

America's Got Talent and 'Tis the Season to Remember Those Gifts

A week before Christmas, I attended a performance of *The Nutcracker* in the Old Opera House Theater in Charles Town, West Virginia.

My presence was obligatory. My five-year-old granddaughter and her class of budding ballerinas appeared as dancing Lady Bugs for a brief time on the stage, a part undoubtedly added by the director to include the little ones. I was tired and joked to my son that I hoped whoever sat in the seat next to mine had a soft shoulder, as I would likely be in dreamland before the ballet was well underway.

Boy, was I wrong.

The dancers, the choreography, the special effects, the costuming: all blew me away. A few performers were over 20, but most appeared to be high school and middle school students, all of whom performed like troopers. Whoever created the costumes deserves a gold medal, and the lighting, the artificial snow, and the painted background scenery were absolutely gorgeous.

Afterwards, I remarked to my son and his wife how impressive it was that a town with a population of only around 6,000 could stage such a spectacle. Even more, I said, the performance made me aware of the vast array of talents that are so often overlooked or hidden in America.

As I watched these young ballerinas dance with such confidence and grace, the product of years of discipline and training, the thought came that on this very night, all across the country, thousands of other young dancers were undoubtedly

performing these same routines. Then other images of young people came to mind: the high school athletes who pursue excellence in their chosen sport, the kid who spends his evenings learning computer programming or reading Russian literature, the 16-year-old girl who spends her Friday evenings in a shelter serving food to the homeless.

And then I thought of all those Americans who daily bring their talents to a different sort of stage: the ICU nurse working the night shift at the hospital, the cop who heads out the door at 6 a.m. to a mostly thankless job, the builder who works from dawn to dusk to support his growing family, the mom who devotes herself to her husband, her children, and her home.

Talent, I thought. Amazing talent and a will to succeed, no matter the odds. That was America.

The following day, yet another thought came to me. That performance of *The Nutcracker* didn't just happen all by itself. It required the work of dozens of volunteers: ushers, seamstresses, makeup artists, backstage helpers, and parents driving their children to practices, in some cases for years.

This spirit of American volunteerism is older than the history of our nation. From the time settlers first touched shore in places like Virginia and Massachusetts, Americans gave of themselves to others. Today we follow in their footsteps, helping our neighbors and donating vast amounts of time and treasure to charities, community organization, and yes, to this production of *The Nutcracker*.

And now the holidays are upon us, candles of joy and hope in winter's darkest season.

Yet rather than celebrating and pointing the rest of us to these lights in the darkness, many of our leaders seem obsessed with promoting misery rather than joy, despair rather than hope. They ignore American ingenuity, common sense, and

compassion, and instead rattle the shackles and chains of fear and doubt, apparently in hopes of [keeping us in line](#) with their ambitions.

So, it's up to us. This holiday season, let's look at the people of this great land and see the bounty of talents they possess. Let's take heart in their skills and aspirations. Let's remember the generosity shown by millions of our fellow citizens.

Let's celebrate the season and let's celebrate America.

Merry Christmas, everyone, and here's hoping next year is the best and the brightest of all!

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