

Martha Graham on the Hidden Danger of Comparing Yourself to Others

By [James Clear](#) | [Creativity](#), [Life Lessons](#), [Motivation](#)

Agnes de Mille had just achieved the greatest success of her career, but right now the only thing she felt was confusion.

She was a dancer and a choreographer. Early in her career, de Mille had created the choreography for a ballet called *Three Virgins and a Devil*. She thought it was good work, but nobody made much of it.

A few years later, de Mille choreographed a ballet named *Rodeo*. Again, she thought her work was solid, but it resulted in little commercial fame.

Then, in 1943, de Mille choreographed *Oklahoma!*, a musical show from Rodgers and Hammerstein that enjoyed nearly instant success. In the coming years, *Oklahoma!* would run for an incredible 2,212 performances, both around the nation and abroad. In 1955, the film version won an Academy Award.

But the success of *Oklahoma!* confused her. She thought that her work on *Oklahoma!* was only average compared to some of her other creations. She later said, “After the opening of *Oklahoma!*, I suddenly had unexpected, flamboyant success for a work I thought was only fairly good, after years of neglect for work I thought was fine. I was bewildered and worried that my entire scale of values was untrustworthy. I talked to Martha.”

Martha was Martha Graham, perhaps the most influential dance choreographer of the 20th century. (Although not as well-known by the general public, Graham has been compared to other creative geniuses like Picasso or Frank Lloyd Wright.)

During their conversation, de Mille told Martha Graham about her frustration. “I confessed that I had a burning desire to be excellent, but no faith that I could be.” [1]

Graham responded by saying, “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.”

The Uselessness of Judging Yourself

For nearly two years, I have been publishing articles every Monday and Thursday on [JamesClear.com](#). Some days the words come easier than others, and there have been plenty of times when I have felt a smaller version of what Agnes de Mille felt.

“I thought this was a good article. Why don’t people seem to enjoy it?” Or, I’ll feel like I mailed it in on a piece only to see it become the most popular post of the month. Regardless of the outcome, I’ve realized one thing: we are often terrible judges of our own work.

Martha Graham’s advice takes this concept a step further by explaining that not only are you a bad judge of your own work, it is not your job to judge your own work. It is not your place to compare it to others. It is not your responsibility to figure out how valuable it is or how useful it can be. [It is not your job to tell yourself, “No.”](#)

Instead, your responsibility is to create. Your job is share what you have to offer from where you are right now. To quote Pema Chodron, the Buddhist teacher, your job is to “come as you are.” (And then [find your inner Sisu](#) and keep coming.)

There are people in nearly every field of work who make each day a work of art by the way they do their craft. In other words, nearly everyone is an artist in one way or another. And every artist will judge their work. The key is to not let your self-judgment keep you from doing your thing. [Professionals produce](#), even when it isn’t easy.

Keep Your Eyes on Your Own Paper

In grade school, I remember my teacher passing out an assignment and telling each student to “keep your eyes on your own paper.”

Perhaps she was simply trying to teach 8-year-olds to not cheat, but hidden within that phrase is also a deeper message about what really matters. *It doesn’t make a difference what the person next to you writes down for his answer. This is your race to run. It’s your assignment to complete. It’s your answer to create. How your paper compares to someone else’s is not the point. The point is to fill the paper with your work.*

The same can be said of your work today. No matter what you spend your days doing, every morning you wake up and have a blank piece of paper to work with. You get to put your name at the top and fill it with your work.

If what you write on your paper doesn’t meet someone else’s expectations ... it is no concern of yours. The way someone else perceives what you do is a result of their own experiences (which you can’t control), their own tastes and preferences (which you can’t predict), and their own expectations (which you don’t set). If your choices don’t match their expectations that is their concern, not yours.

Your concern is to *do* the work, not to judge it. Your concern is to [fall in love with the process](#), not to grade the outcome. Keep your eyes on your own paper.