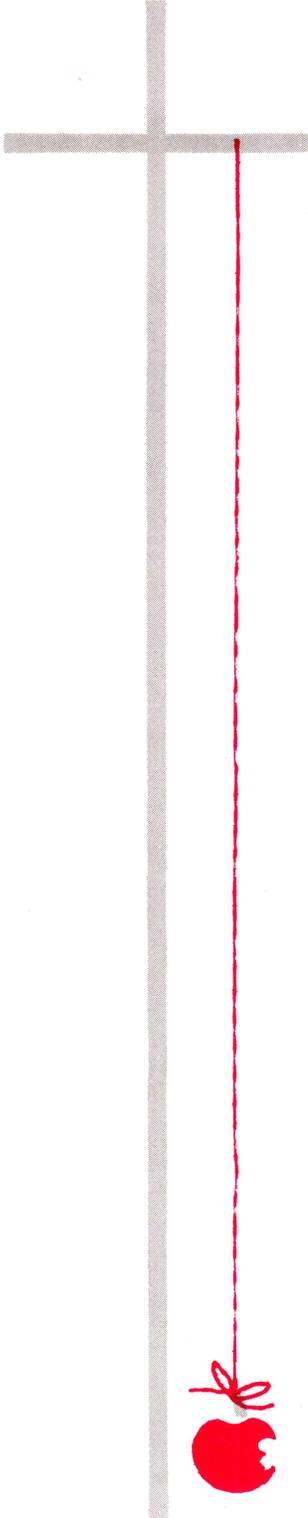


FROM

EVE TO MARY

By Betsey Beckman



Two women, Eve and Mary: two wombs who have borne the life of the world. In this Advent time while we wait for birth, our gaze falls once more on these two maidens who dared to be mothers, who each in her own way dared to step out of the established order of the times to taste the apple of new knowledge. Implanted with a new seed, each of these matriarchs revolutionized her society, giving birth to the paradox of pleasure and pain, death and resurrection. Both of them boldly chose to enter into the knowledge of God, leaving behind them the garden of innocence and opening their hearts to the instruction of pain.

Let us use the vehicle of dance and the time of Advent to explore the roles Eve and Mary played in salvation. Although this material provides direction to the dancer for a liturgical piece, it is equally intended to offer readers an Advent meditation.

In an empty sanctuary a waist-high candle stand serves as centerpiece. To the left of it, a small wooden stool. Behind the candle stand a dancer kneels, her hands encircling the top of the stand and concealing something from our view. The sound of a recorded heartbeat permeates the air, and the hands begin to pulse as if responding to a heart held within them. Each pulse opens the hands a bit further until they reveal the contents: an apple.

In the shadow of this proverbial tree of knowledge lives Eve. Just as we often have the resources for devout living at our fingertips but ignore them out of fear, Eve is as yet blind to the riches of the tree's fruit. Slowly, she peers out from behind the tree-post, at once reptile and feline in

movement. Rising to full stature she moves without effort. In this state of innocence the body and spirit do not compete.

No matter how uncomfortable and forbidden growth may be, an unconscious part of each of us gravitates toward its danger. Instinctively, Eve's hand begins to operate as with a will of its own, undulating toward the apple and calling for her attention. Finally Eve notices the forbidden fruit. For a moment she is enthralled with its beauty, then abruptly turns away, realizing the danger of her desire. Just as for us, the times of most growth are in the questioning of principles we have accepted blindly, here in the very act of temptation Eve's consciousness emerges.

In vain she tries to overcome the lure of the ripened fruit. Her hand trembles as she reaches, hesitates, glances furtively, and finally plucks the prize to her chest. She creeps away, hiding her treasure until assured of her privacy; then she opens her hands to examine it. Fear gives way to exhilaration, as often happens in the face of discovery. For the first time, we see Eve in her full glory: with exuberant turns and triumphant arabesques, she stretches and presents the apple in full view. She pauses for breath and, in the stillness, takes the first bite, that famous first step which might equally be seen as the beginning of the fall, or the beginning of salvation.

