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NextGen Academy
*Change the World Through
 Personal Transformation*

Martha Graham and the Dances of Life

Jeff Adshead
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NGT Juice is a motivational and educational message sent out to pump you up with inspirational stories, quotes, testimonies, video clips, songs, and even home activities.

This Juice contains musings about the world of dance and one of the world's most acclaimed practitioners of the art form. As with all Juices, and everything other thing in life, it is not really just about dance. Everything can be a metaphor for something else. This Juice is about the unique voice within every person, the courage to keep trying, passion, and more.

It was over a soda at Schrafft's Boston restaurant in 1943 that Agnes de Mille asked Martha Graham for some advice. The two women were arguably the most celebrated choreographers of their time, women whose works still endure and influence others today. De Mille had just received what she called "unexpected, flamboyant success" for a piece (the musical *Oklahoma!*) she deemed only average after having received little recognition for art she felt was much better. De Mille had lost some trust in her ability to gauge her own abilities, and even lost faith in her ability to fulfill her own potential.

Graham told her that artistic satisfaction is elusive, but her continued self-expression was a calling she could not refuse.

"There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open... No artist is pleased. There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others."

Graham's commentary on dance, as well as her

signature style, were thoroughly preserved and propagated by a group of her dedicated protégés. Many of her most quoted sayings bear the mark of self-glorification, something found in all art forms as the practitioners seek to elevate the status of their form or genre. However, Graham often used dance effectively as a metaphor for life. Her forward-thinking choreography prioritized emotion over athleticism, which contrasted with ballet, as she sought to cast a “chart of the heart” onto the stage.

Take her pieces “Lamentation” and “Satyric Festival Song” for example:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npSXDzqwFJg>

Let’s take a look at some other things that Martha Graham had to say.

The body is a sacred garment...Think of the magic of that foot, comparatively small, upon which your whole weight rests. It's a miracle, and the dance is a celebration of that miracle. –Martha Graham

The human body is a wondrous thing. It can heal itself, it is a reflection of the cosmos, and it is the vessel that allows us to sail the seas of physical life. Dancing is a celebration, an act of worship of the sacred temple that is our bodies. Dances have been explicitly created to serve some spiritual purpose. Some are performed to please the gods; others are a mechanism to attain spiritual gratification. For example, the Mevlevi Order of Sufis in Turkey has a trademark way of twirling as a form of dhikr (remembrance of God). They are known as the Whirling Dervishes:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_Km4j36khA
Whirling Dervishes

Great dancers are not great because of their technique, they are great because of their passion. –Martha Graham

In fact, there can hardly be technique without passion or the freedom to fully feel the emotion at hand. What goes on in the head or the heart is not separate from what occurs in your body. The range of a person’s physical movement only goes as far as their willingness to tap into a particular emotion. Athletes hype themselves up, and sometimes even get angry, to improve their performance (some Ignite activities have been wonderful explorations of this idea). Similarly, dancers have to feel free to dance freely. That freedom or delight or pain must be felt authentically. Putting on a happy or sad face won’t fool everyone all the time—in a dance or in life. Humans are

empathic. We read body language to detect emotion, but we also sense other signals of emotion from other people. The following contemporary dance is an example of all this, and the judges' critiques confirm it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKkpc4tbIso>
Contemporary Dance

The body is your instrument in dance, but your art is outside that creature, the body. –Martha Graham

Similar idea. The dance is but a physical manifestation of an unseen process. Improvisational dance is conceptually fascinating because in it we can see, in real time, the immaterial vision of the dancer become material. In every moment of the dance the creator, creative process, and creation are all evident at the same time and fused together into a seamless union. Check out these krumpers free-style battle each other. It's pretty buck (in other words, good):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6hl04JoTwY>

Krumping

How can you relate these lessons about dance to your own creative endeavours? Do you feel that you are absolutely unique and that what you have inside of you might be worthy of expression? Do you feel unity between your heart, mind, and body?

Take a moment to digest the message above and identify key points or ideas that resonate with you.

Thank You,

From your friends at [NextGen Trainings](#)

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