

Not Only a Youth!

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When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance (I Samuel 17:42).

High school graduation is storytelling time: stories about the tough course, the weird teacher, the big game, and the off limits party. All of us live by stories, especially ones told about times like this. Jewish novelist Elie Wiesel once said that God made human beings because God loves stories. Because stories remind us of who we are, where we came from, where we are going.

Today I want to add to your collection of graduation stories. You'll not recognize yourself in this story at first. In fact, you'll wonder what some old Bible story has to do with you.

Let's make a deal. You listen as I retell the story, and I'll keep it short. Even better, I'll make you the main character. Why not, since all the stories of the Bible are finally our stories. Someone said that Bible stories are all letters to us from God: Dear Demetrius, Dear Rachel, Love God!

So here we go! Once upon a time there was David. But, since this is your story, too, once upon a time there was Yolanda, Mark, Rashad, or Jennifer. There was a war going on (nothing new!) between the Philistines and the Israelites.

The Philistines' big man was awesome - 6 feet, 9 inches tall with lots of experience. His name, Goliath. The Israelites had no big man until some little man - "ruddy, beautiful eyes, and handsome" (maybe a wimp!) - by the name of David was asked by a very grumpy king to comfort him with harp music.

David comforted the king. Then his father sent him to the war zone with food for his brothers. David overheard a discussion about who would fight Goliath, and he ended up volunteering.

And even those of you who don't have a perfect religious school attendance record, probably know the rest of the story. Goliath had lots of armor, rhetoric, and apparent courage. David had a staff, five stones, a pouch, and a sling. And it took one stone to take the giant out long enough for David to cut off his head. The Israelites win, the Philistines lose, and some folks, including David - live happily ever after. In fact, David becomes king.

That's the story. Religious drama at its best. No wonder Nintendo is about to release a David and Goliath game. Which means that Goliath still has a chance, and that this story really is yours when you buy the game.

There are some obvious morals to this story:

that it's better to be lucky than good
that it helps to have God and the king on your side
that quick small guards are better than big slow centers
that one's insecurity is often exposed by the size of one's weapon
and the loudness of one's voice

David's route to success was tough. He was chosen out of the blue to succeed King Saul in the middle of a family squabble: why not me, asked the older brothers?

Why him, asked the father? After all, David was the youngest, the least experienced, the one nobody thought about in spite of his “good looks!”

David wasn’t given major responsibility. His first task: to comfort an upset king; his second — to take food to his brothers in battle. And when he got pulled into the debate, “who will take on the giant?” David looked naive. He was talking to men his superior about military matters. Perhaps he was enticed by the rewards that would come to the victor. He left the sheep unattended. And he asked dumb questions when one of his brothers accused him of hanging out, just to watch the action. Then he went to the king, saying something about having a strong heart, some experience with sheepherding, and a religious conviction, not exactly compelling credentials for fighting a giant.

Perhaps David doesn’t resemble you. But I think this story is yours. Why? Because the voices in the story are rather familiar.

First, there was the voice of the giant: “when the Philistine saw David, he disdained him.” Goliath was a teenage warrior. In fact, his grandfather was a warrior. The giant had weapons and armor and gusto. For forty days no one had taken him on. Ruddy and handsome young David was an insult to Goliath, who was ready to feed him to the birds for lunch. To make matters worse, David felt very much alone. The military men, and his relatives and friends, were more scared than he. And repeating “I think I can, I think I can” didn’t help very much.

In David’s story, Goliath was the enemy, an overwhelming obstacle, a source of fear, a set of odds that seemed insurmountable. In your story the goliaths are whatever conditions you think you can’t change. Or the people who look bigger than life who stand in your way.

Recently in the *Atlanta Constitution* there was a quote from the novelist Kurt Vonnegut, author of *Cat’s Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, and others. “What people dare not admit,” he said, “is that life is so hard they don’t care if it goes on or not. That’s the real reason nobody’s too eager to save the planet.” What Vonnegut describes is what others have called our “covenant with death.” It’s what happens when people see all the terrors of life before they are old enough to resist them. Then the future becomes a future of fear, or no future. And so we go about our work, our routines, as though nothing is wrong, when lots is wrong. And some of it can be changed. In David’s case, it took a conviction, a stone, a sling, and a giant’s helmet that wasn’t stone-proof. A lot of giant helmets aren’t stone-proof! So remember what happened to Goliath. I wonder what giants you can overcome?

Second, there were voices besides Goliath’s. That’s the good news. The bad news is what they said. Jesse, David’s father, who could think of his youngest son only as the herder of sheep and an errand boy. The brothers, who accused David of nosing into their military business for personal gain. Abner, the commander of Saul’s army, who claimed he had never heard of the kid. And Saul, who insisted that David wear the king’s helmet, coat of mail, and sword. To which David said, “You’ve got to be kidding. I can’t even walk with this stuff on.”

