

## **From Art to Cultural Diplomacy: Martha Graham Uses Dance as a Communication Vehicle**

By: Katherine Hsu

Martha Graham, celebrated as the “Picasso of Dance,” perceived her dance performances as a form of communication, articulating, “Dance was first because . . . it’s communication . . . communication a feeling, a sensation to people.”<sup>1</sup> Emphasizing new techniques, her dances – underscored by the release and contraction within the breathing cycle – symbolized life and expressed dramatic tension to the audience. Graham revolutionized modern dance into a medium of cultural diplomacy, using it to express Americana themes that promoted the United States’ democratic origins and development into a twentieth-century nation. Transforming dance from mere entertainment into a potent communication tool, she utilized her unique techniques to convey poignant narratives, promoting Western values of freedom and inclusivity. Her visionary approach reshaped international perceptions of America and continues to influence the use of cultural diplomacy’s soft power tactics today via the arts.

In 1894, when Graham was born, ballet, the prevailing dance style, was primarily a form of pure entertainment. With its “standardized esthetic approach,” ballet incorporated classical lines and repetitive movements.<sup>2</sup> A paradigm shift ensued with the advent of Symbolism, a modern dance which championed a freer style, paralleling the New Women's movement in society, where women were gaining independence. Popular in the 1920s, dancers focused more on how one's body uniquely moved in bare feet, breaking away from constraining ballet shoes

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<sup>1</sup> Foulkes, Julia L. *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey*. University of North Carolina Press, 2006, 46; Martha Graham, “Martha Graham Reflects on Her Art and a Life in Dance,” *The New York Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index, March 31, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> John Martin, “The Dance: New Standards: Modern Forms of the Art and Its Technique,” *The New York Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index, X6, June 1, 1930.

and tight corsets.<sup>3</sup> Isadora Duncan was at the forefront, embracing dance to “express the truth of my being in gesture and movement.”<sup>4</sup> Training under Ruth St. Denis, another renowned dancer, Graham flourished, learning to improvise and express her individuality through deliberate gestures, becoming “of the best in the new movement” of modern dance.<sup>5</sup> As a leading figure in the modern dance revolution, Graham pioneered an era where dance evolved beyond entertainment into a robust medium for social expression, setting the foundation for her future role as a cultural ambassador.

In line with Graham's philosophy of dance as a form of communication, her performances served as a form of artistic expression that also conveyed profound messages, including emotions. This was unlike classic ballet dances, such as *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*, that weaved narrative tales. Transcending Symbolism, *Lamentation*, debuted in New York City on January 8, 1930, where Graham's choreography explored grief, a “universal” emotion, by utilizing tension in her movements. Throughout the dance, Graham remains seated, her movements restrained by the tubular purple jersey costume, revealing only her feet and face (see Appendix B). Her poignant struggle with her garment evoked powerful emotions, which resonated with audience members; one of whom shared that the performance enabled her to finally mourn her son's death after many months.<sup>6</sup> Graham's modern dance style allowed the dancer to reinvent herself and echo everyday life experiences, which became an appealing and effective message as a cultural diplomacy tool.

Martha Graham's dance production, *American Document*, utilized dance as a new form of communication medium to encapsulate and project American ideals and history – a pivotal step

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<sup>3</sup> "Loving Cup For PavLowa: Fellow Artists And Patrons Give Dancer an "Au Revoir Memento."” *The New York Times (1857-1922)*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index, Apr 26, 1922, 28.

<sup>4</sup> Isadora Duncan, *My Life*; (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, Copyright renewed 195), xxxiii.

<sup>5</sup> Martin, “The Dance,” X6.

<sup>6</sup> Martha Graham, *Blood Memory* (Doubleday 1991), 118.

in her journey to becoming a cultural diplomat. Created during the backdrop of the Great Depression, *American Document* uniquely focused on American life's complex reality by depicting both the noble and scandalous aspects of American history, encapsulating Graham's conviction that "[a] dance reveals the spirit of the country in which it takes root."<sup>7</sup> Premiering in 1938 in the Vermont State Armory, the *American Document* not only showcased the Declaration of Independence and Emancipation, but it also portrayed a Native American mourning land loss, an astonishing message as this part of American history was rarely depicted during this time period.<sup>8</sup> Thus through productions like *American Document*, Graham wielded her modern technique to articulate Americana's ideals of individuality, democracy, and freedom of expression. Her subsequent performance of *Appalachian Spring*, an ode to the American frontier, at the Library of Congress in 1944 served as a springboard for her selection as a cultural ambassador advocating American nationalism internationally.

Graham, considering engagement integral for effective communication, believed the audience's reaction and understanding were as equally important as the message conveyed by the dance itself in creating a two-way dialogue. Demonstrated in responses to the *American Document*, critic E. McC from the *Dance Observer* underscored this duality in evaluating this art form, "the impact of a work of art on the public who will be its last judge." He gauged the *American Document* as a success based on the audience's reaction to the themes, "for it speaks of freedom, of democratic rights, of an inherent revulsion from injustice and exploitation . . . that is why the audience cheered, as they made their own vow that freedom shall not perish."<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Dana, a critic from the *New York Daily Worker*, also lauded the performance as,

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<sup>7</sup> Martha Graham, quoted in Maureen Needham. "I See America Dancing: Selected Readings, 1685-2000." 203-204, "Platform for the American Dance" by Martha Graham.

<sup>8</sup> Gervaise Butler, "'American Document' Reviewed," *Dance Observer*; (New York) 1938. [www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200154015/](http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200154015/).

<sup>9</sup> E. McC., "Martha Graham and Dance Group," *Dance Observer* (New York), January 1939. [www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200154078/](http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200154078/).

