

Anna Veronis

Literature Honors Project

Honors Project: David and Goliath by Malcolm Gladwell

Description of intent

For me, reading is escapism, but reading something that bears philosophies that can potentially adjust your outlook on life is another level to that "escapism." This project's purpose was to select a book positively labeled as life-changing and delve deeper into why it has that reputation. After being recommended Malcolm Gladwell's *David and Goliath*, I went in intending to annotate heavily and think critically about how I could apply Gladwell's philosophies to my own life. After finishing, my plan was to immediately dive into the artistic component, where I began to understand my own learnings and interpretations and used those to guide me through my writing. Along the way, I came to discover that this book is particularly relevant for high school students because we're at the pinnacle of evolving and maturing (although you never suspend developing mentally). I presumed it would be very beneficial to share these hypotheses with others in hopes of everyone adopting its preeminent ideas of changing/opening up perspective to see the unknown and eventually embed your positive finding into your lives.

My Interpretation of Gladwell's Theory on David and Goliath:

By: Anna Veronis

David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants by Malcolm Gladwell is a book on the biblical narrative of David, an underdog applying his judgment and perseverance to conquer the conflict facing Goliath, the more dominant opponent. The most notable takeaway is how our advantages become a disadvantage and inversely when our believed vulnerabilities and weaknesses become a strength to make up for it. What qualifies as an advantage or disadvantage is almost invariably going to differ between people, but there will always be a mutual ground where "We have a definition in our heads of what an advantage is — and the definition is not right. Moreover, what happens as a result?"

It means that we make mistakes. It means that we misread battles between underdogs and giants. It means that we underestimate how much freedom there can be in what looks like a disadvantage”(page number here). Striving to change yourself to achieve the giants’ diversion is most likely never to be successful. To prevail against the giants, David has to accept changed strategies that create pertinacity, and audacious traits, something that becomes self-evident to an “underdog” who traditionally takes the longer route, which aids them to deceive the “giants” next step, as the author expresses, “Giants are not what we think they are. The same qualities that appear to give them strength are often the sources of great weakness.” (80). Because of this willpower, the inferior does not persist like David as they aimlessly affirm the match’s rules established by the authoritative opponents. However, it is difficult for the reader to comprehend this as Gladwell does, and he explains, “Understanding the power of the underdog requires an effort. It requires standing up to conventional wisdom.” (103). I believe this signifies that adopting a different strategy to win is one of the most prosperous resolutions. What we deem to be relevant in our society arises out of these sorts of irregular struggles and conflicts because the act of confronting overpowering odds establishes moral and ingenuity.

Possessing an abundance of resources is already a clear advantage, but it makes you immobile and sets you on the perspective that you are already leading. While mobility, endurance, intellect, and stamina enable “underdogs” or people assumed to be less competent to do the impossible, they can actually execute the so-called “impossible.” Their strong qualities allow them to because they have been wrongfully appointed assumptions of weakness unknowingly. For example, Gladwell explains that “Any fool can spend money. But to earn it and save it and defer gratification—then you learn to value it differently.” (167). It is globally assumed that being bigger, more powerful, and wealthier is always in our best interest when in reality, it is not. This idea was brought up through Gladwells inverted U-curve philosophy. The idea that the “n” curve or inverted u shape reminds us that there is a point where resources we believe to be superior stop positively influencing our lives and actually cause a decline. The ‘n’ curve insinuates that advantages increase with numbers and plateaus before the privileges diminish with increased numbers, Gladwell says, “The logic of the inverted-U curve is that the same strategies that work really well at first stop working past a certain point,”(236). This leaves “giants” at a disadvantage because, in some areas, more is not always better. The idea that we form our impressions through comparing ourselves to those that we find ourselves alongside indicates how we cloud our judgment and potentially set ourselves up for failure. Gladwell portrays this philosophy through statistics, for example, how the citizens of countries considered “happy” have higher suicide rates than residents of unhappy countries because the comparisons and contrast are so prominent that it depletes lives. The way you understand your own capabilities and base them on your surroundings creates your compliance and ability

to undertake challenges or embark upon rigorous things. This is crucial because it builds your motivation and interdependency that you carry with you throughout your life.

Gladwell asserts that disadvantages such as a learning disability or mental illness can frequently assist in over-developing skills in other areas that counterbalance it. Most of the time, it equips us with more knowledge gained than anticipated. This concept can be demonstrated through something called “desirable difficulty,” where problems and questions are conceived to be “disfluent,” or in other words confusing, prompting people to think much more intricately, engaging them to pour in more effort and support, this philosophy is very similar to another one of the author’s doctrines, “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”(34). These qualities help anchor that individual for success. If they have to defeat their obstacle, the challenge will become defeated more vigorously and prosperously because of the increased effort required. Gladwell explains the antithetical to this theory as “capitalization learning”: we get good at something by building on the strengths that we are naturally given. (166). Essentially, “capitalization learning” highlights the expertise and skills that develop instantly to people. Additionally, he adds that learning how to deal with failure’s probability is highly beneficial for the real world. For those with predisposed “disadvantages” such as learning disabilities, society makes it easier for them to be exposed to failure, but ironically according to Gladwell, that is advantageous, letting out another example of interchanging strengths and weaknesses.

