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'Thought-provoking, provocative'

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“David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants,” by Malcolm Gladwell. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2013. 320 pages, \$29 (hardcover).

“What the Israelites saw, from high on the ridge, was an intimidating giant,” Malcolm Gladwell writes near the beginning of “David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants,” his latest book. “In reality, the very thing that gave the giant his size was also the source of his greatest weakness. There is an important lesson in that for battles with all kinds of giants. The powerful and the strong are not always what they seem.”

What follows is a fascinating study of individuals (and societies) who have overcome seemingly insurmountable odds to achieve success in a wide variety of disciplines. But this is not a book about the skills and perseverance needed to triumph over obstacles. Rather, it is about how we think about obstacles – and how that thinking is often overly simplistic and flawed. Gladwell essentially takes issue with the traditional way most of us tend to view adversity.

Gladwell began his career with *The American Spectator* before accepting a position as a reporter for the *Washington Post*. He has been a staff writer for *The New Yorker* since 1996. His Jamaican-born mother, whom he frequently credits with inspiring him to become a writer, is a psychotherapist, and his father is a mathematics professor from Kent, England. Gladwell has a degree in history from the University of Toronto. Interestingly, he was also a gifted runner, winning the 1,500-meter competition at the 1978 Ontario High School championships.

As has been the case with his previous books, “David and Goliath” is extensively researched, with no less than 17 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the nine chapters that form the main text. The book is divided into three sections. The first is “Part One: The Advantages of Disadvantages (and the Disadvantages of Advantages),” which examines the lives of several people who excelled in spite of the fact they had to deal with circumstances that most of us – on first glance – would consider less than ideal. “Part Two: The Theory of Desirable Difficulty” looks at how overcoming the challenges precipitated by adverse conditions can have a positive influence on ultimate achievement. Finally, “Part Three: The Limits of Power” considers how characteristics that often give rise to success can also be counterproductive in ways not immediately obvious to the outside observer.

I am a huge fan of Gladwell’s previous work. His insights are often as profound as they are counterintuitive. His current attempt to nudge us into understanding things in a new way certainly does not deviate from that trend. The author clearly sees the world through a slightly different lens than most of us. As I was reading “David and Goliath,” there were times when I thought to myself, “That makes perfect sense, why didn’t anyone else think of it?” That is

precisely the point. Gladwell intuitively senses what is transpiring at a deeper level. Yet his true genius lies in his capacity to explain these insights in a way that makes them appear to be common sense.

One of my favorite chapters is “David Boies: You Wouldn’t Wish Dyslexia on Your Child, or Would You?” Many readers will recognize the high-profile lawyer who became one of the most sought-after attorneys in the United States despite not being able to read until he was in the third grade. How people like Boies are able to overcome these kinds of “adverse” circumstances and achieve extraordinary greatness forms the central theme of Gladwell’s book.

“Innovators have to be open,” Gladwell explains in reference to Boies. “They have to be able to imagine things that others cannot and to be willing to challenge their own preconceptions. They also need to be conscientious. An innovator who has brilliant ideas but lacks the discipline and persistence to carry them out is merely a dreamer. But crucially, innovators need to be disagreeable. They are people willing to take social risks – to do things that others might disapprove of. That is not easy. Society frowns on disagreeableness. As human beings we are hardwired to seek the approval of those around us.”

Another chapter that held my attention was “Rosemary Lawlor: I Wasn’t Born That Way, This Was Forced Upon Me.” Here, Gladwell explains what he sees as the underlying blunder in the tactics used by the British government in attempting to deal with the growing unrest in Northern Ireland during the 1970s.

“If you want to stop little Johnnie from hitting his sister, you can’t look away one time and scream at him another,” Gladwell notes. “You can’t treat his sister differently when she hits him. And if he says he really didn’t hit his sister, you have to give him a chance to explain himself. How you punish is as important as the act of punishing itself. What is harder to understand, however, is the importance of these same principles when it comes to law and order. They were saying the decision to obey the law is a function of a rational calculation of risks and benefits. It isn’t personal. But that’s precisely where they went wrong, because getting criminals and insurgents to behave turns out to be as dependent on legitimacy as getting children to behave in the classroom.”

Full disclosure: I did not agree with everything Gladwell espouses in “David and Goliath.” I occasionally sensed an underlying political agenda in some of his anecdotes. But on the whole, I did find it to be extremely thought-provoking and even provocative. If you are one of those folks who likes to explore alternative ways of thinking about things you will definitely enjoy Gladwell’s latest attempt to enlighten us. I recommend it highly.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.

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