

**Talking to Snakes** By Kasey Vliet 12.17.2008

“Kasey, today when I went to my garden I saw an anaconda lying in my casaba sticks. If the snake were to come at you, what would you do?”

“Well, they tell me I am not to kill anacondas.”

“But if it came after you...”

“I would kill it.”

I would kill the snake. Why would I kill it? I would kill another living animal. I am a peaceful man. At least I try to be a peaceful man and I consider myself peaceful. But yet, I would kill the snake to protect myself.

This brief conversation between my fatherly neighbor and I as we took a rest beneath the cool black Surinamese night sky gets at a central theme for my belief in the Peace Corps good. Communication and making the world a more peaceful place.

I think about that snake coming at me. Me looking down at its slithering skin speeding across the dry, cracked dirt. I have no idea what that snake is thinking. I have never communicated with a snake. I have never attempted to. All that I have to make a decision on is what people have told me about snakes, what I have seen on TV and in movies. Here, in Boslanti, they tell me that snakes eat people. Every time that I go into the bush, people tell me to look closely at the dirt for snakes because snakes eat people.

With no established way for communicating with the snake, I am clueless to the reality of the snake's intentions as it comes at me. The intentions could be violent or peaceful. Maybe it wants a hug? No, wait, snakes eat people. It does not want a hug.

This world functions on a survival of the fittest mentality. Especially here in the jungle, we are either hunting or being hunted. Sometimes both. We are the fortunate ones. For many years now humans are the fittest. By the grace of our brain power we are able to outsmart other animals in the jungle. A poisonous spider comes into the house; we have the means to kill it. We have created tools to fend off the other animals and we work together to make safe places to live apart from these animals. When a hungry jaguar wanders to the village edge we have guns to shoot it before it eats our children or animals. As humans at the top of the food chain we are rarely seeking to communicate with predators.

So, here I am. Face to face with this snake. No way of communicating and little prior knowledge about its way of life. We are both faced with the same predicament. Unfamiliar facing unfamiliar. It is fight or flight for us both. The snake comes at me and I fight. There is no outrunning an anaconda, and if he catches me he will kill me and eat me.

If only we had a way to communicate. Or some prior interaction that built trust. I take this confrontation between familiar and unfamiliar and apply it to humans and to the Peace Corps. So often people see other people as “snakes.” The world’s boundaries and walls are shrinking by the day, but they are not gone yet. Peace Corps places people in these unfamiliar territories, where walls still exist, to form communication lines that build trusting relationships between people and previously unknown people. We are able to exchange languages and cultural beliefs. Peace Corps takes the unfamiliar and makes it familiar. In doing so American citizens are safer at home, and the host country citizens are safer as well because we have established a bond between nations, more accurately, a bond between people.

I am a Peace Corps volunteer in Suriname, and often the Surinamese people see me as a snake. They have never met an American and can only make decisions based on what they have heard. “Americans are killing people in Iraq,” they say. “Americans dropped a bomb on Japan, killing thousands of innocent people. Did you come here to kill us?” they ask. These observations are all valid, based on what these people have learned. It is a Peace Corp Volunteer’s responsibility to broaden these outlooks and to build the trust that he or she is here to build relationships that will avoid war and bombs. We are here to build relationships that allow us to communicate about our differences and to reach a peaceful agreement when disagreements arise.

I see many Surinamese people as snakes, too. They call me racial slang like “bakaa” and then laugh together after making a comment about me that I did not understand. They sit and stare as I walk the streets in the capital city, Paramaribo, making clicking noses and leaving me uncomfortable and uncertain of their intentions. In cases such as this, where I encounter an unfamiliar person whose intentions are uncertain, it helps to stop and open a line of communication. A simple, “Hello!” or a smile goes a long ways.

My thoughts drift back to the snake. If we could communicate, the snake and I could avoid fighting. Our fear and uncertainty about one another would no longer put us in battle positions with no way to discuss other options. If people would communicate more often, communicate with other people outside of their borders, we too would no longer have so much unfamiliarity. We would know one another, build relationships together, have friends, brothers and sisters that extend around the world.

This hypothetical confrontation with a snake awakens the motivation within my heart that everyday that I am here in Suriname, building relationships with friends, sisters, and brothers, I am doing good for my country and for the world around. I am turning the unfamiliar into the familiar and building lines of communication between people. The idea of America declaring war on Suriname is absurd to me now. These are now my friends and family too. Imagine a whole world full of countries where we had friends and families living. There would be no more wars. We would not declare war on our friends or family. Would we? Peace Corps is partly about training locals to help their communities complete technical projects, and as Peace Corps Volunteers we receive plenty of reminders and trainings on this along the way. But let’s never forget that Peace Corps is also about making a peaceful world; it is about getting to know the snakes.