



## **The Gentle Way**

An Autobiographical Essay for VSA arts

by Lynn Manning

Fear tastes like rusted metal in my mouth. My heart is thudding in my chest. Rushing blood hisses in my ears. The stink of stress, sweat and Tiger Balm<sup>®</sup> assault my sinuses. My muscles feel as tight as coiled springs. My palms are wet with sweat, and it feels like a small animal is attempting a gymnastics routine inside my stomach. I

and slowly stretching my muscles. None of it is working. If I had known that this was going to be so stressful, I never would have volunteered for such torture.

jam-packed with boisterous people. The event is the annual Los Angeles Open Judo Tournament, hosted by the LACC Judo Club. Judo matches are in progress on all three competition mats. The competitors range from age seven, boys and girls, to women and men Masters divisions for people over 40 years of age. The bleachers and sidelines are churning with agitated spectators and judo players alike. They represent a variety of races and ethnicities. Some speak languages I don't understand, but everybody speaks some Japanese. You have to in judo because, whatever judo *dojo* (class) or tournament you visit, anywhere in the world, judo techniques, procedures, and scoring are spoken in Japanese. This is so that judo practitioners (called *judoka*) can train and compete safely together no matter their mother tongues.

Some of the spectators are shouting out instructions to the competitors. A mother encourages her young daughter from the sidelines, saying, "Don't let her get your



to do this. Have I lost my mind as well as my sight?

e by a stranger in a night club in Hollywood. The man had picked a fight with me, and I had overpowered him and thrown him out of the club. He returned a few minutes later with a gun. He shot me in the face, once. The bullet destroyed my left eye and severed the optic nerve behind my right eye. There was nothing that surgeons could do to save my sight. In the 15 months since then, I enrolled in rehabilitation training at the Braille Institute of America. There, I learned the tactile reading and writing system for the blind named Braille, after its French inventor, Louis Braille. I was also taught orientation and mobility, which included techniques for safely getting around inside familiar dwellings, and how to use a white cane to confidently travel city streets and navigate through public buildings. I also learned new ways to cook meals, clean house, maintain my laundry, and other activities necessary to live independently once more. Eight months after losing my sight, I was once again able to move into my own apartment. Some rehabilitation professionals, as well as several of my family members, thought that I was been one to face a new challenge head-on. Living with blindness was no different.

One of the first things I learned about being blind was that it's very easy to losing my sight, I had been a very active 23-year-old. I loved to practice karate with friends, play pickup basketball and flag football at the neighborhood park, and to boogie down on the dance floor one or two nights a week. All of that came to an abrupt halt when my sight was taken away.

What didn't disappear was my app long for me to start getting fat. I've never considered myself a vain person, but as a about you. Now that I was blind, it seemed even more important that I take pride in my appearance. I wanted people to notice something more about me than just my white cane.



participation. Judo cannot be learned by doing moves in front of a mirror. We need willing partners to properly learn and excel at judo. So it is that we come together to practice in pursuit of the

challengers. I got bounced around quite a bit, but the experience was exhilarating. Overall, the class was an exhausting 90-minute workout.

Burns and Glen invited me to stay after class so that they could show me some other techniques I could look forward to learning in the weeks to come.

Leading me onto the mat, Burns said, "You'll probably learn this one next week. It's the one-arm shoulder throw, or *ippon seoi nage*. He grabbed my right sleeve, jerked me toward him, then he spun around, thrust the biceps of his right arm into my right armpit, straightened his legs as he snapped forward at the hips, and sent me sailing over his head to crash thudding to the mat in front of him. He admonished, "Next time, t want to break something."

After Burns helped me to my feet, Glen took hold of my right sleeve and left lapel, saying, "This is my favorite. It's a sacrifice throw called the *tomoe nage*, or stomach throw.

He took a few quick steps backward as he pulled me toward him. He then raised his right foot and jammed it into my gut as he fell backward to the mat. My feet immediately left the floor as he propelled me with his foot straight up into the air above him, then guided me with his arms to come slamming to the mat, flat on my back, just beyond his outstretched body. He enthusiastically leapt to his feet while I writhed on the floor, more shocked than hurt.

Glen exclaimed, "Is that cool or what!"

Both of these guys were at least 10 years older than I, and some 30 pounds think you little white boys are having way too much fun body slamming the big black to make you guys pay for this pain. got.

In the fall, my mobility skills, Braille reading, and writing skills were good enough that I was able to enroll as a full-time student at Los Angeles City College. The college had an extensive judo program, so Glen and I both enrolled in the Beginning Judo class. Our 30 or so classmates, male and female, were all sighted. The instructor,

Sensei Nishioka, made a point of telling them not to cut us any slack because of our disabilities. I did my best to punish anyone who condescended to make that mistake. I gained a reputation for training hard and competing harder. It was in Sensei N class that I fully REALIZED that I could compete on equal footing with sighted judo players. Having lost my sight just a year earlier, this new knowledge worked wonders for my self-confidence, and I strove to be the toughest player in class. I was not some poor, helpless blind guy worthy of pity. Anyone who assumed so was in for a very painful attitude adjustment. This defiant confidence accompanied me outside of the *dojo* as well. If I could excel at judo, I could excel at anything!

Now, standing here in the on deck area of competition mat number three,  
list





straighten my uniform. I realize that the hissing sound in my ears is the spectators cheering.

The referee says, "*Rei*."

I bow.

Step back."

I do so.

He announces, "*Ippon!* Manning!"

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would also be the first time that the Paralympic Games would be held in the same host city as the Olympic Games, and the competitive events staged in the same venues. The national governing organization for blind amateur sports in the United States, the U.S. Association of Blind Athletes (USABA) would be conducting the Paralympic Judo Team trials at its National Championships in early 1988. Sensei Gibson thought it would be an historic opportunity for blind judo, and she believed that I stood a very strong chance of making the team.

I was excited by the possibility of representing the United States in international competition at the Paralympic Games. I soon learned from USABA that the Paralympics are Olympic style, international sports events for elite athletes with disabilities. The athletes are divided into six different categories of disability: amputee, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injuries, intellectual disability, visual impairment, and *les autres*. Paralympic judo competition would be solely between blind and visually impaired judoka. Needless to say, I dismissed all thoughts of retirement, reinvigorated my training regimen, and set out upon an international judo career that would stretch 11 years.

I won that spot on the 1988 U.S. Paralympic Team that went to Seoul, but my weight class was cancelled for lacking the requisite three competitors. I was allowed to compete in the open weight class, but was eliminated after losing to a Brazilian who outweighed me by 55 pounds. I returned home determined to redeem myself. I quit my 20-year smoking habit, plunged deeper into training, and went on to win the World Heavyweight Championship of Blind Judo at the 1990 World Victory Games in Assen, Netherlands. This earned me recognition as Blind Male Athlete of the Year by the U.S. Olympic Committee. I also took the World Cup for Blind Judo in Sassari, Sardinia in 1991, and took silver medals at the 1991 Tokyo Invitational, and at the 1992 Paralympic Games in Barcelona, Spain. I retired from competition after taking bronze medals at the 1998 World Championships for the Blind, in Madrid, and the 1998 Tokyo Invitational for the Blind. In 2001, I volunteered to teach the Braille Institute judo class when Sensei Gibson retired. I retired in 2007. Judo is indeed what you make it. For me, it is a gentle way of life.

