

# CHRONICLES

## CURSED *With A* BRAIN

By Steve Ramirez



I was cursed with a brain. I try not to think about it, but still, I think all the time. It's like having the wrong remote control for the television. It doesn't matter if I hit stop, pause, reset, or mute...I keep thinking. I tried meditation, but all I did was sit alone in the dark thinking about making sure I did it right. I'm thinking about trying it again someday.

Thinking isn't all it's cracked up to be. Sometimes, thinking can get in the way of doing. If we had to think about making our hearts beat or lungs breathe, none of us would last long. The things that we do best are always the things we just do...naturally. I remember when I was a kid playing football. If the quarterback threw me the ball and I thought about it, I would always drop that sucker. I felt like Charlie Brown....a lunk head. If I just did it, no thinking, just "in the zone," it was as if my armpit was magnetic. It was as if the ball was flying home all by itself. I always caught it.

When I was a teenager, I began to learn how to play the guitar. In the beginning, I would have to focus on where to place each finger, and how to hit the strings. It sounded like hell. Then after a while, I stopped thinking about it. I moved from chord to chord and song to song with ease. It came natural. Sometimes, especially when I'm playing Texas Blues songs, I feel inspired. I never play it the same way twice. It just flows from somewhere deep inside of me. It still sounds like hell, but I am having more fun doing it.

Later, I started practicing martial arts. In the Marines, I studied Tang Soo Do. Then after several years, I began the long journey as a student of Aikido. Aikido means, "The way of harmony." This may be true, but for me it was more often, "The way to pain and injury." I studied under a man named Akira Tohei Sensei. He was an amazing man. During the last test I took before him, I remember that he sat for hours, his legs tucked under him, knees bent, resting his body weight on the heels of his feet. I did not know then that he was dying of cancer, and that his hips were riddled with the mutinous cells. Hour after hour, he sat there, watching us demonstrate our skill or lack thereof. The pain and suffering that he should have been feeling did not seem to bother him in the least. I don't think he was thinking about it.

Did you ever notice that cows never worry about the butcher shop? They just eat grass, and munch

their cud, all facing in the same direction, or lying in the shade of a tree. I would make a lousy cow. I would ruin the whole thing, and none of the other cows would like me. I just could not help myself. Eventually I would walk up to the herd and say, "Hey ladies, do you know where this is all going?" I doubt any of them would even look up. Instead, they would continue to eat and sleep and I would be alone in the back 40 planning my great escape.

When you're cursed with a brain, it's hard to be thoughtless. The best things I have ever done, I did without thinking about them. For example, I joined the Marines because I felt it was the right thing to do- for me. Many people who loved me, and many who did not, thought it was a mistake. I was told that I would never do it; that it would be too tough. I served as a Marine for five years and they were some of the best years of my life. During that time, I learned what it was to be a part of something noble. I learned the true meaning of the words Honor, Courage, Service, and Love. During that time, I learned what it meant to be a man.

Later, when "life" was taking an ugly turn and all my thoughtfulness paid off with a big goose egg, I decided to go hunting in Africa. It was a childhood dream; the kind of thing that everyone says, "someday I would like to\_\_\_." Whenever I hear someone say those words, I know they will never do the thing they are considering. Instead, they will think about it, and find all the reasons why they can't, or shouldn't, and then they will go back to grazing. My African adventure made absolutely no economic sense, and it was worth every penny. I hunted and hiked from the Kalahari Desert to the Skeleton Coast. I climbed the world's tallest sand dune and slept beneath the Southern Cross. I laughed with Bushmen trackers and sang "the kudu song" with my professional hunter as we stumbled through the mopane bush at night. It is a good thing I didn't spend much time thinking about it. I did it, because I felt that my life would be so much the lesser without it.

The last decade, has been the toughest ten years of my life thus far. It has challenged everything I ever thought I had. During that ten-year span of time, I used my brain and thought about my decisions and actions and the consequences that could result. I played by "the rules" and followed the path that seemed expected of me, by society, by those

around me, by those I loved, by myself. In the end, I found it to be true that plans are worthless and that life happens to us as we plan. I lost so very much of what I had gathered over time, and yet gained what I had lost long ago. I lost my job, and my house, and my savings, and my retirement, and much of my former belief system. What I gained, was me. For the first time, I did not think about it; I just stood fast, at peace with myself, and let everything else be as it would be.

When things seemed at their lowest, I did something thoughtless. I signed up for my first 26.2-mile marathon run. The herd told me I was crazy, that I would never do it; but they were mistaken. Often, I have found that others will place upon me the limitations they place upon themselves; but those are just the cows. Still, I know that when I get to the back 40, there will be other bulls like me, not many, but enough; and together we will make our escape, not by what we think, but rather by how we feel. We will step forward toward freedom not by following the feelings of emotion, but rather by following the feeling of the spirit. We will step forward by following that rare thing inside us that, if we close our eyes and silence the outside voices clearly shows us the way.

I trained for months. I ran in the sun, rain, heat, and cold. I suffered up and down the hills. With each mile, I envisioned the moment when I would stand with 33,000 other souls who were completely thoughtless. Each mile I ran in training, and in the marathon, I was running inside myself. You don't complete a marathon with your feet, you complete it with your heart. You complete it, with your spirit. Each step forward is a step closer to yourself. The pain, the exhaustion, the elation, all let you know what it is to be alive, truly alive. I know this to be true. I never had to think about it.

As my life comes closer to its newest ending, and most recent beginning, I hope I can learn to be more thoughtless. To that end, I'm going to go stand in a river and wave a stick. I will cast my line back and forth over the water. I will listen as the birds sing. I will watch as the day slips by like a leaf on the water. I will cease to pretend that I understand this space in time, and in that moment, I will truly live. X

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