

David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants

by Malcolm Gladwell

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Malcolm Gladwell is the best-selling author of books such as *The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, and *Outliers*. He has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1996 and before that at *The Washington Post*. He was born in England and raised in rural Ontario. This is actually the first Gladwell book I have read and I understand why some readers and reviewers question his work from a standard “social science” perspective. In *David and Goliath*, Gladwell tells and examines ten stories (including *David and Goliath*) and draws lessons from them. Of course he picks stories that illustrate his overall thesis and then generalizes from them; this is what irks many critics. Any thoughtful reader can think of similar stories with opposite results. But what these stories show is that his lessons on life are *possible* --- and that’s good enough, even if they are not *guaranteed* outcomes.

Gladwell argues that “much of what we consider valuable in our world arises out of these kinds of lopsided conflicts . . . the act of facing overwhelming odds produces greatness and beauty.” Second, he says, we often mis-read these stories.” What looks like strength (a big, heavily armored giant) can actually be a weakness (slow, overconfident, etc.)(p. 6). A weakness (small, young) can be a strength (fast, unintimidated) --- or it can produce compensating strengths (the dyslexic who can’t read but develops a phenomenal memory and listening ability). Part One is entitled “The Advantages of Disadvantages (and the Disadvantages of Advantages),”

Gladwell does a fascinating job of showing how *David* actually had the advantage over *Goliath* though it didn’t look like it at the time. I’ve always loved this story and it’s been decades since I got any new insight on it. Thank you Malcolm! Here are the other stories: Vivek Ranadivé (Ch 1) coached a champion girls basketball team to victories against much better athletes and shooters by using an all-out harassing full-court press from start to finish. The better-skilled teams lost. Middle school teacher Teresa DeBrito (Ch 2), against all the assumptions that smaller classes had better educational results, found success by creatively making the most of a large enrollment. Caroline Sacks (Ch 3) loved science but lost her confidence when she enrolled at an elite Ivy League school. Gladwell shows how good students at less elite schools develop confidence and a willingness to take on challenging problems --- when their relative mediocrity in an elite pool of students would negatively affect their self-confidence and performance. Interesting!

David Boies (Ch 4) had dyslexia but developed compensating skills and became a great lawyer; same with Gary Cohn who became president of Goldman Sachs. Jay Freireich (Ch 5) developed a level of courage as a poor, disadvantaged kid that expressed itself in a pitbull tenacity that found an effective treatment for cancer in children. Gladwell also talks about how the Nazi bombing of London made the English resolve stronger rather than weaker. Wyatt Walker (Ch 6) was the young black man being bitten by Sheriff Bull Connor’s police dog in a famous photograph. Gladwell explores how the young man found such courage and also such cunning to get himself photographed in a way that would catch the attention of Washington and the world. Rosemary Lawlor (Ch 7) provides an example of a simple, unarmed woman in Northern Ireland who mobilized other women to stop (temporarily) the heavily armed British/Protestant occupying troops from their violence. Wilma Derkson (Ch 8) exemplifies the possibility

of forgiveness in the context of her little daughter's rape and murder, And finally Andre Trocmé (Ch 9) was a Huguenot Pastor in the town of LeChambon when the Nazis invaded France, installed their puppet Petain in Vichy, and began to round up Jews to take to the death camps in Germany. Trocmé and his community stood up to the threats boldly and honestly and were successful in protecting their Jewish neighbors. No weapons. A position of weakness – but victory nonetheless.

Difficulty can be actually desirable because of its capacity to bring out strength. Anyone familiar with the Bible would also say that God works through "earthen vessels." "Not many mighty, or brilliant, etc." are part of the church's early leadership. It is through the humble and weak that God works. He builds Israel from a deceptive loser like Jacob. Jesus comes to an ignominious end on a cross between two thieves – but that leads to resurrection and salvation. Gladwell has recently spoken of his rediscovery of the Christian faith of his Mennonite family upbringing and this book seems part of that rediscovery process. In a world (and too often a church) that glorifies success, brilliance, strength, beauty, money, and celebrity, *David and Goliath* is a great counterargument worthy of wide reading and discussion.