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Contemporary themes

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The Pseudo Security of Advantages

# Naturally, as humans, we are bred to believe that our security and well being is measured by all the “advantages” we possess against our adversaries. These “advantages” are often measured in wealth, perceived intelligence, or power. Yet many of us would never fathom the idea that things we see as advantages are what may lead us to our downfall. We never consider that those who may seem disadvantaged are able to fight in an unconventional manner in order to achieve their desired outcome. This idea of advantages being an illusion of security is explored by journalist, and bestselling author Malcolm Gladwell in his book *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants.* Gladwell uses the biblical story of David and Goliath, along with contemporary issues regarding class size ratios, and college prestige, to further prove his point that many factors commonly perceived to be disadvantages may become advantages if utilized in an unconventional way.

From birth we have been raised on the concept that Power equates to strength. This notion can be traced all the way back to biblical times, most notably in the battle between the perceived underdog David, and the monstrous mountain of a man Goliath. Goliath himself is surprised, and offended to see a shrimp like david challenge to battle him, Goliath feels that the man the israelites sent him is nothing more than a scrawny sheep herder, and replies appropriately “am I a dog that you should come to me with only sticks?”(13). David is the Sniper of his era, fast precise, and cunning. Goliath on the other hand is powerful but in his own category, Goliath is the equivalent of a pointman: full of strength, brute, and large. Gladwell exposes an odd behavior of Goliath which bring to light the concept that Goliath was not the appropriate contender against David, the account that Goliath is lead by an attendant (seeing guide) on to the battlefield, which alludes to an underlying medical problem associated with acromegaly “one of the common side effects of acromegaly is vision problems”13). This explains the “come to me” line said by Goliath. Gladwell further asserts his message that Goliath’s advantage is his weakness “in reality the very thing that gave the giant his size was also the source of his greatest weakness”(14). Although David cannot match goliath’s strength, he is precise enough to land an extremely dense rock into the skull of Goliath. Gladwell asserts his position on strength being a deception in his passage by showing us that the source of Goliath’s ungodly strength and height is ultimately his weakness, as well as showing that Goliath is forced to fight on Davids terms. .

Parents, for decades have had the concept that lower student to teacher ratios equate to a better education tattooed into their brains, however Gladwell conveys his idea that a class size too small is not beneficial at all, in fact it may actually may be doing the opposite. Gladwell cites an “inverted-U curve”(37) as evidence of the correlation between large and overcrowded classrooms and small and underpopulated classrooms. The class size curve shares the same philosophy as parent wealth curve in that there is a sweet spot somewhere in the middle. “inverted-u curves have three parts...theres the left side...having more makes things better...the flat middle, where doing more doesn't make much of a difference, and theres the right side where, doing more...makes things worse”(38). The common misconception is that the lowest teacher to student ratio brings forth the highest quality of learning; Gladwell points out that the rash belief that the smallest class size makes learning better is not simply true “It all depends where you are on the curve”(38). Insisting that “we have become obsessed with what is good about small classrooms and oblivious of what can also be good about large classes.”, which brings to mind the suggestion that smaller classrooms are not always better.

In the United States, there is a belief that a highly prestigious school will bring you the best quality of education. Gladwell gives us the account of a young college student's (Caroline Sacks) first hand experience of her misconceptions to her premium payments to a very prestigious academic institution. Selecting a college was an endeavor on its own, The Sacks family treated as if shopping for a new car “I think we looked at five schools in three days,”(49) from her trip she settles with Brown university as her first choice, and Maryland as her second. She chooses Brown primarily for the level of prestige that it bears. ‘Brown is a member of the ivy league… it has more resources...more academically able students, and prestige, and more accomplished faculty...brown routinely places among the top ten or twenty colleges in the United States ”.(49). These figures are in stark contrast to those of Maryland “Maryland finishes much farther back in the pack”(49). Even Though Caroline’s school is of high prestige, this did not guarantee her success. In fact her academic grades fell “I had never not excelled...It was pretty disheartening”(54) Caroline’s sudden change in performance can be explained using the little fish big pond philosophy. Although Caroline is intelligent in her own right, she has never been placed in an environment where she is not the only intelligent student, Brown to her is like a giant international ocean filled with fish both academically equal, and superior to her. “She was a little fish in one of the most competitive ponds in the country - and the experience of comparing herself to all the other brilliant fish shattered her confidence.”(54). The Confidence obliterating experience Caroline encountered at Brown made her feel dumb, even though she is very intelligent. Her sobering endeavor uncovers that the prestige a school may have does not guarantee you success. In Caroline’s instance her love for all subjects science related is spoiled by the sour academic, and emotional encounters at her top choice college.

Have we been looking at the factors that make an advantage in the wrong light? Have we been trusting the security of advantages too much? The simple answer to a convoluted and puzzling question is yes. It is not our fault though, it is only human nature. The trust that man has placed in his advantages may have carried us to where we are in the universe now, but man should never become complacent the apparent security he sees in his advantages. As we have learned these “Securities” may end up having little to no effect, or may even be the cause of your downfall. As Gladwell has demonstrated, It only takes a seemingly “disadvantaged” foe to decimate the “privileged” adversary, and some have learned this the hard way.

Works Cited

Gladwell, Malcolm. *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Epub.