

Naturally Talented

Even nature needs to be nurtured.

In her book *Grit*, Angela Duckworth points out that Western society has a fascination with and preference for “natural talent”. Even in the USA, with its history of favoring hard work and respect for overcoming personal obstacles, once that lip service is done, people seem more enamored of those that allegedly possess Genius, or at least Natural Talent. Consider the success of TV shows like *The Voice* or *America’s Got Talent*. I am not a fan of this type of show, but if I had to choose one, I’d prefer *So You Think You can Dance?* simply because it emphasizes the hard work the dancers, all of them more “gifted” than 99% of the populace, put in, and the coaching they require.

When I was “growing up” in the martial arts, people talked about Chojun MIYAGI as if he were a prodigy. They lauded Kenwa MABUNI’s prodigious knowledge of kata. And of course, Morihei UESHIBA was not only a saint but a magician as well. Certainly these assessments have a great deal of truth in them, especially when one compares these martial arts luminaries with others of their era, but it seems that no one wishes to see them as human beings, let alone hard-working human beings. Then I read Robert W. Smith’s *Chinese Masters and Methods*, in which Smith visits numerous Taiwanese masters and finds them extremely skilled, but possessing many human foibles as well. Perhaps they were masters because of their skills, but they were not saints and few if any were prodigies. They developed their skills the way all of us do—through hard work and keeping their eyes on the prize. I began to realize that the process of this adoration of masters (whether they are Japanese, Chinese, or any nationality) is simply a fascination for Genius applied to an art’s founder and its seniors.

Occasionally, one hears stories about such and such a master having paid his dues as a student. Far outnumbering these stories, however, are those in which the master amazes his own students with his incomprehensible technique, e.g. Ueshiba apparently disappearing only to reappear on a nearby staircase, or Miyagi cracking the hardwood floor with the power of his *sanchin* stance. Of course, some of this willingness to express awe at the high level of skills attained by martial arts masters comes from our comparative low level of skill. Arthur C. Clarke said, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” When you do not understand how a martial technique is done, it naturally appears magical and the performer appears, if not supernatural, then at least a genius that is naturally (and thus inexplicably) talented.

Even the most rational scientists can remain in awe of Einstein or Heisenberg. Even the most seasoned martial artists can remain in awe of Ueshiba and Miyagi. It gives us some level of achievement toward which to aspire.

Certainly there are martial arts doubters, just as there were those who doubted the theories of famous scientists. But once the doubt is assuaged, respect sets in. And if the doubter still cannot understand how the theory or technique works, he will either extend his doubt for a while or cross over into awe.

In a seminar, I was showing an aiki technique in which I threw my partner with an unperceivable movement. A high-ranking instructor commented to another instructor that what I was doing was impossible and that my *uke* was being “too easy to throw”. A friend suggested that I use a different partner, so I had him choose a series of partners, each of a different build, a few of whom I had never met before. The throw continued to work with minimal effort on each of them. The doubting instructor, after my seminar was over and after he stopped shaking his head, then asked me to criticize his techniques—his doubt had become respect.

Why had his respect not turned to awe? I suspect it was because I prefer to explain everything I do so that the astute student can replicate it, eventually if not immediately. The sufficiently advanced technology having been explained, it no longer appears as magic but as the result of hard work.

NEXT TIME: Why do we persist in respecting hard work, but continue to be fascinated with and pay more attention to what is perceived as Natural Talent?