Another one of Gladwell’s lessons entails that taking advantage of your own skillset is imperative to conquer big competitors on your own. The explanation here is burrowed under a statistic that Gladwell presents to us, “If an underdog army uses guerrilla tactics in battle, it wins 63% of the time. If it does not and tries to fight fire with fire, it succeeds in only 29% of matches.” (78). The initial response from most is, what does this mean? Essentially, suppose you turn up as the “underdog” or the David, in that case, it is essential not to push yourself to challenge the largest competitor in their specialty, instead focus on how you can outsmart them with your strengths and impose your own “specialty.” When put to situations where you are encountering a Goliath and resemble a David, it is quintessential not to parallel yourself in physical power but to recall everything you can do that your adversary cannot. This allows you to use your vulnerability of feeling like a “pushover” when in actuality, it becomes your leg up.

David and Goliath’s story enlightens us on what transpires when people deemed as “average” or “normal” confront giants or Goliaths. When Gladwell uses the word “giants,” he means, “powerful

opponents of all kinds—from armies and mighty warriors to disability, misfortune, and oppression.” We see this throughout the book, but it is described best in this passage:

Each chapter tells the story of a different person—famous or unknown, ordinary or brilliant—who has faced an outside challenge and been forced to respond. Should I play by the rules or follow my own instincts? Shall I persevere or give up? Should I strike back or forgive? Through these stories, I want to explore two ideas. The first is that much of what we consider valuable in our world arises out of these kinds of lopsided conflicts because the act of facing overwhelming odds produces greatness and beauty. And second, that we consistently get these kinds of conflicts wrong. We misread them. We misinterpret them. Giants are not what we think they are. The same qualities that appear to give them strength are often the sources of great weakness. And the fact of being an underdog can change people in ways that we often fail to appreciate: it can open doors and create opportunities and educate and enlighten and make possible what might otherwise have seemed unthinkable” (12).

The concept of perspective becomes embedded in the reader's consciousness after seeing these examples and wondering how we can implicate them in our own lives or to what we perceive to be our disadvantages. Personally, I found it fascinating to implement my own ADHD (Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) to Gladwell's disadvantage to advantage philosophy. I discovered that perhaps something like being hyperfocused, one of the most salient attributes to people with ADHD, can significantly come to our advantage. Instead of presuming "hyperfocusness" negatively, as something that causes people to be too immersed in things, it permits them to effectively disregard the world around us while holding our attention for hours. Using our dysregulated attention system to advantage can assist us in becoming so intently focused on a critical task that all intrusions are tuned out; this can be exceptionally effective for an assignment or test like the SAT. Hyper focusing can advise us to strive towards completion on a task without disrupting concentration and allowing best work. Another example could be shifting perspectives towards accommodations. Although things like "extra-time" are encompassed by a stigma and appear as not as deficient or even "slow," it enables people living with ADHD to discern that fair doesn't regularly mean equal. Since ADHD wired brains function abnormally, we recognize that people necessitate various elements to succeed. Failure, which is perpetually acknowledged as a disadvantage, can instruct dominant traits of resilience. ADHD is saturated with trial and error, which propels those to discover more and obtain a more significant amount of knowledge than a normal functioning brain.

Correlation Between the Painting and Book (artist statement)

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The purpose of the painting was to compose a piece of artwork immediately after I finished the book to accumulate all my opening perceptions, visions, thoughts, and lessons. I embarked upon what I imagined to be a sort of "double-take," my impression following it was to incorporate Gladwell's philosophies and life strategies that traverse into one another. More concretely, the red face is supposed to symbolize someone's most degrading piercing invalidity, weakness, or vulnerability, conforming to the blue face that expresses the promising extraordinary strength resulting from the new perspective taken from the supposedly inadequate/weaker side. The merge between the two profiles has a very elusive undertone of purple, embodying the simplicity yet the intricacy of what it necessitates to conform your own disadvantages to advantages and vice versa. The fuse amid the portraits could also be interpreted the other way; although we traditionally read things left to right, at any different angle, the strength could be the one integrating into the weakness, permitting another perspective. The whole story and lesson of David and Goliath encompasses the notion of growing perspective and how you interpret something as opposed to how someone else does. This leaves my painting up for your own perspective, exemplified through the shared eye; although it's what retains the faces together, it's also what divides them in their separate channels.

Art Piece