I know you graduates have heard all of these voices, because mine is one of them. The father who has a hard time letting the son grow up, the jealous older brothers and sisters, the adult who can’t remember, and the one who tries to make a young shepherd into a warrior too soon. When you’re deciding whether or not to fight a giant, who needs this kind of advice? Really!

But there is more to say. The other side of David’s cautious father was the father who sought David out when he was to be anointed king. The brothers were jealous,

yes, but they were also the guys who probably taught David to use a slingshot. The forgetful army commander who later filled David in about military strategy. And Saul, of course, who loved David and gave him responsibility, despite his rejection of the armor.

So the voices were mixed. Those who gave David shaky advice also nurtured, supported, and loved him. And that's no different, I suspect, from some of the voices you've heard at home, at school, elsewhere — and voices that you will continue to hear — sometimes in *your* view, voices that are too naggy and critical, voices nevertheless of care and concern.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* illustrates this point. As you know, it is an engaging tale of early twentieth century life in Black America. Celie is the major character of the story. She writes letters to God and ends up finding herself. The story is about joy and sorrow, life and death, love and hate, dark and light in the lives of poor persons who have been victimized by racism and sexism. Celie is abused and beaten and befriended and loved by Pa and Sofia and Shug and others.

What Walker says to me is that these contradictions (hate and love), like the mixed voices David heard and the ones you hear, can be endured and transformed by you and others into celebration. So Celie says: "I think this is the youngest us ever felt." And Harpo echoes: "White folks busy celebratin' they independence from England. Us can spend the day celebratin' each other." Feelin' young and celebratin' each other are how the voices of hate and love in Celie's life got changed into a chorus of affirmation. So may it be for you.

Finally, most importantly, there was David's voice, and there was God's. Those voices are the key to this story and maybe to your story. David knew who he was, what he had done, and who was with him. He had a story which gave him some roots. The story helped him remember the sheepherding days, the lions and the bears, and how he had rescued lost sheep.

But he also knew that he was no self-made young adult who had done it all on his own, American hero style. After all, David probably had *inherited* his staff, his pouch, his sling. And his motive for taking on Goliath, finally, was not selfish, but on behalf of others. He believed that the God about whom he had heard in his religious community was a God who looked out for the young, the lost, for those in trouble, for those most unlikely to be chosen. This God was at the center of David's religious tradition. So David took up his sling with the assurance that the God who had come through in the past would come through again.

David also knew that he was anointed the next king before Goliath ever appeared on the scene. In fact, just to confuse you thoroughly, we aren't sure that David killed Goliath. Another Bible story says it was one of his brothers. But maybe it doesn't finally matter. David was chosen for who he was, not for what he was about to do.

Desmond Tutu, the Black Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, recently said: "Nothing can be more subversive, more revolutionary, than when you say to people that it doesn't matter how you are or what you are. It doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor, whether you are learned or stupid, whether you are tall or short. Your worth is something that has been given freely, gratuitously, by God." Tutu said that the South African government is worried about people who read the Bible because it contains stories that tell them they are worth something. And when people believe that, when nobodiness becomes somebodiness, worlds get turned upside down. That is the legacy left us by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the unnamed students at Tianamen Square and the Freedom Fighters in

Eastern Europe, and so on. And it's the reason David was free to act. Why? Because the outcome of his mission was irrelevant to his worth in God's eyes. That kind of freedom, that kind of love are worth remembering.

Goliath said it. Saul said it. Don't go, David, you are only a youth. You aren't old enough. You're not prepared. You haven't matured as a thinker. Does it sound familiar yet? Trouble is, Goliath and Saul were looking at the right stuff — power, age, experience, self-assurance in the wrong way. A youth? Yes! David still had a way to go and plenty to learn. And given the rest of David's story, he learned a lot!

But only a youth? No! From David's experience, his convictions, and a commitment to his people; from his ability to listen to many voices and to make of them one voice, from there emerged a mission that was not to be denied — a mission too demanding for only a youth.

So, from the many voices around you today comes this parting blessing — “Go, and the Lord be with you.” This blessing went from Saul to David, it now goes from us to you. You have tended your sheep, you have defeated lions and bears along the way, you have learned some tough lessons about life and you have listened to many voices. Like David, you have convinced us that what has gotten you this far will help to carry you on. Know, however, that our blessing to you is as mixed as Saul's was to David. David was the source of Saul's comfort, of his worry, of his pride, and yes, of his envy. And every adult celebrating with you this week knows all these emotions, and more. But remember this! Amidst his comfort, worry, pride, and envy, Saul (and God) were still the ones, who passed on the kingship to David. With that assurance from us to you, “Go, and the Lord be with you.” Let all the people say, Amen!