

WHAT MAKES A GOOD TEACHER?

K.S. Gandhi

As I begin with this article, I can see the smirkful faces, who heard me several times on this issue, thinking - “So, the *first* thing he is going to do is to talk about his *Guru*”. I am going to fool them. I will come to him *later*.

What makes a good teacher is a good question to ask. One of answering this question, I felt is to recall one’s own experiences. My first recollection is of my Sanskrit-Telugu-Drill-Scout ‘master’. I was in class one or two. He would take us to Independence day celebrations or whatever, and by the time the function was over, we would all be tired. He would buy *chikkis* for us, and would even carry the little ones to their homes. Many years later, I went to pay my respects to him with folded hands. Even as I was doing so, he folded *his* hands, pointed towards the sky, undoubtedly praying for *my* welfare. So kind, compassionate and concerned! Is it that which makes a good teacher?

A scene from one of the first movies of Bruce Lee comes to my mind (I do not remember the name of it now). The movie begins with Bruce Lee approaching the teacher and requesting him to teach Karate. Then he respectfully bows to him, body bending from the lower back downward, head slowly lowering, and eyes turning away from the master and toward the ground. WHAM! The master gives a flying kick to Bruce Lee’s head. The next scene shows Bruce Lee picking up his randomly distributed body and rising from the floor, confusion written all over his face. Now the teacher returns the reverential bow of the pupil, bending his body and head slowly, his *gaze* never leaving Bruce Lee - and says “Lesson one. Be watchful”. So much for compassion and kindness, but one is never in doubt about the effectiveness of the teacher here. (I wonder if it would be good to drop students of Fluid Mechanics into Sankey Tank?)

Now I cannot wait. I must talk about my *Guru* - Professor Sanyasi Reddy. Even today, his luminous eyes, boyish look, and eagerness to help come to me vividly. I spent endless hours of *his* time. I would bug him while he was eating in his room, or walking to the library, or doing his experiments. He explained *everything* from basics. *Clarity* was stamped every where. He is my role model. However, as I write this, I recall what Einstein wrote about one his teachers (I forgot the name). Within minutes of entering the class room, the teacher got totally confused, and there was bewilderment all over (Being Germanic, the students did not make noise). Einstein wrote that he learnt more physics from the way the teacher extricated himself from difficulties, rather than when the class went smoothly!

Now I am reminded of what Feynmann, one of the great teachers of our times, said. He said teachers are superfluous - good students learn by themselves, and others cannot be helped! Teacher is *merely* there, only to show the way. This when coupled with a story I heard, gives me an idea about the issue at hand. But, first the story (I cannot vouch for the authenticity of the story since it was told to me by one of my friends). This is about the famous pair: Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein (‘Whereof one does not know, there of one must be silent’). I can never make out who is the teacher and who the pupil is. But formally, Wittgenstein was the student and Russell was the teacher. They were apparently disputing about the absolute provability of *any* proposition, given certain axioms - Wittgenstein maintaining that there are *no* such propositions. So Russell got tired and said “I can prove to you that there is not a single tiger in *this* room, provided you accept that looking is a way of resolving this dispute”. The pupil said “OK. Prove it”. Russell



A picture is worth a thousand words!

said simply “Please do look”. So Wittgenstein got on all his fours, and started looking everywhere. Time was passing and he was *still* looking. The teacher got tired and said “Aren’t you satisfied?” The pupil said “Sir, we must be very careful, I am not sure if the tiger is *there* where I am *unable* to look.”

So, what makes a good teacher? Having a class of good students! Student and teacher form a team, mutually dependent and mutually nourishing.

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