

## Graham, “An Athlete of God”

As heard on *The Bob Edwards Show*, October 9, 2009

*Legendary choreographer Martha Graham believes that dancing—like living—may look easy, but actually requires years of constant practice to achieve a sense of one's own being and a satisfaction of spirit.*

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 come shape of achievement, the sense of one's being, the satisfaction of spirit. One becomes in some area an athlete of God. Practice means to perform over and over again, 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. Many times, I hear the phrase, “the dance of life.” It is close to me for a very simple and understandable reason. 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 experience 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 that 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 and the tenacity of faith. But it must be the kind of faith that Abraham had, wherein he “staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief.”

It takes about ten years to make a mature dancer. The training is twofold. There is the study and practice of the craft 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, there is the cultivation of the being. It is through this that the legends of the soul's journey are retold with all their gaiety and their tragedy and the bitterness and sweetness of living. It is at this point that the sweep of life catches up the mere personality of the performer, and while the individual—the undivided one—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 of pull on 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.