“*American Document* is important both because it bears a clear and unequivocal message and sets a new high in theatrical dance forms . . . destined to appeal to the masses of people.”<sup>10</sup> These reviews signified Graham’s achievement. Her portrayal of America’s history and ideals through dance won over audiences and garnered positive reviews, resulting in her selection as a cultural ambassador.

While cultural diplomacy can be traced to Ambassador Thomas Jefferson’s era, amidst the geopolitical shifts of the 1950s, marked a “golden age” for American cultural diplomacy, Martha Graham’s modern dance found its place in communicating the virtues of the United States. For the next 15 years after World War II, 36 independent new states emerged in Asia and Africa due to decolonization from European rule. These nascent nations aspired to modernize and enhance their living standards, attracting the attention of superpowers for their strategic locations and abundant natural resources.<sup>11</sup> This period was vital for geopolitical dynamics, as President Eisenhower believed it was imperative to counter the Soviet Union’s propaganda and prevent further conversion to communism, citing the “falling domino principle” at a news conference, noting, “we simply can’t afford greater losses.”<sup>12</sup> Consequently, Eisenhower established the Emergency Fund for International Affairs to support cultural diplomacy abroad and enacted the 1954 International Cultural Exchange and Trade Fair Participation Act, endorsing diplomatic initiatives focusing on democratic merits and “new American solutions” to twentieth-century problems with an accurate representation of everyday American life.<sup>13</sup>

Graham, whose modern dances conveyed universal emotions, timeless struggles, and a

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<sup>10</sup> Margery Dana, “Martha Graham's 'American Document' at Carnegie,” *New York Daily Worker*, October 12, 1938. [www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200154060/](http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200154060/).

<sup>11</sup> Leffler, Melvyn P. “Cold War and Global Hegemony, 1945-1991.” *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no. 2 (2005): 66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163766>.

<sup>12</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, “The President's News Conference,” The American Presidency Project, April 7, 1954, accessed January 16, 2021, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-491>.

<sup>13</sup> Geduld, Victoria Phillips. *Dancing Diplomacy: Martha Graham and The Strange Commodity of Cold-War Cultural Exchange in Asia, 1955 and 1974* (Taylor & Francis, n.d), 57-58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20749313>.

revolutionary technique, was an ideal fit.<sup>14</sup> Building on her relationship with President Eisenhower, Graham became a pivotal figure in Cold War politics, serving under five different presidents over 45 years as a cultural diplomat, reinforcing America's democratic ideals and modern solutions.

Advancing the concept of dance as a universal form of communication, Graham's performances reshaped foreign perceptions of America, transcending linguistic barriers. Despite skepticism surrounding her visits to anti-American countries, she left an indelible impression by communicating alternative perspectives, which led to the "opening of doors" between nations.<sup>15</sup> Namely, after her performance in India, a critic remarked that her dance, *Lamentation*, reshaped his perception of Americans as "fat, well-fed, cigar-smoking." During the 1954 Asia tour, the troupe captivated audiences in Japan, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Israel. Critics were enthralled, as Terry of the *Herald Tribune* encapsulated the success of Graham's tour, "Can a dancer win battles in the cold war? Martha Graham appears to be doing just that . . . with her art . . . she is serving her country brilliantly."<sup>16</sup> This passionate international response reinforced the State Department's premise that "dance is a language in itself which can transcend national boundaries and native language barriers." Local representatives and press also voiced enthusiastic appreciation for Graham's performances. The American Embassy in Tokyo extolled, "The uniquely American aspect of her art . . . was eloquent ideological testimony of America's cultural depth and vitality," along with a request for collaboration to learn Graham's modern dance style.<sup>17</sup> The *Times of Indonesia* also praised Graham's performance, "this talented woman

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<sup>14</sup> *Times of Indonesia*, quoted in Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate. *International Cultural Exchange and Trade Fair Participation Act of 1956*. February 21, 1956. Haithi Trust (100667963).

<sup>15</sup> Graham, *Blood Memory*, 202.

<sup>16</sup> Terry Walter, "Dancing Her Way to Victory," *New York Herald Tribune* (1926-1962), January 15, 1956, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Tribune / Herald Tribune.

<sup>17</sup> "Hope for America: Performers, Politics and Pop Culture." Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/hope-for-america/cultural-diplomacy.html>.

presented something of the United States that we could wholeheartedly approve of,” with an invitation to return.<sup>18</sup> The dancers also felt the importance of being abroad, leaving “their mark on every country we went to in some way, with somebody . . . with enough people that it was worth doing . . . . The people got a chance to see what was going on in our country.”<sup>19</sup> The inaugural tour’s success led to an extension and subsequent tours, with Graham traveling to more than 25 countries between 1955 and 1987.<sup>20</sup> Through each performance, Graham transcended national boundaries and language barriers with her unique artistic language, championing democratic ideals and elevating American culture, thereby fostering international collaboration.

A cornerstone of Graham’s success as a cultural ambassador stemmed from her diverse, inclusive dance troupe that communicated commonality with people of all ages, body types, races and cultural backgrounds, including Asian and African Americans. Graham purposefully incorporated stylistic elements from each performance location, fostering relatability for foreign audiences through shared identities. Graham described her dances as a fusion of many cultures,

“a great deal of what I do today is not only American Indian but also Mexican Indian. It is not that I tried to be either Mexican or Indian, but to gain the ability to identify myself with a culture that wasn’t mine. One begins to realize that all human beings are the same.”<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, her approach was reciprocal as she actively learned from the local culture:

“throughout the tour, the natives of each land gave to me the gift of their culture through the presentation of native dances. In the evening I tried to do the same.”<sup>22</sup> Her diversity-oriented troupe and integration of local dance elements shaped international perceptions by cultivating

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<sup>18</sup> *Times of Indonesia*, quoted in Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Hodes, telephone interview by the author, February 27, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Victoria Philips, and Heinrich von Herzogenberg, “*Martha Graham's Cold War: the Dance of American Diplomacy*,” (Oxford University Press, 2020), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Graham, *Blood Memory*, 144.

