

## COMMON GROUND, FOREMAN, BARNARD COLLEGE

Dance: Our Common Ground  
A Presentation by Donlin Foreman

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DONLIN FOREMAN, 20-year veteran of the Martha Graham Dance Company, was coached by Martha in all her major male roles, performed with Eliot Feld's Company and La Scala Ballet. Co-founder/director/choreographer of Buglisi/Foreman Dance (1993-2005), and presented six seasons at the Joyce Theater, two seasons at Jacob's Pillow, the Kennedy Center, the Melbourne International Festival; performed at the White House; critical and professional acclaim for performing and choreography. Professor of Professional Practice in Dance at Barnard College, Columbia University, has published *Out of Martha's House*, contributed to the Martha Graham issue of *Choreography and Dance*, *Dance Teacher* and *Dance Spirit* magazines; chaired the Dance Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts.

JENNIFER EMERSON FOREMAN is Co-founder of *On Common Ground* creating dance educational and performance collaborations. As a principal dancer for Buglisi/Foreman Dance, was instrumental in the creation of fifteen new works, rehearsal director, staged and coached signature repertoire. Emerson toured the US with the Graham Ensemble, receiving the Coca-Cola Award for Artistic Excellence, performed with the Graham Company, and implemented an arts-in-education curriculum for the Empire State Partnership program. She is on the Board of Directors for the Nest Dance Festival, Associate Artist of Knife, Inc, Hunter Dance/Theater, and PAMAR; on faculty at Barnard College, Usdan Center, and the Graham School; has been guest faculty at SUNY Purchase, Ailey, Neighborhood Playhouse, others.

## Abstract.

We intend to articulate a philosophy of dance, and its relationship to teaching within a Liberal Arts setting. We teach a technique that has evolved out of the lineage of Martha Graham, which derived from Denishawn, which had its roots in the works of Delsarte and myriad classic forms of ethnic and ritual movement practices. If we can get beyond the oppressive image of the Graham ‘contraction and release’ as an anvil and hammer, what we see is simply the human being - the breath, inhaling and exhaling, taking in and releasing, holding and letting go.

Students enter the classroom with many preconceived ideas about what dance is and varied levels of technical training. We stress that dance is something that lives within each one of us – that our process is to guide the discovery of our common language. The theme is: this is not movement you don’t know. This is movement you have known since you took your first breath, your first step – since you as a newborn held onto – or let go of - your mother or father’s finger. We demonstrate this philosophy both through movement series, and by drawing on diverse writings (Campbell, Jung, Rilke, Gadamer) and images from visual art (Blake, Kollwitz).

The physical process is primary, for it is in the experience of ‘the doing’ that allows us to understand, to know, and to be able to apply what we discover beyond our dancing – to our lives. The greatest challenge for students is not to achieve the tension (so closely associated with the Graham technique), but to fully engage in the opening. Our movement reveals the inner surfaces of the body – the inside of the hand, arm, leg, an open neck and chest – so that we may perceive our vulnerabilities. The practice of these movements is dangerous to the personality that wants/needs to remain guarded. It takes great bravery to be direct and clear. A student’s courage to fully explore this aspect of movement becomes their greatest strength. Imagery can help with this – that is why the writings and visuals are also brought in – but the body experiencing its own full potential is the greatest tool we have for reaching this goal.

The notion of the body politic, that society parallels the body, plays deeply in this work. It can either open or close itself, be vulnerable or rigid, have balance or not. Through this movement vocabulary these parallels become profound. Particularly working within the Liberal Arts environment, where class demographics are as diverse as our international community, it is important to find ways to touch each individual’s imagination, and help them to recognize what we all share – the instrument of the body and the medium of movement. This perspective can be applied widely – not only in the way students individually approach dancing, but also in how they relate to each other, and what they bring to the many other endeavors they will pursue in their lives.

