

"Belo Cipriani's account of profound loss is both riveting and suspenseful, as we traverse with him into a new world."
—Amy Tan, author of *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Joy Luck Club*

BLIND A MEMOIR



BELO MIGUEL CIPRIANI

Out of the Darkness



Belo Cipriani Doesn't Let Blindness Stop His Pursuit

by Heather Robinson

Every athlete faces physical challenges, but what if overnight you lost a sense so fundamental to your existence that nobody would blame you for never playing again?

In 2007 Belo Miguel Cipriani was brutally attacked by people he had once considered friends. They beat him severely and left him bleeding on the street. The assault culminated with a boot crushing down on his head. Belo was immediately plunged into total darkness. Instantly, the world he had navigated so effortlessly became scary and unforgiving.

"I had to learn how to do everything again, from grooming to walking. For us mobility is survival, if we take a wrong step we die," he said.

Belo spent most of the first year after his attack rehabbing and undergoing several procedures, as surgeons attempted to restore his sight. For his 27th birthday his dream came true and he awoke able to see the alarm clock beside his bed. "It was like 100 champagne corks popping at the same time," he said of the experience, which was the result of surgeons using silicone oil to reattach his

retinas. Two months later the magic glue came apart and he was dropped into darkness again. Belo realizes that at this point his traumatized retinas are probably beyond repair and that only stem cell regeneration offers a glimmer of hope.

During his sighted life, Belo loved to move and got involved with Capoeira at 12 years old. This martial art



originated in Brazil and combines elements of dancing, combat and acrobatics. It is played one-on-one to live rhythmic music while players kick, flip, sweep, feint and move with each other. The art form was originally developed as a stealth form of combat by slaves and was outlawed for many years by the Colonial government, because Capoeiristas were nearly impossible to take down in a fight. Belo was a natural acrobat and excelled at the practice, quickly learning to do back bends and walk on his hands. As a teenager he earned the nickname Cheiroso, which means fragrant in Portuguese, because of his enthusiastic use of cologne.

After he lost his sight, finding a Capoeira studio that was willing to train him was not easy. Belo contacted several before he finally found the United Capoeira Association in Berkeley, Calif., and connected with Bira Almeida, or Mestre Accordian as he is known to his students. This master teacher is a tall, fit older man with the quiet calm of an expert with nothing to prove. During lessons the Mestre stays close to Belo, using his hands, body and voice to deliver constant cues.

“I still play Capoeira, but it affects everything when I train or do the drills.”

Belo accommodates for his lack of vision by listening, focusing in on the other players breath and the sound of the floor squeaking.

Performing Capoeira requires power, stamina, agility, grace and creativity. “You need to be somewhat of a composer. When you’re playing with someone you’re

almost writing your own little short story,” said Belo.

According to Belo, once a student learns the standard moves he or she can rework them to make them their own. Each Capoeirista can create their own signature moves and infuse their own style into each game. He views playing Capoeira as a dialogue between two people with no limit to the potential movement vocabulary.

Since losing his sight this free-flowing conversation has been interrupted, though not ended. “Before, I was concerned with what I was going to say with my movement. Now I’m just concerned with maintaining the conversation.”

“There’s always something after nothing. The only thing that has no solution is death.”

Since the attack Belo has channeled much of his creative energy into writing. His recently released memoir *Blind* chronicles his first two years living with a vision impairment. “What most people know about blindness is outdated. I really wanted to contribute to the blindness community.”

He was inspired by the lack of literature from newly blinded



adults learning to navigate and assimilate into the world again. His book explores the nuts and bolts of recovering from tragic loss, both physical and emotional, says Belo. “There’s always something after nothing. The only thing that has no solution is death.”

There are a lot of misperceptions about blindness and disability in general that Belo hopes to combat with this writing. High on his list is the “bionic myth,” or the belief that if a person loses their sight their hearing and other senses will immediately develop to superhero proportions. Though he does acknowledge that his other senses have changed—for example he now appreciates good beer and wine—the shift is not as radical as many people perceive it to be. He is also not too keen on the way that disabled people are stripped of their sexiness by the media, literature and popular culture in general.

Though it is easy to focus on trying to understand this senseless violence that caused his blindness, Belo's story has moved beyond that awful day. He is now focused on learning to move in the world as independently as possible. Along the way he has discovered that patience and trust are two tools that are imperative for his survival and he works hard to cultivate both of these virtues. The attack that took his sight made trust difficult, while patience was never his strong suit.

"There's a lot of planning involved. I just can't be spontaneous," said Belo. There is a flip side to this limitation though. "Things don't come as easily, but it helps me to know what I really want to do," he said.

Everything for Belo has changed since the incident and that includes his dating life. "It's so easy to get distracted by the visual. I've noticed that now the quality of people I'm dating is so much better. If I'm dating someone it's because I like their personality." Though he is currently single Belo

"I like the fact that Capoeira is really family-oriented. They've embraced me. I feel like this is something that everyone can enjoy."

is open to the prospect of a relationship. He is looking for someone who has passion and is happy with his life. Strong arms don't hurt either.

At this point he wishes he could do more Capoeira, so that he could improve his fitness as well as get more practice. The challenges of obtaining reliable transportation and his wacky freelance writing schedule make more regular practice difficult. Still he appreciates every moment he gets to spend on the mat.

"I like the fact that Capoeira is really family-oriented. They've embraced me. I feel like this is something that everyone can enjoy." ©

Order Belo's book, *Blind: A Memoir*, and read his blog at www.blindamemoir.com.

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