She sighs with satisfaction as the taste of knowledge floods through her. In the moment of revelation, Eve comes to grips with the paradox of good and evil. On the heels of joy comes truth. Eve stares at the gaping hole in the apple and realizes the ir-



reversibility of her action. Typically, the act of courage that emancipates us from ignorance is labeled by the powers that be as crime. Gripped with fear, Eve frantically attempts to hide the evidence of her "sin." All else in vain, she rushes to replace the defaced fruit on its stand.

Eve now feels compelled to escape. Back and forth she races, as we do, searching for the perfect date, the perfect ministry, the perfect counselor to hide ourselves from judgement. From offstage comes a voice pronouncing the consequence of her actions: "I shall multiply your pains in child-bearing. You shall give birth to your children in pain" (Gn. 3:16). Her body contracts as if recoiling from the curse of the words. She looks down at her shape in embarrassment and doubles over to cover herself. Regretfully she crawls away from the land of unconscious joy into the pain of self-knowledge.

Eve's movements become burdened and heavy. She travels in a large circle and periodically stops to don an article of clothing, till Madonna-like she is fully clad in veil and garment. As if she has worked her way through the evolution of civilization, her motions become more subtle, more courtly, more modest, and she finally takes her humble place on the stool. Seated, she begins a repetitious rhythmic dance suggesting weaving at a

loom. She has left the eternal and taken on the mundane.

The silence is broken: "Rejoice, so highly favoured: The Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28). The woman slips from her chair and crouches trembling beside it to shield herself from the light emanating from just above the apple. "You shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call him Jesus" (Lk 1:31). Mary now emerges slowly, delicately from behind the chair. Just as Eve's hand instinctively guided her toward growth, so Mary stretches out her hand, which leads her to the apple. As she stands there trembling in the self-doubt that comes just before the leap, from offstage we hear a woman's voice: "Be it done to me according to Thy will" (Lk 1:38). Slowly Mary's hands descend on the apple, and she sheds the security of her innocence to take on the consequence of growth.

Mary lifts the apple overhead with one hand, while the other hand forms a small cup just in front of her womb. As if falling, the hand holding the apple quickly descends until the fruit rests and reverberates cupped at Mary's womb. This image of receiving a seed deep within her center is repeated three times. This is the moment of quiet integration one knows when sensing God deep within, at the root of oneself. Then, Mary breaks into a series of rapid turns across the space which open into a gentle rocking motion, a kind of cradling of the fruit of her womb. Slowly she descends to her chair again, and then, as an offering, she drapes herself across the stool exposing her implanted womb to the heavens.

Now begin the pangs of birth, the inevitable contractions of a body bringing forth life. The arms and legs rise to fold around the apple at Mary's center and then fall back again to the Earth. A voice echoes the predictions: "You shall give birth to your children in pain." "You shall conceive and bear a son." "Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a

woman clothed with the sun, standing on the moon. She was pregnant and in labor, crying aloud in the pangs of childbirth" (Rv. 12:1).

Finally Mary curls into a small ball with the apple outstretched and freed. As we have learned time and again, birth is the first step toward death. Mary turns to face the post, the tree of knowledge from whence the fruit originated and which is about to become the tree of death and life. With the apple still lifted, she steps in front of the tree, and a voice calls out, "You see this child: he is destined for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel" (Lk 2:34). As before, the apple descends, and this time Mary bows her head and torso over as arms outstretch to either side, cruciform. Three times this is repeated, and in the process Mary undergoes with her son the passage through death to new life. Mary steps back to her seat, the apple gently making a revolution around her head as it curves downward. When she is seated, with a sense of completion Mary lifts the apple to her mouth and partakes of its sweetness. Having known its bitterness she can now taste its glory without guilt. Mary rests the fruit on both of her hands just in front of her womb and remains statue-like in the final tableau.

The dance depicts the evolution of consciousness. It begins with the original unconscious union of God and humankind, and proceeds through the assertion of independence by means of a criminal yet heroic act. This leads through pain, alienation, and death, and then finally to triumph over death in the final conscious re-union of God and humanity. By reaching for knowledge, Eve began our journey of consciousness. Mary gave birth to the fulfillment of that conscious union. May we all have the courage to taste the fruit — and to give birth. **ML**

Beckman received her undergraduate degree in Theology from Georgetown University, where she directed the Dahlgren Chapel Dancers and was a principle dancer with the Greg Reynolds Dance Quintet in Washington, DC. She is a member of ML's editorial board.

