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## **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'm more terrified than I have ever been in my life. I'm trying to calm myself by breathing deeply 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.

I'm in the main gymnasium of Los Angeles City College (LACC). The place is 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

sleeve, Melissa. Knock her hand away! Good! Now grab her belt and go. *O goshi*, 'hip throw!' Yes! Yes! Oh! Cover up, Melissa! Good try. Wait until the referee stands you up, then do it again."

A coach berates a judoka on another mat, shouting, "Get your grip, Rogers! Straighten up and get your grip! Don't follow him around like that, he's a foot sweeper. Watch his... Oh! See? What did I tell you? Get up off of the mat, Rogers! That's where he wants you. Stand up, Rogers! Don't let him sink that choke, get your chin in there. Grab his fingers! Don't you tap out. You better not tap out. Tenri Dojo doesn't tap out! Fight it! Fight it!"

A spectator says, "Might as well save your breath. He can't hear you now."

My weight class, heavyweight novice men, was called to competition mat number three 10 minutes ago. I'm now standing in the "on deck" area, trying to shake this fear. I'm bare-footed, and dressed in the traditional straw-colored judo uniform called a *gi*. It's composed of a loosely fitting cotton jacket and trousers. The jacket is constructed of a heavy duty weave in order to withstand the violent snatching and tugging of grip fighting. The jacket is held closed by a wide cloth belt, white in color to indicate my novice rank. It is wrapped around my waist twice and secured with a square knot just below the belly button, leaving two 8- to 12-inch tongues of belt to dangle. When the match in progress ends and the winner is announced, it will be my turn to do battle. I will have to summon the courage to step out onto the mat for my very first judo match in my very first tournament, ever.

There are only two visually impaired judo players among the several hundred competitors here. I'm one, and my friend, Glen, is the other. Glen prefers to be referred to as "partially sighted" rather than "blind" because he can see some things, but not very clearly. Glen tells me that, in bright light, he can make out the shapes of people, but not the details of what they look like. As for me, I don't mind the term "blind" because I have no light perception at all. I can't see a thing. Glen and I won't be competing against one another because we're in different weight classes. I'm a heavyweight and Glen's a middle-weight. His division is in action on mat number one and I have no way of

knowing how he's doing. As terrified as I'm feeling, I'm beginning to regret my decision to do this. Have I lost my mind as well as my sight?

I haven't been blind all my life. Fifteen months ago I was shot in the face 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 moving too quickly, taking on too many new things for my own good, but I've always 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 become sedentary. Physical activity is difficult to come by when you're blind. Before 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 appreciation for good food and drink. It didn't take long for me to start getting fat. I've never considered myself a vain person, but as a child, I was taught that one's physical appearance is the first thing that people judge 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.

To whip my body back into shape, I tried creating workout regimens at home—doing calisthenics, lifting free weights, and attempting to duplicate karate *katas* in absence of a mirror. It all proved to be depressingly boring.

I eventually complained about this to Glen and Burns, my newfound visually impaired friends at the Braille Institute. They bubbled over with enthusiasm for the Braille judo class they had enrolled in a few months earlier.

Glen said, "Judo is great! It's a grappling martial art, more like wrestling, so it's perfect for the blind. You'll love it."

Burns, who's totally blind like me, added, "If a fool puts his hands on you, you've got him where you want him. Judo's good for your balance and spatial awareness too. A big muscular dude like you should do real good at it."

I decided to give it a try.

There was a total of 10 visually impaired students in the Braille judo class when I enrolled. The instructor, Linda Gibson, and her volunteer assistant, Mike Rodsten, were both sighted. *Sensei* is Japanese for 'teacher' or 'master' and the title conveys respect. We students were instructed to refer to them as such. Everyone in the *dojo*, or school, was bare-footed and wearing judo *gis*. At the beginning of class, we students lined up according to height and rank, along one edge of the mat area, opposite the senseis.