<sup>22</sup> Graham, *Blood Memory*, 206.

familiarity, making audiences more receptive to her dance messages of America's core values of diversity, freedom and inclusivity.

In response to the increasing global influence of youth culture and the recognition of younger generations as key agents of social change, in 1962 government initiatives began engaging younger audiences in cultural diplomacy efforts. Graham directed informal lecture workshops towards this younger demographic instead of offering more formal demonstrations to society's elite.<sup>23</sup> Her inclusive appeal enabled her troupe to successfully engage both elite and younger audiences, which Linda Hodes, a member of Graham's dance troupe, corroborated, "they all had a positive reaction."<sup>24</sup> By offering lectures and dance lessons to young local dancers, Graham facilitated the introduction of her modernist technique for use in their own choreography. The State Department heartily endorsed this one-to-one contact with local youth, who could disseminate messages and culture exchanges to future generations.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, by emphasizing her unique techniques, Graham not only further etched her mark on the global stage, but also ensured the continued propagation of American democratic values and ideals by providing the younger generation in these countries with a deeper understanding of American culture and opportunities for collaboration through dance lessons and workshops.

As a cultural ambassador, Graham also utilized dance to convey political awareness surrounding gender equality, further shaping international perceptions of America. She challenged societal perspectives on gender roles by making women integral characters and giving them leading roles in her performances. Choreography in *Frontier* and *Dances of Women* defied traditional gendered movements, placing women at the center of the narrative.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Phillips and von Herzogenberg. *Martha Graham's Cold War*, 168.

<sup>24</sup> Hodes, telephone interview by the author.

<sup>25</sup> Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War*, (Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 47.

<sup>26</sup> Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 46.

Additionally, Graham herself was a role model as a choreographer, teacher, and director of her own company, roles previously not held by a woman.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, her groundbreaking career and the empowering roles she created for women not only served to communicate to audience members the talent of female performers and women in general, but they also contributed to the broader diplomatic messages she was conveying, subtly advocating for Western values of equality and progress.

Graham's pioneering role in dance and cultural diplomacy was acknowledged nationally when President Ford awarded her with the Medal of Freedom, making her the first dancer and choreographer to receive this highest civilian honor. Even after her death in 1991, she continues to leave her mark, as influential dancers like Rudolf Nureyev, Mikhael Baryshnikov, Paul Taylor, and Merce Cunningham, who were members of her company, continue using dance to communicate opinions and ideals. Having danced for eight different presidents at the White House, Graham persistently impressed the importance of dance as a communications vehicle.<sup>28</sup> Her pivotal role in the evolution of dance was showcased in a 1998 documentary series, *The Power of Myth*, where Joseph Campbell lists Graham among the "individuals who were key to our civilization" and changed the way dance is seen today.<sup>29</sup> Graham's transformative impact on the perception of dance as a form of communication and her legacy in cultural diplomacy continue to inspire and shape perspectives today.

Graham's innovative modern dance style constituted a vital component of the broader soft power Cold War diplomacy efforts, uniquely communicating Americana through her dance technique indigenous to the United States. During this era, global trade fairs and exhibits showcased state-of-the-art American technology, while international sporting events amplified

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<sup>27</sup> Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 29.

<sup>28</sup> Graham, *Blood Memory*, 169.

<sup>29</sup> Graham, *Blood Memory*, 164.



America's might. Concurrently, American radio networks reached worldwide audiences, subtly disseminating American culture and values into communist-oriented locales. Other art forms like jazz embodied American democracy and civil liberties through African American musicians and accessible concerts attended by commoners.<sup>30</sup> For her part, Graham's avant-garde techniques symbolized America's contemporary problem-solving aptitude, with the potential to benefit third-world countries seeking to improve their quality of life. Conclusively, Graham's importance in shaping American identity was paramount as modern dance was "the one art uniquely American." This was pivotal in her service as a cultural ambassador for four decades.<sup>31</sup>

Reflecting the long-term implications of Graham's approach, her method of using dance for cultural diplomacy to articulate American ideals continues to be used as a soft power strategy today. While Hodes acknowledged that staging these large-scale performances abroad was costly, she asserted the importance of this exchange as "the people got a chance to see what kinds of things were going on in our country. And we got a chance to see what was going on in their country."<sup>32</sup> The prioritization of cultural diplomacy has fluctuated under different presidential administrations, typically gaining prominence during crises and receding during peacetime. Notably, it waned under President Nixon's presidency, as he and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, questioned its effectiveness, leading Nixon to transfer the cultural programs department from the State Department to a National Security Council subcommittee.<sup>33</sup> However, from 2001 through 2010, federal government funding for cultural exchange programs increased by 40%. This resurgence encompassed First Lady Laura Bush's 2006 "Global Cultural Initiative," which advocated for the use of arts, including dance, for "international engagement

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<sup>30</sup> Schneider, Cynthia P. *Cultural Diplomacy: Hard to Define, but You'd Know It If You Saw It* (N.p.: Brown Journal of World Affairs, 2006), 192, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24590653>.

<sup>31</sup> Geduld, *Dancing Diplomacy*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> Hodes, telephone interview by the author.

