemed to go from bad to worse. That disturbed him profoundly. In his mind, if anything was worth doing, it ought to be done with excellence. So co-workers who goofed off or whose lives seemed meaningless, only served to give him deeper resolve to do and be his best and to help as many people as he could. As he considered whether to participate in his co-workers' parties or not, he longed for a way to show or tell them that it wasn't them he objected to, but rather their personal choices, ones he felt were harmful to them and that would be profoundly harmful to him if he participated in them. So instead of staying for the party during the Thanksgiving holidays, he made a decision to go on a hike – a decision that was to alter all of our lives forever. His journal entry reads,

"For one of the two holidays that might actually have some meaning for me, I will be isolated again out of a need for self-preservation."

He packed up his camping gear and headed for the hills – alone.

A week or two before Thanksgiving I (Sharon) had written a letter to all three of my children in triplicate, but on John's letter I had added a note saying, "John, don't forget to count your blessings this Thanksgiving because they are many." So in his journal he wrote,

"Well, since Thanksgiving is coming up, I'm going to work on counting my blessings, which, says Mom, are many. First off, I'm living in Hawaii right near Volcanoes Nat'l Park. It would be hard to imagine a more unique spot on the planet. I have a job with the U.S. Geological Survey, an important organization that will be spicy on my resume. I'm working in field biology, gaining valuable experience that will help me in my decision of whether to pursue graduate studies, and if so, in what. I'm in better physical condition than I have been since I was 15 (with the possible exception of times near field day at PQQ (Puraquequara - the boarding school John attended)). I have an awesome mountain bike for the first time in my life, and so far I haven't entirely killed myself on it yet. I have two wonderful, supportive parents, and an amazing sister and a cool brother. I have a set of extremely varied experiences that is broader culturally, geographically, and educationally than most people gain in a lifetime, and there is no sign that I will cease or slow down in gaining further experience. Most importantly, I'm a child of God and I know where I'm going – I just need help finding out what to do in the meanwhile."

This faithful and consistent "child of God" who also happened to be our child, penned these words just six days before his fateful trip. We discovered most of his journal in March of 2000, four months after his disappearance as we were going through his belongings, and the rest in the fall of 2006. Even though we knew in our hearts that John knew where he was going, it was a tremendous gift from God to read what he had written. It was John's farewell as well as his invitation to join him by becoming a part of God's family.

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