Sensei Gibson calmly enumerated the benefits and basic tenets of judo. She said, "Judo is what you make of it. Some people take it for self-defense; others practice it for physical fitness; and still others pursue it as a competitive sport. For all, it can build self-discipline, confidence, and leadership skills. It also increases physical strength and coordination, as well as flexibility and balance. The Japanese translation of the word judo, is 'the gentle way.' This is because we use our opponent's strength and momentum against him and to our own advantage. Thus, we strive to achieve the first tenet of judo. What is that, class?"

The class responded, "Maximum efficiency with minimum effort!"

Sensei Gibson, said, "Very good. We bow to one another before and after competing or practicing together to show our respect and appreciation for our partner's

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 second tenet of judo. What is that, class?”

The class responded, “Mutual welfare and benefit!”

“Yes,” Sensei Gibson said. “Now, lastly, and most importantly, we judoka strive to do what?”

The class responds, “We strive to make society better through the perfection of ourselves!”

I was thoroughly impressed.

The first 20 minutes of the workout were taken up with warm-up exercises—calisthenics and stretches designed to increase our flexibility, strength, and grace of movement. Next, we practiced several ways of taking a fall without hurting ourselves. Even though judo is practiced on thick mats called *tatami*, it is still possible to be injured badly if you fall improperly when tripped or thrown. Familiarity with these brake falls, or *ukemi*, can come in handy anywhere that a person, sighted or visually impaired, might accidentally slip and fall. Next, came instruction in actual judo techniques of self-defense. Through precise verbal description and hands-on demonstration, I was taught how to execute the major hip throw, called *o goshi* in Japanese. My partner and I then spent 10 or so painful minutes repeatedly throwing one another to the mat. Next, we learned how to follow up the throw by taking control of an opponent on the ground with a mat hold. In this case, it was the *kesa gatame*, or scarf hold. My partner and I took turns allowing the other to firmly pin us with the *kesa gatame*, then struggling for 30 seconds, with all our might, to escape the hold. Maintaining the pin took nearly as much effort as trying to break it. After several muscle-straining rounds of this, I was dripping with sweat. The most exciting and dangerous part of the class was saved for last. It was called *randori*, or standing sparring. Unlike sparring in boxing or karate, no punches or kicks are thrown in judo. In *randori*, you attempt to throw your partner to the mat with force and control while he or she is trying to return the favor at the same time. Even though I knew only one throw, Sensei Gibson encouraged me to mix it up with all

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, don't forget to slap the mat when you fall. You don'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 lighter. Feeling like I'd just been taken advantage of, I said, "That's cool and all, but I think you little white boys are having way too much fun body slamming the big black dude." We all laughed, but I vowed to myself, "One day I'm going to make you guys pay for this pain." By summer's end, I had gotten good enough to give back as good as I 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 Nishioka's 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, listening to the controlled chaos in this gymnasium, my confidence has vanished like vapor. This is not why I got into judo. I would be perfectly content to limit my brawling and body slamming to the practice floor. Unfortunately, Sensei Nishioka's judo class is an accredited college course and he requires students to submit a term paper at the end of the semester. The only way to avoid writing a term paper is by competing in a tournament during the semester. I'm a full-time English major here at the college, and because of that I have more than enough term papers to write. I initially welcomed this opportunity to avoid writing another one. Now, I'm regretting it. When the match in progress is over, I'm going to have to conquer this debilitating fear.

A buzzer sounds, indicating that time has expired for the match on mat three. There's a smattering of applause as the competitors separate and return to center mat. They will straighten their uniforms, bow to one another, step backward to their starting lines, and await the referee's decision.

Somewhere on the far side of the mat, I imagine my opponent looking on. Beyond his name, weight class, and *dojo*, I don't know a thing about him. I don't even know how he's built. Is he tall and skinny or short and stocky? That little bit of information could at least give me an idea of what judo techniques he might prefer. I'm feeling in the dark in more ways than one, and there's no one here to ask. The spectators applaud as the referee announces the winner and the players turn and exit the mat.

Someone approaches me and says, "Manning, you're up. Are you ready?" I can only nod. He continues, "I'll lead you out to your starting line."

I take hold of his elbow and we walk side by side. At the edge of the mat we bow before stepping into the competition area.