<sup>33</sup> Michael L. Krenn, *The History of United States Cultural Diplomacy: 1770 to the Present Day*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 142.

and dialogue,” and the State Department’s 2010 dance troupe tour to Africa, East Asia/Pacific, and South America.<sup>34</sup> The 9/11 attacks catalyzed a renewed focus on cultural diplomacy, particularly regarding the Middle East.<sup>35</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Clinton continued to advocate for “smart power” methods to enhance international communication, including the “Center Stage” public diplomacy initiative leveraging the arts.<sup>36</sup> While President Trump’s “America First” stance favored an exclusive focus on international economic trade and a diminished role for federally-funded cultural diplomacy, privately financed dance troupes like Battery Dance continued to tour and promote American culture aimed at youth audiences.<sup>37</sup> Recently, President Biden reinstated the Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, previously disbanded under Trump, underscoring his belief in its necessity for cultural and diplomatic efforts: “Cultural diplomacy is the linchpin of public diplomacy; for it is in cultural activities that a nation’s idea of itself is best represented.”<sup>38</sup> Overall, Graham’s introduction of dance as a novel form of communication altered the portrayal of the United States in foreign countries through cultural diplomacy, a practice still employed today.

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<sup>34</sup> “Mrs. Laura Bush Launches “Global Cultural Initiative” to Enhance U.S. Cultural Diplomacy,” Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC, Washington, 2006. [www./2001-2009.state.gov/p/af/rls/fs/73876.htm](http://www./2001-2009.state.gov/p/af/rls/fs/73876.htm); Kate Taylor, “U.S. to Send Visual Artists as Cultural Ambassadors,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2010. [www.nytimes.com/2010/10/26/arts/design/26friends.html?searchResultPosition=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/26/arts/design/26friends.html?searchResultPosition=1).

<sup>35</sup> Krenn, *The History of United States Cultural Diplomacy*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> U.S. Department of State Welcomes Haitian Performer BeLO to the United States, Brings Cultural Diplomacy to Main Street America, Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC, Washington, 2012. [www.2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/10/199331.htm](http://www.2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/10/199331.htm).

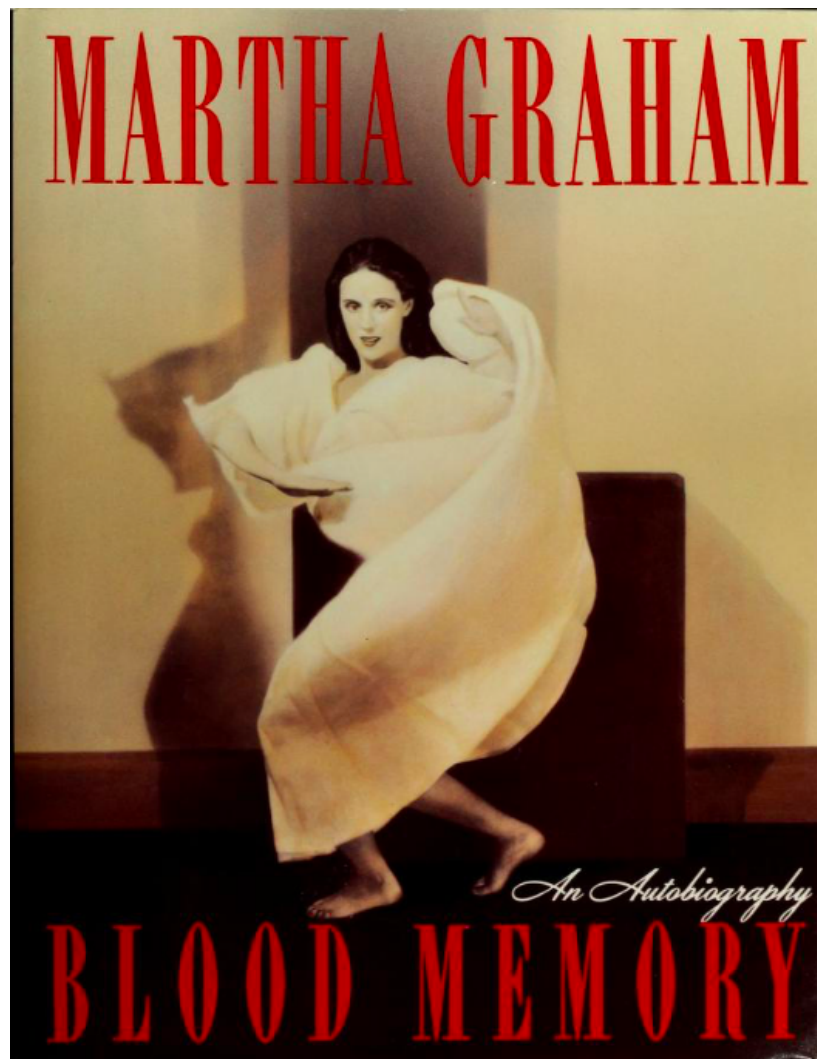
<sup>37</sup> Battery Dance: Global Programs. Accessed February 4, 2021. [www.batterydance.org/globalprograms/](http://www.batterydance.org/globalprograms/).

<sup>38</sup> Ables, Kelsey. “Biden Reinstates Arts Committee That Disbanded Under Trump.” *The Washington Post*, October 1, 2022; United States Department of State. *2005 - Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy*, September 15, 2005. [www.2009-2017.state.gov/pdcommission/reports/54256.htm](http://www.2009-2017.state.gov/pdcommission/reports/54256.htm).

