

# The Breath of Belief

A romance based on a story of faith, choices,  
and resilience

Luciano Gouvea

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Translated by the author with assistance from Mona Moraru

First English Edition

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## DEDICATION

To my family, especially my wife, Fábia, and my daughters, Júlia and Sofia, for their affection, patience, and inspiration. To my dear spiritual mother, Maria Helena Carneiro Catunda, for insistently reflecting on love and for showing me the way.



Where there is no love, put love and you will find love.

Saint John of the Cross

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## NOTE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

Since I wrote this book in 2013, many things in my life have changed. Today I live in Toronto, Canada. I now have friends and coworkers who do not speak Portuguese and always ask me about a possible English edition. My answer has always been that I am comfortable speaking English, but far away from writing naturally in this beautiful language. I then would add that I needed to find someone who could talk to me and together we would translate and maintain the original intention.

Well, I found this someone. I want to thank Mona Moraru for allowing this work to be the way I always wanted it to be: a collaboration. Her expertise and willingness to understand the intricacies of the text made this translation as truthful as the original.

Thank you very much, Mona. Now, I can tell all my English-speaking friends that my book has an English edition.

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## PREFACE

Luciano asked me to preface his book. Only the reciprocal esteem and admiration that unite us can justify such a request. For this very reason, I will try to be impartial.

Savoring a crescendo of interest, I read these revealing pages of a mature spirit appreciating the phenomena of life. A fiction on top of the real. Not a manufactured realism, but one suggested by everyday life in its superior aspects. It is, therefore, a serious novel. I could say mystical. This is because the author did not set out to write a story just to satisfy the taste for reading. He believes that we can discover, at every moment, the true meaning of human relationships as a path to the transcendent.

The language is correct and clear. The plot grows with each chapter. The reader feels drawn to the story. At the same time, one realizes that he or she is being invited into contact with the true meaning of existence. This is brought out by the behavior of the characters, especially the protagonist.

At this time, when hopeless but coherent people turn to spiritual values—but do so inadequately—Luciano's novel offers positive answers. This is not plot for plot's sake. The results of these pages, in a varied and rich dynamism, are spatial pictures, colors, and attitudes never before seen. The reader wanders through Europe with the protagonist. With him, he gets to know or reminisce about the history of the Old World, while learning how to live.

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At the end, you will not have just one more book in your hands. There will remain in your spirit a questioning and a hope. A soft wind will kiss your face. You will see that life is beautiful. And worthwhile!

Maria Helena Carneiro Catunda

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## CHAPTER 1

Dreams are the driving springs of science. They appear in the form of crazy things that wander in consciousness, on the bridge between the possible and the impossible. Dreamers are the people who move the world, even a millimeter, but a millimeter forward. Dreaming is part of the process of understanding the infinite complexity of events that built us, just as we are. And may you use your spectacular combination, in the best possible way, to turn your most ambitious wishes into reality.

Your friend, David Gladwell

“Come in, John,” David said, waving his hand. “I wrote something for you, some words of farewell. It’s better than Edgar Allan Poe’s writings.” He smiled, handing his friend a closed letter.

“Okay. If it’s that good I’ll publish it and never mention your name,” John smiled back. “Thanks, David, I’ll take my time reading it when I get home. I don’t want you to see me crying.”

“Ah, it wouldn’t be the first time, remember? You cried with nervousness before you presented your doctoral thesis. And then you got a perfect mark.”

They both smiled.

“Changing the subject, unfortunately, I have some very bad news for you,” said David, asking his pupil to sit down.

“Am I going to Brazil by rowboat?” replied John, knowing that David was joking.

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“Worse, you will miss the inauguration of the barbecue grill at home. I will have a party and you will be in the middle of the woods wondering why you chose to spend three years of your youth killing mosquitoes.”

“Said the one who spent eighteen months living in an igloo to study the native people of the North of Canada,” answered John, pointing to a photograph on the wall.

“At least there are no mosquitoes there.”

“Don’t worry about me. You know I need this time to gain confidence so I can see something pure and real. And, yes, missing the barbecue at your place by the lake will be tough, but I have to go,” he replied, getting up.

“I’m not worried about you, I’m worried about me. What am I going to do without my right arm?” he joked, squeezing his friend’s hand.

“Ha! Ha! You’re left-handed, David, you’ll be fine.”

“Good luck with everything. If you need anything at all, you know where to find me.”

