

1934

The Chief Qualification for Living

Douglas Horton

Follow this and additional works at: http://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_commencement

© Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Recommended Citation

Horton, Douglas, "The Chief Qualification for Living" (1934). *Commencement Addresses*. 30.
http://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_commencement/30

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives at Lux. It has been accepted for inclusion in Commencement Addresses by an authorized administrator of Lux. For more information, please contact colette.brautigam@lawrence.edu.

THE CHIEF QUALIFICATION FOR LIVING

Douglas Horton

"Choose you a man!"

Do you remember who said that? It was Goliath, the giant, the ogre of your childhood. It was when the children of Israel were waging one of their frequent wars with the Philistines and were camped on one side of a valley, with the enemy opposite, that this big swaggerer, nine feet tall with half a ton of armor on him (according to the report of his opponents), walked up and down outside the Israelites' lines and defied them: "Give me a man, that we may fight together: choose you a man and let him come down to me." And the story runs that in the camp of Israel there was only one man to accept the challenge--a man with the appearance of a child, the stripling, David--though there were many children there with the appearance of men. The whole heroic tale is told in the 17th chapter of I Samuel.

Heroic tales such as this--tales of Odysseus, of Aeneas, of Siegfried, of Roland-- seem all to belong to the distant past. But this is not strictly true. There is an inveterate element of adventure in everyday living. You have in fact only to re-name the participants to appreciate how very up-to-date the Goliath story is.

Nothing is more certain, for instance, in this day when the knowledge of the human mind has so greatly increased, that you and I, though individuals, are many individuals in one. Every person has his business-- is a manufacturer, salesman, transportation expert, housekeeper, or the like--but if that were his only character he would become a mere robot. He has his hobbies, recreations: he is a golfer, collector of first editions, rose-grower. And he is likely to have still other genuine interests to which, since his day has in it only 24 hours, he can devote

no time at all: his leanings may show him to be a literary man, an educator, an artist. It is certain that everyone is part theologian--for we all have our ideas of God--and part statesman--for we all have a penchant political. In a word, you are no better described as a man than as an army of men. For the moment I will call you an Israelitish army.

You are encamped there, behind your brow, perfectly defended--at least so far as any of the rest of us can see, for God hath so wrought that no man's individuality may be penetrated without his own consent. From the outside we cannot tell what thoughts are moving singly, or in squad or company formations, through your camp, what affections are marshaling them, what motives are preparing them for a sally. You are yourself: you are your own army. No one will entice you into the valley from your hill fastness unless you desire it yourself. And that, apparently, is also the position in which the Israelites found themselves.

But life does not leave you alone. In some form or other it goes stalking up and down outside, challenging, "Come on out and fight!" And it puts your army within in a flutter. What shall I send out to take up this challenge? you ask yourself. You may be asking yourself that question this very morning if you are a young man or woman trying to hit upon a life-occupation. Shall I send me out a well-trained clerk, a lawyer, a buyer, or what? Which one will best stand up against that challenger and force the fighting into his own territory?

But life, calling from outside, does not seem particular about what kind of profession your defense may assume. It seems particular, like Goliath of old, about one thing only: "Give me a man, that we way fight together: choose you a man for you, and let him come down to me." Mature

strength and wisdom is what life demands. Half a man will not do--
neither will half a woman.

Choose you a man.

One great part of our difficulties with life comes of our failing to choose our best selves for our experiences. We send into life our next-best, immature, childish selves. We do not choose a man for our battle: we choose a child.

Anyone may make his own list of the childish characters in which we allow ourselves to appear. I take mine largely from Professor Overstreet.

We expect children to boast, for instance. "I've got an uncle who is as rich as any man in the world." "My father could lick any man in the block." "My mother's almost a hundred years old!" Sometimes the suggestions are rather overpowering! They are all very well in children; but in a man, how puerile! Yet there is many a man who in his physical maturity still continues to rely on boasting to maintain himself as he faces the world. "You can't tell me anything about life." "My country could lick any country on earth." "This is the world's greatest newspaper." Pure childishness! Individuals of that type are not, however, so disquieting a phenomenon, for they may quickly be assigned to their place. A more significant circumstance is that a great part of the public seem to demand that type of person for a leader. On the whole we do not vote for political candidates who do not rave about their records, their party, and what they'll do when ~~they~~ elected, in superlatives. We usually send children to vote for us.

Akin to the child-man who boasts is the child-man who bullies. It has been said that bullying is boasting with one's fists, or whatever

substitute for fists can be found. "Bullying, whatever form it takes, is an effort to gain power not by intelligently meeting the demands of the situation--cooperating with the other person, trying to understand him, realizing his rights and his possibilities, but by violently dominating the situation." If a child cannot hold his place among children by his own physical size, he is likely to make up for this loss by making children smaller than he is, fear him. But in a man! We have seen it sometimes in a foreman who, fearing he may lose his own position, takes his fears out on the man under him. We have seen it in an executive who, waited upon by representatives of his labor, dismiss them without a hearing with a gruff, "I don't need anyone else to run my business for me." It is in evidence in the military officer whose specialties are profanity and punishment. He was well drawn as Himmelstoss in "All Quiet on the Western Front". It is always in a little person trying to be recognized as big. Instead of being big, in a man's way, by achieving large sympathies and an understanding mind, he tries to be big in a child's way--by using threats and force over those whom chance has placed in his power.