## Appendix A

**\*Note: I used many primary sources to craft my analysis, but the main primary source document that guided my paper was Martha Graham's autobiography *Blood Memory*, as it allowed me to better understand her viewpoints and influences as well as how she used dance to communicate her ideals that formed the basis of her cultural diplomacy efforts. Since the book is over 250 pages and is not divided into chapters, I chose to include the first section of the book.**

Graham, Martha. *Blood Memory*. Doubleday, 1991.





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I am a dancer.

I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same. In each it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes shape of achievement, a sense of one's being, a satisfaction of spirit. One becomes in some area an athlete of God.

To practice means to perform, in the face of all obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire. Practice is a means of inviting the perfection desired.

I think the reason dance has held such an ageless magic for the world is that it has been the symbol of the performance of living. Even as I write, time has begun to make today yesterday—the past. The most brilliant scientific discoveries will in time change and perhaps grow obsolete, as new scientific manifestations emerge. But art is eternal, for it reveals the inner landscape, which is the soul of man.

Many times I hear the phrase “the dance of life.” It is an expression that touches me deeply, for the instrument through which the dance speaks is also the instrument through which life is lived—the human body. It is the instrument by which all the primaries of life are made manifest. It holds in its memory all matters of life and death and love. Dancing appears glamorous, easy, delightful. But the path to the paradise of the achievement is not easier than any other. There is fatigue so great that the body cries, even in its sleep. There are times of complete frustration, there are daily small deaths. Then I need all the comfort that practice has stored in my memory, a tenacity of faith.

It takes about ten years to make a mature dancer. The training is twofold. First comes the study and practice of the craft which is the school where you are working in order to strengthen the muscular structure of the body. The body is shaped, disciplined, honored, and in time, trusted. The movement becomes clean, precise, eloquent, truthful. Movement never lies. It is a barometer telling the state of the soul’s weather to all who can read it. This might be called the law of the dancer’s life—the law which governs its outer aspects.

Then comes the cultivation of the being from which whatever you have to say comes. It doesn’t just come out of nowhere, it comes out of a great curiosity. The main thing, of course, always is the fact that there is only one of you in the world, just one, and if that is not fulfilled then

something has been lost. Ambition is not enough; necessity is everything. It is through this that the legends of the soul's journey are retold with all their tragedy and their bitterness and sweetness of living. It is at this point that the sweep of life catches up with the mere personality of the performer, and while the individual becomes greater, the personal becomes less personal. And there is grace. I mean the grace resulting from faith . . . faith in life, in love, in people, in the act of dancing. All this is necessary to any performance in life which is magnetic, powerful, rich in meaning.

In a dancer, there is a reverence for such forgotten things as the miracle of the small beautiful bones and their delicate strength. In a thinker, there is a reverence for the beauty of the alert and directed and lucid mind. In all of us who perform there is an awareness of the smile which is part of the equipment, or gift, of the acrobat. We have all walked the high wire of circumstance at times. We recognize the gravity pull of the earth as he does. The smile is there because he is practicing living at that instant of danger. He does not choose to fall.

At times I fear walking that tightrope. I fear the venture into the unknown. But that is part of the act of creating and the act of performing. That is what a dancer does.

People have asked me why I chose to be a dancer. I did not choose. I was chosen to be a dancer, and with that, you live all your life. When any young student asks me, "Do you think I should be a dancer?" I always say, "If you have to ask, then the answer is no." Only if there is one way to make life vivid for yourself and for others should you embark upon such a career . . . You will know the wonders of the human body because there is nothing more wonderful. The next time you look into the mirror, just look at the way the ears rest next to the head; look at the way the hairline grows; think of all the little bones in your wrist. It is a miracle. And the dance is a celebration of that miracle.



I feel that the essence of dance is the expression of man—the landscape of his soul. I hope that every dance I do reveals something of myself or some wonderful thing a human being can be. It is the unknown—whether it is the myths or the legends or the rituals that give us our memories. It is the eternal pulse of life, the utter desire. I know that when we have rehearsals, and we have them every day, there are some dancers, particularly men, who cannot be still. One of the men in my company is not built to be still. He has to be moving. I think at times he does not know what he is doing, but that is another matter. He's got the essence of a man's inner life that prods him to dance. He has that desire. Every dance is a kind of fever chart, a graph of the heart. Desire is a lovely thing, and that is where the dance comes from, from desire.

Each day of rehearsal for a new ballet I arrive a little before two in the afternoon, and sit alone in my studio to have a moment of stillness before the dancers enter. I tease myself and say I am cultivating my Buddha nature; but it is really just such a comforting place for me to be—secure, clear, and with a purpose. It is that order of these elements together that led one writer to call dance “glorified human behavior.” I sit with my back to our large mirrors so that I am completely within myself. The room is a bit of a jumble; we are to leave on tour soon. Packing crates are lined up with those pieces Isamu Noguchi made for me that will travel with us, stenciled in black: APPALACHIAN SPRING, HÉRODIADÉ, NIGHT JOURNEY.

This studio with its worn floors, and its door that opens into the garden, means the world to me. When Lila Acheson Wallace presented it to me in 1952 it was a security to know I could work and have a home. Lila was a glorious being. She understood the divine turbulence within an artist, and had a way of supporting you without ever making you feel beholden or awkward.

