

Swinging David's Sling

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I can imagine how the Hebrew people of David's time felt when they were surrounded by those giant philistines like Goliath and everything looked really grim. Giants have long served as a metaphor for obstacles that seem insurmountable. The giant of Jack and the beanstalk could easily represent Jack and his mother's poverty, the giant Goliath represents the seemingly impossible task of this little band of people surviving in their new hostile homeland.

We have our giants today as well. Not that many of them were talked about in any real depth during the last election. We heard a lot about national security, but I think that's really missing the point of the real giant, the injustices that exist in the world that we really need to try to defeat. When he had President Bush's ear soon after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Jim Wallis of the Sojourners, said to him, "Mr. President if we don't devote our energies, our focus, our resources and our time on overcoming global poverty and desperation we will lose not only the war on poverty but we'll lose the war on terrorism. Unless we drain the swamp of injustice in which the mosquitoes of terrorism breed, we'll never defeat the threat of terrorism." Indecently, that was the last time the president asked Mr. Wallis for his advice.

It seems that unlike in the old stories we have more trouble recognizing our giants. Maybe we're more like those soldiers who hustled around camp, too scared to really look the giant in the eye and take him on; instead we divert ourselves toward easier foes, ones we know we can defeat. We are in need of real heroes who are willing to seek the giants that really threaten our society.

The heroes in giant stories are also very similar. They're the little guys, in more ways than metaphors. In the story of David and Goliath there is a lot of background that happens before we get to the great battle scene. David is a shepherd, not one of the nobility or a great trained warrior. He's the youngest son – which in the society he lived meant he was little better than a slave, he certainly wasn't going to be inheriting any wealth or prestige, much less any of his father's favor. In fact he's the one who has to tend to the sheep while his older brothers are off seeking glory at Saul's side. Poor old David is stuck out in the fields. Then to add insult to injury he has to take food up to his brothers like a common servant. When he does so, he overhears the challenge from the giant, Goliath, who's scared the Israelites out of their wits. They've run before him for the past 40 days and nights as he's issued his challenge to single combat.

David happens to hear this challenge and says I'll take him. What's interesting from here is how David's difference is accentuated. He tries on Saul's armor and it doesn't fit – he relies on his tool that he's learned how to use fighting lions and bears. David is not a helpless boy who faces the giant, he's been tested by living in the world, the harsh world of the fields where he's faced lions and bear. Instead to the sword of the king, David reaches down and picks up five smooth stones from the valley floor.

We'll get back to these five stones in just a minute.

When he goes before the great warrior Goliath, Goliath laughs at him – he's down right insulted that these up start Hebrews have sent a boy, a boy to fight him, the mighty Goliath. And this boy's weapons, how can they prevail? No, Goliath says to David "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the fields." What Goliath doesn't know is that David is on intimate terms with those birds and wild animals; he knows them far better than does this arrogant giant. So relying on his crude weapons and his faith, David prevails, knocking Goliath out with one stone and cutting off his head with Goliath's own sword.

Battle stories are often hard ones for me to come to grips with. As we hear the casualty count grow in Iraq and know that we're not hearing a tenth of the suffering of the Iraqi people, I can't rejoice even at the triumph of a mythic warrior. This story is an old folk tale that's been borrowed to give David, the future king, a great entrance into his people's narrative. It's such a familiar tale that it's part of our culture, but the underlying metaphor is a potent one for our times.

I don't want us to think of the giants that challenge us as other people. No one is a giant that deserves our physical assault. That's the point of giants; they are bigger than any person, seemingly insurmountable obstacles that require us to use our wits, our faith, and our strength to overcome. Singer song writer Peter Mayer expressed this brilliantly in his song, Rosa Parks, as the chorus says, "Rosa Parks sat down sending great Goliath to the ground from a will of stone that struck his crown the Giant came down." Here it's little Rosa Parks taking a seat on a bus and in so doing smashing the goliath of racism in the head. Rosa Parks is one of those heroes who was willing to look the giant in the eye.

These giant stories all tell us that we have to be the heroes. This story of David and Goliath is one of the earliest incidents of an Israelite succeeding without God's direct intervention. Yes, David relies on his faith, but God does not intervene to insure his success. While this could indicate that the story originated in another source (such as a folktale) or that it does have some historical value that's been preserved, I think it's also instructive as to how we call upon our faith in times of trouble.

It was David's faith that gave him the courage to face Goliath, which gave him that same will of stone as Rosa Parks. But he drew the strength needed to defeat the giant from the world in which he lived. His strength came from years spent protecting his sheep from the dangers of the world. When he reached for a weapon to face Goliath the text is very plain in saying he reached down and picked up these five smooth stones from the valley floor. This valley was a special place, a home to the people who'd been without one for so long. And it was from this place that David drew his strength.

That strength needed faith to put it in action. Faith is needed to summon the will to look the giant in the eye. When I hear people talking about changing positions on issues in order to win elections I think of David trying to put on Saul's armor, he couldn't even walk in it because he didn't have faith in that armor. Losing faith in our beliefs will not

win elections, but turn us into those who feed the giants of injustice. Those positions on issues are statements of faith that people's lives matter, that justice has a chance in the world. I will not stop advocating for a living wage, I will not stop advocating for civil rights for gays and lesbians; I will not turn my back on the environment I will not stop protesting against war in order to win an election. For these are the issues that express my faith and to abandon them would be to lose my faith.