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I danced with the Graham Company for fifteen years under Martha's tutelage (and for a few more years just for aggravation's sake). I teach a technique based on my work with Martha – it emphasizes the individual, the human being, and dancing as living. Martha is quoted as saying, “We look at the dance to impart the sensation of living, in an affirmation of life . . .”<sup>1</sup> Dancing, just as living, is full of contradictions, oppositions, embracing, releasing, breathing, seeing, hearing, feeling, focus, intent, and love.

*What can I tell you about dancing that you don't already know – something essential to your living? When the tide rises it brings wonders and dangers and on leaving, on receding, we realize the Things it left and the Things it took: another day, food, amusing stuff, our dead - our foot prints... an ocean moves through us, fathomless. Dancing moves through us; we do not go and put it on like a coat or a suit of clothes. I take a breath, and I move.*

*People can tell us that we are 'X number of centimeters' from the front of our bodies to our back, but for me there is no defining rule that pertains to my dancing body except for the great poetic imperative. Like poetry our movements have the possibility of ringing – re-sounding in the hollow places we find in this great armature of the body – and we listen... beginning to understand a feeling we had never heard before, like a bird's song we had never felt.*

*What can I tell you that you don't already know? We find our Joys where we stand.*<sup>2</sup>

I bring the depth of these things up because whether I teach a level II or level VI, I approach the work from the same point of view – from the point of view that movement speaks, and that by speaking it reveals us. Movement speaks through us and we through it; this is the

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wonder-filled duality in dancing. We are the dance and the dance is us. Beginners can approach their movement this way as well as the advanced dancer. I believe this.

When a student leaves my class I don't care that they remember a movement series, I care that they remember the images that grew up around that series. I am not interested in teaching them a "contraction" but in reminding them –allowing them to recognize – to re-discover the physical sensation of wrapping themselves around something, holding on to it and releasing it. They fold themselves in and in and in, like the kneading of bread into itself over and over again. And when they open out to the world, they touch forever by knowing it has always lived within them. The whole body becomes connected – from beyond the tip of the finger to below where our feet press into the clay of the earth.

Students enter the classroom with so many preconceived ideas about what dance is and widely varied levels of technical training. My goal is to guide the discovery of a common language. I say to them: This is not movement you don't know. This is movement you have known since you took your first breath, your first step – since you as a newborn held onto a finger that was placed in your hand. This is not Martha's movement and it is not my movement, it is your movement. It is movement that will serve you if you allow yourself to be immersed in it. The movement becomes your teacher. Do not feel subordinate to it but demand of it.

When we sit to begin class we are not subjected to this place – the place becomes ours. To reinforce this perspective, I tell a story of an article I read in the magazine Parabola that describes the oracle at Delphi as a great bronze three-legged caldron. The caldron has a lid on it and on this lid sits the goddess who speaks the oracle. It goes on to equate her sitting on this place with possession.<sup>3</sup>

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Joseph Campbell's writing also serve greatly to illustrate the images I bring to the classroom. In his article, *The Way of Art*, Campbell remarks:

Significant, also, is the idea of the Immovable Spot of the future Buddha - which corresponds to Black Elk's "center of the world," which is everywhere. It is not a geographical place, but the state of mind...<sup>4</sup>

Both of these quotes illustrate that the point from which we move and to which we move is ours.

Technique is approached not as a series of exercises, but as the deep investigation of body language, a physical wisdom, and emotional gesture. The work embraces the Jungian ideas of the archetype and the collective unconscious, and yields physical, emotional, and intellectual recognitions.<sup>5</sup> Connecting images to the movements of this technique, allows students to see how images from their own lives can inform the movements of this work. This personal intent brings inspiration, vitality and urgency to a movement. A single step or solitary gesture, imbued with a personal physicality, becomes dancing.

A student of mine from several years back sent me an email about a singular gesture of monumental proportions:

"I found this passage in the NY Times Magazine on April 10, 2005. The article is about John Paul II when he spoke in Poland many years ago."