I can never forget my first visit to her home, High Winds. When we

sat at the dining room table, Lila drank from a beautiful gold cup, given to her by the Egyptian government, which she told me came from Tutankhamen's tomb. Lila's husband, DeWitt, looked at me and said, "So, you're a dancer." He lifted his hand over my head and asked, "Can you kick this?" It was a formal evening, and I was wearing a Dior. I answered, "I can, but not in this dress." The memories of Lila visiting me here and giving me her acts of light as a friend often return to me in this studio; and other moments as well. They say that energy, once it is created and enters the world, can never be destroyed, it only changes. Perhaps that is why I sense so many presences in this room. 7

Outside my studio door, in my garden, is a tree that has always been a symbol of facing life, and in many ways it is a dancer. It began as a sapling when I first moved here and although a wire gate was in its way, it persisted and grew to the light, and now thirty years later it is a tree with a very thick trunk, with the wire embedded within. Like a dancer it went to the light and carried the scars of its journey inside. You traverse, you work, you make it right. You embody within yourself that curiosity, use that avidity for life no matter whether it is for good or for evil. The body is a sacred garment. It's your first and your last garment; it is what you enter life in and what you depart life with, and it should be treated with honor, and with joy and with fear as well. But always, though, with blessing.

They say that the two primary arts were dance and architecture. The word "theatre" was a verb before it was a noun—an act, then a place. That means you must make the gesture, the effort, the real effort to communicate with another being. And you also must have a tree to shelter under in case of storm or sun. There is always that tree, that creative force, and there is always a house, a theatre.

Trees can be the most beautiful things in the world, particularly when they are not in leaf. There is one tree where the road cuts through Central Park from the East to the West Side. Each passage I make during the

seasons shows it in a different aspect of becoming. When it is out of leaf, it becomes so old and so striking, rather like my favorite No mask, of an old woman who had once been very beautiful. Each time I see that tree I salute it for its power, and its mystery.

The spine is your body's tree of life. And through it a dancer communicates; his body says what words cannot, and if he is pure and open, he can make of his body a tragical instrument.

8 That tension, that intensification of a body in its stillness and in its movement, I feel reflected in our studio. At one time a creek ran through this property, and I believe the land still holds some of that hidden water. The Greeks felt that where there was a spring, a manifestation of the flow of life, there also was a goddess who could either be placated or offended. It is a strange force that at times seems alive under our building. Even in the studio, we have had a little shoot of plant life come up out of the floor just near the piano. It is another world and we accept it as a gift.

I am absorbed in the magic of movement and light. Movement never lies. It is the magic of what I call the outer space of the imagination. There is a great deal of outer space, distant from our daily lives, where I feel our imagination wanders sometimes. It will find a planet or it will not find a planet, and that is what a dancer does.

And then there is inspiration. Where does it come from? Mostly from the excitement of living. I get it from the diversity of a tree or the ripple of the sea, a bit of poetry, the sighting of a dolphin breaking the still water and moving toward me . . . anything that quickens you to the instant. And whether one would call that inspiration or necessity, I really do not know. At times I receive that inspiration from people; I enjoy people very much and for the most part feel it is returned. I simply happen to love people. I do not love them all individually, but I love the idea of life pulsing through people—blood and movement.



For all of us, but particularly for a dancer with his intensification of life and his body, there is a blood memory that can speak to us. Each of us from our mother and father has received their blood and through their

parents and their parents' parents and backward into time. We carry thousands of years of that blood and its memory. How else to explain those instinctive gestures and thoughts that come to us, with little preparation or expectation. They come perhaps from some deep memory of a time when the world was chaotic, when, as the Bible says, the world was nothing. And then, as if some door opened slightly, there was light. It revealed certain wonderful things. It revealed terrifying things. But it was light.

10 William Goyen, in *The House of Breath*, wrote that "we are the carriers of lives and legends—who knows the unseen frescoes on the private walls of the skull." Very often making a dance springs from a desire to find those hidden frescoes.

In Burma, on our second Asian tour in the 1970s, I had been asked to present flowers at the tomb of the Burmese Unknown Soldier. This I did in the presence of our ambassador and the Burmese minister of culture. When I had finished, there was a tremendous stir, great sounds of conversation. The Burmese wanted to know who had coached me to present the flowers in precisely the correct manner, steps, and gestures that would be appropriate to a Burmese woman of my age and station. No one had. Just as no one had taught Ruth St. Denis to touch back generations in East Indian dance to find the true path and spirit for her solos which even the Indians at that time had lost.

But for this you must keep your vessel clean—your mind, your body; it is what the Zen masters tell their students who get too full of themselves, too wrapped up in theory and too many thoughts. They ask them, "That is all very good; but have you cleaned your dish?" For the Buddhist student lived by begging food; and how could he receive it if his bowl was not clean? He is being asked if he is ready for his next meal. A clear instruction to get back to basics. It is so easy to become cluttered.

I think that is what my father must have meant when he wrote to me when I was away from home. "Martha," he said, "you must keep an open soul."

It is that openness and awareness and innocence of sorts that I try to cultivate in my dancers. Although, as the Latin verb to educate, *educere*, indicates, it is not a question of putting something in but drawing it out, if it is there to begin with.