I think, "Mutual welfare and benefit."

We continue to my starting line, and halt. My opponent is totally silent. I imagine he's standing at his line, five feet in front of me. I can hear the referee's breathing, midway between us, slightly to my right.

My guide whispers, "Good luck," and I hear his feet recede back the way we came.

The referee says, "*Rei.*" And I bow. He says, "Step forward."

I do so, straining to hear the footsteps of my opponent. I'm praying that my terrified trembling isn't visible to the spectators in the stands.

The referee commands, "Arms up. *Kumikata.*"

I take hold of my opponent's sleeve and lapel, and he does the same to me. He appears to be close to my height and build.

The referee commands, "Arms down," then barks, "*hajime!*"

Spring loaded with fear, I whirl into action. I grab my opponent's right sleeve, snatch him toward me, drive my right biceps into his armpit, spin into position for a shoulder throw, and uncoil with enough explosive energy to hurtle us both into the air. The man slams to the mat, flat on his back, and I crash down on top of him. I've never thrown someone with such force before. I immediately roll out and scramble to tie him up in a mat hold.

The referee grabs the back of my *gi*, shouting in Japanese for me to stop. "*Matte! Matte!*"

I release the man on the mat. My heart is pounding. Blood hisses in my ears. The referee helps me to my feet, then tugs me toward center mat. I'm still trembling as I

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

The referee says, "*Rei*."

I bow.

He says, "Step back."

I do so.

He announces, "*Ippon!* Manning!"

The crowd roars and it washes over me in waves. My guide is immediately by my side, placing my hand on his arm and leading me off the mat.

He says, "That was beautiful, man. Beautiful!"

At the mat's edge, we turn and bow before stepping off onto the parquet floor. Once we're on the sidelines, he says, "Man, I'm so glad you slammed that jerk. When I walked you out to the line, he was standing there with his hands on his hips, grinning and shaking his head from side to side like he's thinking, 'This is going to be a piece of cake.' I bet that'll be the last time he underestimates a blind dude."

No one else there underestimated me either. Every match after that was extremely hard fought. My other opponents were determined not to be publicly humiliated like that first guy. Even so, I went on to win four out of six matches and placed third out of the seven competitors in my division. It earned me a bronze medal and a promotion to brown belt. It also got me hooked on the all-out combat of tournament judo. Whereas *randori* was a test of one's skills, tournament was a test of one's heart. The following semester, I joined the LACC Judo Team and, for the next two years, competed in team tournaments against sighted collegiate opponents all over California and the Southwestern United States. I was winning an average of two out of three matches when I graduated city college and had to quit the team in 1982.

I continued to compete in local, Los Angeles-area tournaments, but eased up on my five-day-a-week training regimen. By 1987, I was contemplating retiring from competition altogether, when Sensei Gibson informed me that blind judo was going to be included for the first time at the 1988 Paralympic Games in Seoul, South Korea. It

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, but I'd never heard of 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*, which includes those who don't fit the other categories. 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, 'the gentle way' has been a way of life.



Photography by Christopher Voelker

## Lynn Manning

Lynn Manning is an award-winning poet, playwright, actor, Paralympic Silver Medalist, and former World Champion of Blind Judo. In 1996, the Los Angeles-based artist co-founded Watts Village Theater Company (WVTC) in partnership with actor and community activist, Quentin Drew.

Manning's autobiographical solo play, *Weights*, most recently received a Fringe Review Theatre Award for "Excellence In Theatre" at the 2008 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Since its premiere in 2000, Lynn has performed *Weights* from Chicago to off Broadway and from Croatia to the United Kingdom.

His other critically recognized plays include, *Up from the Downs*, *Private Battle*, *The Last Outpost*, *Central Ave*, *Chalk Circle*, *Visitations*, *On the Blink*, and *Shoot*. Manning's very first play, *Shoot*, is included in the ground-breaking collection, *Beyond Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights* (Theatre Communications Group 2005). Manning is currently fine-tuning his second solo play, *Quiet As It's Kept* and writing a screenplay based on *Weights*.

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