We don't express our faith in God the way that David did in this ancient story, so on what is our faith based? It's liberal religion that calls us together. It's our history and common tradition. The sentiment regarding liberalism expressed in by James Luther Adams could have been written on the morning of November 3, 2004 instead of 1939. I would not go so far as to say we are facing the threat of a Nazi-like take over that Germany did. I would not go that far. That said, the restriction of civil liberties, the increased secrecy of our government, the demonization of the poor and other people, the centralization of media, as well as the climate of fear are all creating a form of government that is not what I believe our great nation should stand for. In that way we are staring down a giant.

As in the time Adam's was writing, it's not been easy to be a liberal during the past decade. In 1939 when this teacher and theologian found himself facing down a giant, like David, Adams reached for five smooth stones and his faith to help him in his fight. What five smooth stones did Adams pick up from the valley's floor? He calls them the "five smooth stones of liberal religion". The first is the principle that revelation is continuous. This means that our symbols, our rituals and words themselves are only referents to reality and can't encapsulate it. Our experiences and discoveries will help deepen the meaning of those referents and our understanding of the world. Living this principle means that we can actually learn from history and apply those lessons to contemporary situations. Adams describes this continuous revelation as "god being in the process of self-fulfillment in nature". Acknowledging the complexity in using the referent God, he described God as the inescapable commanding reality that sustains and transforms all meaningful existence". Not exactly the same definition that David might have given nor the one I learned in Sunday school. For Adams god provides the structure or process through which meaningful achievement is possible, the working reality in which all of us are destined to live. So we are free and limited in this idea of God. Reality is then no human contrivance, and it's only in this reality that human good can be realized and understood. Here Adams adds is where liberal theist and religious humanist can find common ground. The first stone that we reach for in the age of injustice is "We put our faith in a creative reality that is re-creative. Revelation is continuous."

Adams second major principle is that relations between humans ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not coercion. There are times when coercion is needed wrote Adams. For instance he says that state compulsory education is one time when we recognize the need for certain restrictions on personal freedoms for the greater good. But free choice must be a central principle, for this allows us to engage in free inquiry to help each of us most fully realize truth and justice. When such freedom is present our faith, our inquiries, will lead us to fully acknowledge human worth and dignity. Jim Wallace described faith as cutting in many ways, saying "when it's not triumphal it can

move us to repentance and accountability leading us to reach for something higher than ourselves. That can be a powerful thing a thing that moves us beyond politics as usual, like Martin Luther King did. But when it's designed to certify our righteousness that can be a dangerous thing. Then it pushes self-criticism aside. There's no reflection." Wallace goes on to say that real faith leads us to deeper reflection and not – not ever – to the thing we humans most want – easy certainty."

The third stone in Adam's bag is the affirmation of the moral obligation to direct our efforts toward the establishment of a just and loving community. He asserts that a faith not bound to justice will lead us to grief, thwarting creativity and divine possibility, robbing us of our birthright of freedom and robbing our community of the spiritual riches latent in its members. Creating a just community means that we ask ourselves how our community treats those among us who are in need, real need of food, shelter and medical care. My partner Lisa and I were talking after the election as we watched the stock market climb realizing that more tax cuts will probably be on the way. One of us commented that for us financially this was a good election – but we have never based our politics on what was best for us financially. Creating the just community is something we must strive to do here, in our own homes, on our own street, in our own town. Many religious people call out Jesus' name while pointing to the sins of others, sins that Jesus never named. Yet they will ignore his obvious and recurrent cries to care for the poor by creating a justice community – a kingdom of God which is always at hand if we will lift our hands to create it.

Adam's fourth principle states that virtue and good are social incarnations – only realized through the institutions we create. Our faith must be expressed through our religious communities, our schools, the social and political organizations we create. Without them freedom and justice are impossible. Freedom, justice, good don't exist anywhere independently of human creations. Only we can bring these ideals into being. We all have power; we don't always see it and often feel like we're powerless cogs in some great machine. But we create these machines and we have the power to influence the values they express. Too many of our institutions are created for personal gain – or for the few to exclude others. We can stop basing what we create on values of selfishness and greed – instead basing our institutions on love and compassion. We need to refine our language so the world understands the religious values from which this impulse rises. Don't give up your power because it feels like it doesn't matter. Each one of us through this congregation, through our schools through the many social service agencies that we can join can express our faith in our deeds.

These deeds relate to Adam's fifth and final smooth stone of liberal religion. This is an attitude of ultimate optimism that the resources are available for the achievement of meaningful change. We recognize the tragic qualities of human existence yet choose to live in a dynamic sense of hope. I was dismayed to see all of the initiatives banning gay marriage on ballots across the country. Yet, ten years ago this wouldn't have even been a question for people to vote on. How long did it take for the slaves to be freed? How long did it take for women to gain the right to vote? Justice does not move quickly but it is like a slow growing root that forces its way through the seemingly impermeable bedrock

of hate and fear to crack those rocks open and allow the light of freedom to bring new life where once there was only darkness. Even today, such justice my friends is growing deep roots in dark places.

Such optimism gives us the strength to seek solutions. There are hungry people in our community, let us join together and feed them. There are families without a roof over their heads, let us join together and build them shelter. While we minister to the needs of many let us also be ready to look the giants in the eye and when ever possible hurl a rock its direction for one day the giant will fall. As we wait for that day, let us always be ready to lift our voices together, at all times. Sometimes it may feel like all we have is our voice, but never doubt that when we lift that voice in song there is power in it.

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