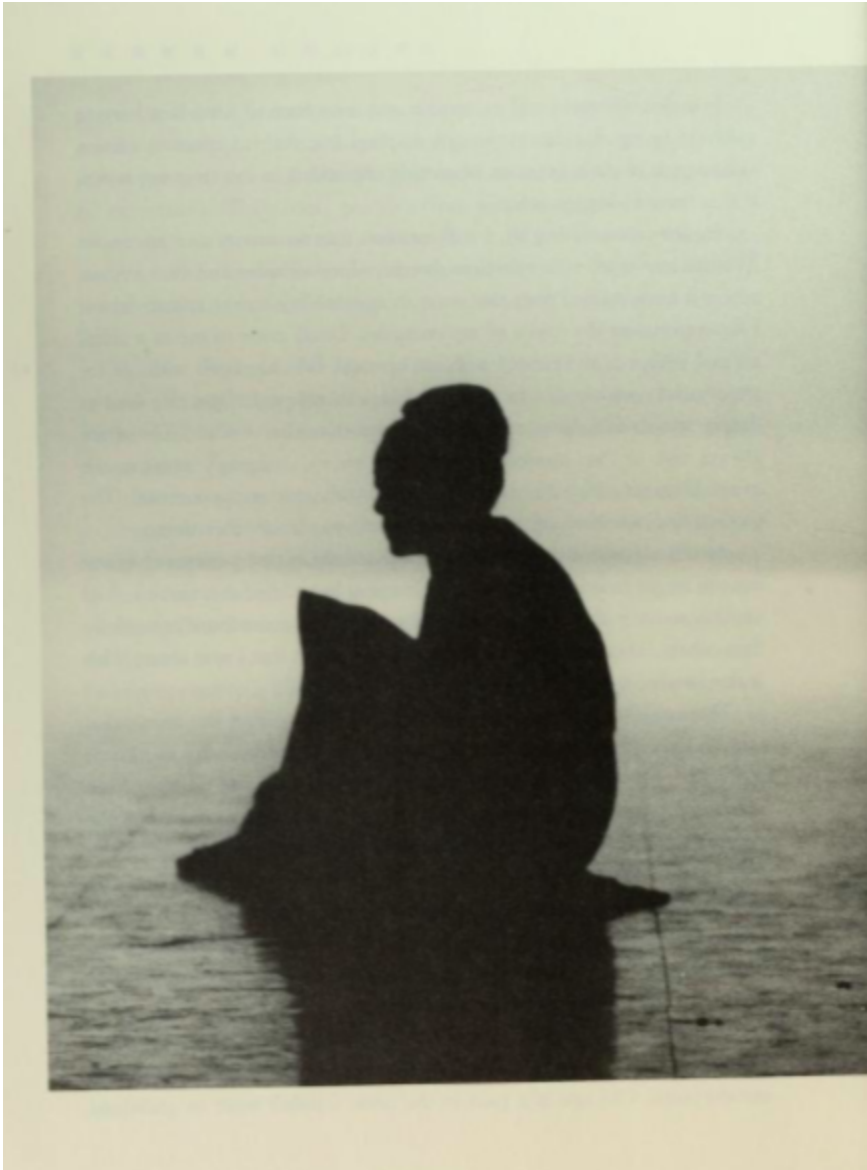
As our rehearsal begins, I will mention that sensitivity and openness. The dancers enter with associate directors Linda Hodes and Ron Protas, whom I have trained over the years to oversee my works and to whom I have entrusted the future of my company. Linda came to me as a child, trained with me, and danced with me onstage. Ron has been with me for twenty-five years and I have trained him in my technique. He knows deeply the roles I have created and can intuit what I want. There are always one or two dancers missing—an injury, a therapy session, the usual. Dancers today can do anything; the technique is phenomenal. The passion and the meaning to their movement can be another thing.

11

At times I will tease my dancers and tell them that perhaps they are not too bright today, that all of their jumping has addled their brains. And yet they move with grace and a kind of inevitability, some more powerfully than others. This moment of rehearsal is the instant that I care about. This is the very now of my life.

The only thing we have is the now. You begin from the now, what you know, and move into the old, ancient ones that you did not know but which you find as you go along. I think you only find the past from yourself, from what you're experiencing now, what enters your life at the present moment. We don't know about the past, except as we discover it. And we discover it from the now. Looking at the past is like lolling in a rocking chair. It is so relaxing and you can rock back and forth on the porch, and never go forward. It is not for me. People sometimes ask me about retirement and I say, "Retire? Retire into what?" I don't believe in retirement because that is the time you die.

The life of a dancer is by no means simple. It is comparatively short. I am not an example of that, but I could not do certain things beyond a certain point. Old age is a pain in the neck. I didn't want to grow old





because I didn't realize that I was growing old. I feel that it is a burden and a fearful thing and one I have to endure. It is not a thing to be treasured or to be loved. It is by any means a difficulty to bear.

When I stopped dancing, it was not a conscious decision. I realized that I did not have the strength or the ability to build into the interior and the soul of the artist. Before I began to dance I trained myself to do four hundred jumps in five minutes by the clock. Today, there are so many things I can't do. I get absolutely furious that I cannot do them. I didn't want to stop dancing and still do not want to. I have always wanted a simple, direct, open, clean, and wonderful life. That has been my time.

There are always ancestral footsteps behind me, pushing me, when I am creating a new dance, and gestures are flowing through me. Whether good or bad, they are ancestral. You get to the point where your body is something else and it takes on a world of cultures from the past, an idea that is very hard to express in words. I never verbalize about the dance as I create it. It is a purely physical risk that you desire to take, and that you have to take. The ballet I am doing now is a



risk. That is all I can say because it isn't fulfilled yet. I let no one watch, except for the dancers I am working with. When they leave I am alone with the ancestral footsteps.

Somewhere very long ago I remember hearing that in El Greco's studio, after he died, they found an empty canvas on which he had written only three words: "Nothing pleases me." This I can understand.

At moments I think that it is time for me to stop. I think of Mallarmé's image of the swan, the beautiful swan, who stayed too long in the winter water until the ice closed around his feet, and he was caught. I wonder, sometimes, if I have stayed too long. Perhaps I am just being afraid.

The American Indians thought that life existed in recurring cycles of death and renewal. Now I wonder if I am to begin a new cycle or if it is part depression, which is a part of doing anything. It is a part of the glory and part of the inevitability, the unknowing part as well.

I have rehearsals and I teach class. I travel with my company whenever I can and sit in the wings, usually with Ron, and give corrections that he takes down on his yellow pad. In the audience Linda and another rehearsal director do the same. And then the dancers receive their corrections.