Perhaps we are not so apt to send, to live for us, a child who boasts and bullies, as a child with other traits, with tantrums, for instance. We know the child who throws himself down on the sidewalk and kicks and shouts "I hate you I hate you I hate you" until he gets what he is begging for. He has learned by an instinct which to our fathers was sure proof of original sin that you are likely to let him have anything he wants rather than endure a public scene. The child will grow out of this if he has wise parents, but there is less hope for the tantric(I believe the adjective is as permissible as the noun) adult. We know him too. He is the one who presents himself to life as a child, hoping for -- and sometimes getting -- what he wants in the way of a

child. It is sometimes amusing to hear a taxi driver in a foreign city tell another driver who disputes a crossing with him what he considers the situation calls for. The whole block becomes acquainted with the one driver's opinion of the other--and of the other's ancestors on both his father's and his mother's side. Not so amusing is it when the tantrum happens to be the favorite indoor sport of your husband: "When are we ever going to have supper!" "This soup is like dishwater!" "Will those children ever be quiet?" or of the wife: "This is a pretty time to come to supper!" "The soup won't stay hot forever!" "If you had the children!" We live like little people when we do not employ the calm and balanced mind of an adult.

But the most colossal type of infantilism in America is yet to be mentioned. In infancy and very early childhood, before the mental controls are built up, complete restraint seems to be the one thing worth living for. Oh to be able to play any time we wanted to, and anywhere--even after supper and on the neighbor's lawn! Oh for excitement--all the fires we wanted to build, all the guns we wanted to shoot! Oh for enough candy to eat: they are taking two and a half tons of it on the expedition to the South Pole--gee, I wish I was Commander Byrd! Oh for staying up late--I'd never go to bed if I had my way! Children beyond the pale of parental guidance do often over-indulge themselves, as many green apple orchards might testify. The normal child presently, however, brings himself up to disciplined living. But some children, though they assume the features of manhood and womanhood, do not really grow up. They will have their way. They will obey just as few moral and civic laws as possible. In business they become the champions of that Rugged Individualism which is nothing but Rugged Selfishness and leads to the sweatshop and child labor. In society they become those people who want all and give nothing. They live chiefly for pleasure

as a child does. Dancing and drinking are their rocking horse and candy--and jazz their rattle. The character they send out against life is a child's; and the rewards which come from noble living are denied them.

But life says: "Choose you a man, that we may fight together." And it is certain that we shall never conquer unless we do. Ah, but how to do it! How! If only the past could come true again in us, if only we might find the man, the David,--our noblest self--to do battle for us! Professor Gossip has finely spoken of the Hero in Thy Soul, but where is he? The everyday life we have to live does not conduce to heroism. But the hero is none the less there, in that camp of yours: and the finding of him is chiefly if not solely facilitated by one thing.

The finding of the man in thy soul is one of the glorious capacities of religion.

It is of course understood that all healthy adults find pleasure in times of recreation by being children again--by playing bear on the floor, throwing themselves into the excitement of a football game, or laughing when the custard pies in the movies speed to their mark--it is part of the rhythm of life in times of relaxation to go back to childhood--but we have our estimate of a man to whom life is only a succession of custard pies, as we have of the boaster and bully, the easily angered, the insatiable self-seeker. How will even religion avail to bring these child-personalities to send a man to represent them in life--to be themselves?

It is all quite simple. People are children because their world is small, as a child's world is small; and no man is ever larger than his world. The things of the small world are supremely important

because they are to him the only things that are. It is because little Willie lives in a world consisting only of things to play with and things to eat that they mean so much to him; the rest of the world has no meaning whatever. When therefore he wants that ball, he wants it. No use to tell him there will be a long day tomorrow when he can play with it to heart's content. No use to tell him you know another little boy in Neenah who never cries for his ball (which probably is not true anyway). No use to tell him he is not being fair to his nurse by splitting the welkin and her eardrums with his shouts. Tomorrow, the boy in Neenah, fairness--these are part of a man's world, and would make it easy for a man to forego having the ball: but they are no part of the boy's world. The ball, however, is, and that he will have.

Similarly, when we possess childish characters, our world is constricted. It is reduced solely to the interests of food, shelter, sex and social position, that is, the sole interests of a minimum man. We must maintain our place at home or in business or elsewhere, and we'll do it by boasting or bullying or in some other childish way if we have to. No use to tell us that from the broad viewpoint of eternity it is better to be right than president. No use then to tell us that if we will only consent to live humbly we shall enjoy deeper ~~spiritual~~ insights into life. No use then to tell us that the lovely things of this world are all born of sorrow. These matters of the good, the true, and the beautiful, are not part of our world; and our little selfish spot in the puddle is.

Now if our world could be widened, what then? Let religion touch it. I speak of religion in the broadest sense. The boundaries of time and space fall off, and we find ourselves in an eternal place. All objects fall into proper perspective. Food, shelter, sex, and social position are seen in their right dimensions when we look to the great

God. Is he that holds the centuries in his hands perturbed that this week has gone wrong for us in the lesser details? There is another week--and even another life. A maturity comes on which, like David's, is not lacking in youthfulness; for all those ~~who~~ are youthful who know there is a future. We are here to work, as ability is given us, the works of a liberally just, supremely benevolent Father, who inhabits eternity. Those who know this enjoy a poise that is not given to others. They do not cry and pant after the little material toys and physical indulgences: they know the joys of a larger world. If you live only in a little house on Main Street, you will grow old sighing for the transitory pleasures of Main Street. If you think in terms of humanity and the long purposes of God, the little things of life will not baffle you. You will rejoice to be able to respond adequately to the challenge, "Give me a man!"