"And in that first hour, or maybe half hour, he did something genuinely astonishing. With a million of us watching, he lifted his hands and cupped them over his face. It was nothing like a gesture of despair; he did not put his head in his hands out of unhappiness. He held his head high and proud so that it could be seen, and he left his hands in place covering it. The crowd watched him, presuming this would last only a few moments as he sought some undistracted purity for his prayer or his contemplation. We waited for him to lower his hands, but he did not. He stayed still, the world gazing up at him. What he did ceased to be a public gesture, but became instead intensely private. It was like watching somebody sleeping.

I do not know how long it lasted. Maybe 20 minutes; maybe half an hour. He was showing us his own inner life as beautifully simple as well as strange and complex."

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This technique is as much a training for life as it is a training for dancing. Probably 90 percent of the students I teach in studio courses will not be professional dancers - not that they can't, they just don't have any intentions of doing so. They are studying dance because they "love" it. Taking this into account, I encourage them to draw on their life experience as they dance, and to draw on their experience dancing throughout their lives.

I saw the watercolors and etchings of William Blake at the Tate Gallery in London when I was on my first European tour with the Graham Company in 1979. I thought these could be illustrations for Martha's technique. One of the most obvious of these was an etching of Blake's from *The Book of Job* 1825 Plate 6: of the devil smiting Job with sore boils and the figure of Job is in an exact "pleading" position from the Graham technique. Since then I have recognized many such similarities between great dancing and great art through the ages – from cave painting to contemporary assemblages of seemingly unrelated objects, fine art, philosophy, psychology, and poetry – all of these have influenced my work – performing and teaching.

In my first year of dancing with Ballet West a man introduced me to the radical idea that "we are our own authorities." I thought that was "neat" until I realized that when we truly adopt this idea into our living, it comes with a lot of responsibility. I try to impress upon my students that dancing is like that – not because we know it all, but because we are ultimately responsible for what we do and how we do it. It is about our choices. So by bringing into class and exposing students to many different kinds of writing from poetry to philosophy, they can see that physicality is given depth through intellectual as well as physical discovery.<sup>6</sup> One must take the authority to "do", not waiting saying, "is this right? is this right?" This point of view is not different in our lives.

Every student is capable of interpretation. An individual's emotions and experiences can

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rise through these movement series, but it requires two very important elements: courage and a sense that they have something to say, both to themselves and to others. The movement series I use in the classroom can help to bring conversations to the surface --- and dialogue becomes dancing.

The greatest challenge for students is not to achieve the tension so closely associated with the Graham technique, but to feel the strength inherent in the terrible beauty of their vulnerability as human beings. The individual must experience the infinite depth of closing to find the great range of opening. We embrace and we release that embrace. We take a hand into ours, fingers closed around another, and we let it go. My body expands as I breathe in and “contracts” as I give my breath out, like the ocean pulling the water from the beach back into herself and then releasing it again onto the shore. Our movement reveals the inner surfaces of the body – the inside of the hand, the arm, the leg, the throat and chest – we become vulnerable. And being vulnerable is considered most undesirable from national defense, to politics, to our own personal expressions. Being vulnerable is dangerous but as a dancer it is the only way we can truly develop the depth and breadth of our expressive qualities.

We live in a world of statistics, market defining mechanisms of demographics, political, corporate, and religious ideologies; ethnic and economic distinctions – we are immersed in the point of view of separating out different groups. We see it grossly demonstrated in the presidential primary coverage. We are being (if we haven’t already been) conditioned to see limitations and differences. However, through our Dancing the recognition of our shared humanity is transforming for the individual, and also for the community of the classroom.<sup>7</sup>

For this “recognition of our shared humanity” to be realized the physical process is primary, for it is in the experience of ‘the physical doing’ (the philosophy is truly in the doing)

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that allows us to know, and to be able to apply what we discover through our Dancing – to our lives. When I go to the studio I don't say I am going to dance or to choreograph – I say I am going to work.