Sometimes the dancers are fine and I say that they are. But sometimes they are not. They are offensive to the form of the piece. There are departures that are made, liberties that are taken, and I have to say no. I conduct the rehearsals and I demonstrate, and I teach class. It all comes down to this: if you put your name on something you should be there.

There is also the vital business of fund-raising. It is very much necessary. In today's world you can do nothing without money. You can have your dreams. You can have the image in your soul, but you cannot objectify it without the means. I rest insecure, not knowing whether my works will be filmed and preserved and whether we can meet the mortgage for our building. There is no Halston, no Lila to stand with me now and

to help me. And yet Madonna, one of my former students, has entered our lives and has talked with me and says we will find a way.

There are times when I return to my home near my school after teaching a particularly difficult class and I wonder where all the loveliness, all the awareness of the magic of the body, has gone. I think of the many times I've experienced certain strange happenings. Some were tales told to me by my parents, and some I remember. Always it seems to me that I was aware of a great curiosity about life, about the actions of other people, other beings. Something of what Empedocles speaks of when he says, "For I have been, ere now, a boy and a girl, a bush, a bird, a dumb fish in the sea." In other words some drops of memory of those past identifications flood over me—not reincarnation or transformation or anything of the kind. I'm speaking of the divinity of memory, the fragments of a memory, and those things of great value that we forget and that the body and the mind choose to remember . . . Emily Dickinson's "intuition picks up the key that memory drops."

15

What I miss some days in a dance class is not perfection, because some of them will never achieve that moment of technical expertise. I don't demand, at the beginning, any vestige of perfection. What I long for is the eagerness to meet life, the curiosity, the wonder that you feel when you can really move—to work toward a perfect first or a perfect fifth position. There becomes an excitement, an avidity, a forgetfulness of everyone about you. You are so completely absorbed in this instrument that is vibrant to life. The great French poet St. John Perse said to me, "You have so little time to be born to the instant." This I miss in class very much. I miss the animal strength, the beauty of the heel as it is used to carry one forward into life. This, I think more than anything, is the secret of my loneliness.

I do not feel myself unique by any means, but I do know that I agree with Edgard Varèse—and I'm going to use a word that I never use regarding myself or anybody else. And that word is genius. Varèse, a won-

derful French composer, who wrote some music for me, opened up new areas of musical strength in the way he used percussion that I had never experienced before. He said, "Martha, all of us are born with genius, but most people only keep it for a few seconds."

By genius he meant that curiosity that leads to the search for the secret of life. That is what tires me when I teach and I come away alone. Sometimes you will see a person on the stage who has this oneness with himself—it is so glorious it has the power to stop you. It is a common gift to all of us but most people only keep it a few moments.

I can never forget the evening I was staying late at the school, and the phone rang. I was the only one there and I picked it up to hear a mother ask about classes for her child. "She is a genius. Intuitive. Unique. It must be nurtured now." "Really," I answered. "And how old is she?" Her mother replied, "Two years old." I told her that we only accepted children at nine (today much earlier, thanks to vitamins and computers and home training). "Nine!" she cried. "But by nine she will have lost all of her genius." I said, "Madame, if she must lose it, it is best she lose it young."

I never thought of myself as being what they call a genius. I don't know what genius is. I think a far better expression is a retriever, a lovely strong golden retriever that brings things back from the past, or retrieves things from our common blood memory. I think that by every act you do—whether in religion, politics, or sex—you reveal yourself. This, to me, is one of the wonderful things in life. It is what I've always wanted to do—to show the laughing, the fun, the appetite, all of it through dance.

In order to work, in order to be excited, in order to simply be, you have to be reborn to the instant. You have to permit yourself to feel, you have to permit yourself to be vulnerable. You may not like what you see, that is not important. You don't always have to judge. But you must be attacked by it, excited by it, and your body must be alive. And you must know how to animate that body; for each it is individual. I remember the

great Russian ballet teacher Volkova, who had fled during the Russian Revolution and was teaching in Denmark. Interestingly enough, she never learned a word of Danish, only English. A young man did a series of extraordinary leaps across the floor. He looked back at Volkova for the praise he knew was his, and she said, "It was perfect. But too effective."

When a dancer is at the peak of his power he has two lovely, fragile, and perishable things. One is the spontaneity that is arrived at over years of training. The other is simplicity, but not the usual kind. It is the state of complete simplicity costing no less than absolutely everything, of which T. S. Eliot speaks.

17

How many leaps did Nijinsky take before he made the one that startled the world? He took thousands and thousands and it is that legend that gives us the courage, the energy, and arrogance to go back into the studio knowing that while there is so little time to be born to the instant, you will work again among the many that you may once more be born as one. That is a dancer's world.

My dancer's world has seen so many theatres, so many instants. But always I have resisted looking backward until now, when I began to sense that there was always for my life a line through it—necessity. The Greek myths speak of the spindle of life resting on the knee of necessity, the principal Fate in the Platonic world. The second Fate weaves, and the third cuts. Necessity to create? No. But in some way to transcend, to conquer fear, to find a way to go on.

How does it all begin? I suppose it never begins. It just continues.

A few years ago the newspaper published a list of hundreds of names, owners of unclaimed property held by a bank. The paper listed a safety deposit box I had taken over twenty-five years ago. The bank wanted two hundred dollars or they were going to take the contents to auction. My assistant went to Brooklyn to recover it. Inside, no cash or jewelry, but

## Appendix B



Moselsio, Herta. *Martha Graham in Lamentation, No. 4*. Photograph.

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