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John Phillip Moore was born in Ottawa, Canada’s capital, in October 1980. At the age of twenty, he graduated in anthropology from the University of Toronto, where he soon earned his master’s and doctorate degrees. The focus of his graduate studies was religious manifestations in diverse cultures, with an emphasis on Indigenous

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communities. He became, at the age of twenty-five, one of the youngest professors ever to be tenured.

In early 2007, he was fascinated by the research of Karl von den Steinen, the reveries of Percy Fawcett and his lost city, and the sensitivity and studies of the Villas-Boas brothers.

His first contact with Orlando Villas-Boas's notes and his dedication to Indigenous peoples made him eager for some experience that would take him outside the classroom. He read everything that had been translated into English and greatly respected the zeal with which the Villas-Boas brothers had treated their research, even when they'd made mistakes in the process of interacting with these peoples. The imperfect heroes populated his dreams of studying the complex relationships of Indigenous people, especially the religious aspects.

That year, with the support of his university, he conceived a research project that would lead him to spend some time studying the tribes in Xingu Indigenous Park, located in the state of Mato Grosso, in the southern Brazilian Amazon. More than five thousand Indigenous people from fourteen different ethnic groups, divided into four large families, lived in the reserve, created by the Villas-Boas brothers during the Roncador-Xingu expedition with the support of anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, marshal Candido Rondon, and sanitarian Noel Nutels. Immeasurable material for John's study.

With the details settled with the Brazilian government, John rented his apartment in Toronto and traveled to Brazil. Straight from the biggest city in Canada to the Xingu, a rustic region with almost no comforts. He settled into a small three-room masonry house, with exposed bricks painted a rough yellow ochre. The floor was made out

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of a not-so-smooth red cement. There were insect screens on the windows to keep out the fury of the mosquitoes and a makeshift roof that made him shiver with fear every time there was a heavy rain. Transient professors, researchers, and the personnel involved in providing medical support to the natives were lodged in the village of identical houses. It was in this environment that he learned to communicate with the natives and to speak Portuguese, which he was able to study with some of the teachers who worked in the area.

As part of the agreement, John had to report all the data collected to the Brazilian government. In addition, it was necessary to negotiate the limits of his incursions directly with FUNAI—the National Indian Foundation—the agency whose constitutional obligation was to protect the welfare of these peoples. John had a limited amount of time to live there and should, by law, interfere minimally in the day-to-day life of the communities. In a little more than six months, he was already speaking Portuguese almost fluently, despite his strong accent. Speaking French helped him less than he had anticipated, and at first every interaction was tiring, as he was shy and afraid of making mistakes. As the time went by, he went from being tolerated to accepted. Gradually, John began to be asked by the natives to participate in the daily activities of the tribes. The time he spent with them increased, until he was allowed to stay with the tribe almost the whole day. The religious, shamanic rituals, initiation into adolescence, purification, birth, marriage, were all documented and analyzed from a unique perspective. The researcher drew parallels with universal archetypes, Greek mythology, and the legends of native peoples around the world. At the end of the study, he was beloved by the community,

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who, as a surprise, prepared a choreographed dance, which was performed just before his farewell. Excited, John absorbed every detail of the ceremony. He would later make an affectionate album that he kept in a drawer next to his bed, to look at whenever he missed that time.

Three years, more than six hundred pages of research, and one bout of malaria after he'd left, John returned to his hometown. He was much more ruddy and several pounds lighter, a result of the conditions on the reserve. The constant sun and heat, the different food, not always abundant, had stolen some numbers from his clothes. He returned the same weight he'd been as an adolescent, almost unrecognizable. He had, however, fulfilled the duty for which he'd set out. His postdoctoral work received acclaim at the University of Toronto and was not restricted to Canadian limits. After publication in one of the most important journals in his field, there were a great number of invitations. He presented his results in the United States, England, Australia, France, and Germany.

Informally, John referred to that period as “the experience of a lifetime.” When talking about it, it was impossible not to notice a nostalgic gleam in his small, black eyes.

His lectures were sincere and full of emotion. With a deep and secure voice, he eloquently narrated his brief but intense interactions and emphasized, since this was the object of his work, the thought and the form of religious expression in Indigenous cultures. He pointed out the representation of eternal, ancient archetypes, similar to those in other civilizations. The native legends were elaborate, complex, filled with symbolism as rich as that of Greek mythology. All found in tribes

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isolated for hundreds of years, without any or hardly any interaction with the white man.

The presentations flowed smoothly, and even though he repeated them several times, he did not do so painfully. The audience could feel the smile in his voice as he spoke. It was a pleasure to listen to him. John left a space at the end of his lectures for questions, which brought a unique component to each session. The next presentation, however, would be the most interesting one for him.