Rilke's Rodin and other Prose Pieces expresses such a point of view of the “doing.” Rilke writes, “For the endowment of an object with life of its own does not depend on great ideas but upon whether out of such ideas one can create a daily labor...”<sup>8</sup> Here I love “daily labor” because before there is craft or art or beauty or expressiveness, first there is work. Rilke does not speak of the artist or art, but a daily labor as the essential aspect of greatness. The action of touching dictates the line, not the action of making a line that looks like I am touching something. Too often there is process for process sake. In the technique there is a lot to learn from process, but to work toward the goal of recognition through fulfilling intention is much more difficult, yet at the same time more enriching, more rewarding, and more fulfilling. This is our labor of love.

I grew up in the south – South Alabama – in the bayous around Mobile Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. For some reason, probably to keep kids from getting too close to the rivers and lakes, I always heard the same story from all the grown-ups. The story always went, “That creek (or pond or river) is bottomless! A man fell in there last year and they never found him. Don't go near it!” I grew up wondering if that pond or river had a bottom to it – it was very mysterious and dangerous. I later realized that the body too is mysterious and dangerous and is infinite in its depth and in its reach. I ask someone to take a high lift of the back. I take a pebble and drop it through their chest and we wait to hear if it hits the bottom – it never has. This is the poetic imperative.

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Within the Liberal Arts environment, where class demographics are as diverse as our international community, it is important to find ways to touch each individual's imagination, and help them to recognize what we all share – the instrument of the body and the medium of movement. At the end of her film, *A Dancer's World*, Martha proclaims, “Dance is the Heart of the Man.” Dancing is being. Through dancing we have always and will always discover our presence as individuals and as a community. But rather than the concept of “building bridges” to connect cultures and peoples, we attend to the human being whose strengths and vulnerabilities can be seen and felt in the palm of a hand that holds another. Through the body experiencing its own language we recognize humanity's common ground.

## Notes

1. Armitage, M, Ed: *Martha Graham: The Early Years*. Los Angeles: Da Capo Press. 1985, p. 103.
2. Gadamer, H: *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1986. pp. 105-115.  
Gadamer's discussion of poetry, and the notion that poetry stands on its own, with no need of justification, has become important to my personal philosophy of dance as being poetic in nature.
3. Freeman, M: Cauldron of Changes. *Parabola*. Vol 23:4, 1998.
4. Campbell, J: *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion*. Novato, CA: New World Library. 2002, pp. 89-118.
5. Jung, CG: *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. New York: Bollingen Foundation Inc. 1990.
6. The following comprise a list of selected works given as supplemental reading for technique and repertory classes I teach:  
Campbell, Joseph: *The Way of Art from The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion*. Novato, CA: New World Library. 2002.  
  
Gadamer, Hans-Georg: *The Relevance of the Beautiful, On the Contribution of Poetry in the Search for Truth, and Poetry and Mimesis from The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1986.  
  
Goldberg, Natalie: *Listening, What are Your Deep Dreams, The Power of Detail, Original Detail, We Are Not the Poem and First Thoughts from Writing Down the Bones*. Boston: Shambhala Productions, Inc. 1986.  
  
Koner, Pauline: *Elements of Performance*. Routledge, 1992.
7. Campbell, J: *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion*. Novato, CA: New World Library. 2002, pp. 89-118.  
Campbell says: "The way of the mystic and the way of the artist are related, except that the mystic may come to regard the world with indifference, or even disdain. Whereas the artist [and for our purposes – the dancer] who has been held by his craft in love to the world as it is, cannot but recognize, with equal eye, the dog, the eater of dogs, the slayer and the slain, -- whether in fascinated esthetic arrest, in pity (shared suffering), or sheer terror – something of himself." This illustrates the notion of recognition of our shared humanity.
8. Rilke, RM: *Rodin and Other Prose Pieces*. London: Quartet Books Limited, 1986, pp. 1-75.

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Inc. 1990.

Mitchell, Stephen, Ed: *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. New York: Vintage Books.  
1984.

Raine, Kathleen: *William Blake*. London: Thames and Hudson. 1977.

Rilke, Rainer Maria: *Rodin and Other Prose Pieces*. London: Quartet Books Limited, 1986.