

What is Civilization?

M. RAM MURTY

In his "First Public Lecture in the East", Swami Vivekananda said, "But education has yet to be in the world, and civilization — civilization has begun nowhere yet."¹ This is quite a dramatic statement and raises the question as to what Vivekananda meant by "education" and "civilization"². It is the purpose of this essay to explore these two ideas in the context of historical developments and to highlight the role of educators in the development of human civilization. As we move into the 21st century, it is incumbent on the intellectual leadership to show us the way out of total annihilation. This is no mere poetic fancy. The survival of the human race depends on it. As the great historian Arnold Toynbee wrote:

In the present age, the world has been united on the material plane by Western technology. But this Western skill has not only "annihilated distance"; it has armed the peoples of the world with weapons of devastating power at a time when they have been brought to point-blank range of each other without yet having learnt to know and love each other.³

After making his shocking statement, Vivekananda continued by saying that "Ninety-nine decimal nine percent of the human race is more or less savage even now."⁴ In January, 1900, in Los Angeles, he delivered a lecture titled "Hints on Practical Spirituality", in which he explained the essential ideas of Patanjali and his psychoanalytic approach to world religions. In that lecture, Vivekananda related what the American philosopher Ingersoll had said to him: "Fifty years ago, you would have been hanged in this country if you had come to preach. You would have been burnt alive or you would have been stoned out of the villages."⁵ Although these words were uttered more than a century ago, things have not really changed much. Since 1900, the world has seen two horrific world wars, and history is replete with episodes of massive genocide and extermination of races stretching across many continents. A cursory look at the daily newspaper is enough to convince anyone that Vivekananda's statements are not an exaggeration. Humanity has not progressed much in the march of evolution.

We seem to be equating 'civilization' with a mercantile outlook. In a letter to his brother, Sri Aurobindo wrote: "Is this then the end of the long march of human civilization, this spiritual suicide, this quiet petrification of the soul into matter? Was the successful businessman that grand culmination of manhood toward which evolution was striving? After all, if the scientific view is correct, why not? An evolution that started with the protoplasm and flowered in the orangutan and chimpanzee, may well rest satisfied with having created hat, coat and trousers, the British aristocrat and the American capitalist."⁶

So what exactly is civilization? On March 25, 1896, Vivekananda delivered a lecture on Vedanta philosophy and in the question period that followed, he gave the following definition. "This universe is simply a gymnasium in which the soul is taking exercise; and after these exercises we

become gods. So the value of everything is to be decided by how far it is a manifestation of God. Civilization is the manifestation of the divinity in man."⁷ From this excerpt, we begin to get a hint of what Vivekananda meant by the word "civilization." In a letter dated March 3, 1894, from Chicago and written to "Kidi", Vivekananda summarised the essence of Indian philosophy. In that letter, reprinted in Volume 4 of the *Complete Works*, we find some amplification of these ideas. He wrote, "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man. Religion is the manifestation of the divinity already in man."⁸ Jesus taught, "Be ye perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect."⁹ Thus we can safely infer that by "perfection", Vivekananda meant "divinity". This leads to a remarkable equation which has some surprising corollaries. Earlier, he equated civilization with the manifestation of the divinity of man. This passage equates religion with civilization. So if civilization has not yet begun, then neither has religion. Not only that; from the same letter to Kidi, we see that Vivekananda equated "perfection" with "divinity" and so we may deduce: education = religion = civilization. And the astounding corollaries are that none of these have yet begun!

In his letter, Vivekananda gives us some idea of what he meant by the word 'religion'. He wrote,

We believe that every being is divine, is God. Every soul is a sun covered over with clouds of ignorance, the difference between soul and soul is owing to the difference in density of these layers of clouds. We believe that this is the conscious or unconscious basis of all religions, and that this is the explanation of the whole history of human progress either in the material, intellectual, or spiritual plane — the same Spirit is manifesting through different planes.¹⁰

Thus, religion, as it is practised, is simply an "unconscious or conscious" expression of the search for "the same Spirit — manifesting through different planes." Vivekananda continues: "We believe that it is the duty of every soul to treat, to think of, and behave to other souls as such, i.e. as Gods, and not hate or despise, or vilify, or try to injure them by any manner or means. This is the duty not only of the Sanyasin [the monk] but of all men and women."¹¹ A corollary of this is the golden rule: "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Religion, as it is practised, is merely a bundle of social customs and often pits nation against nation, creed against creed, race against race. Sadly, this is the history of humanity. In the same letter, Vivekananda diagnoses this malady: "Social laws were created by economic conditions under the sanction of religion. The terrible mistake of religion was to interfere in social matters... [What] we want is that religion should not be a social reformer, but we insist at the same time that society has no right to become a religious law-giver."¹²

In the opening pages of his masterpiece on Raja Yoga, Vivekananda summarised Indian philosophy as follows:

Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy – by one, or more, or all of these – and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.¹³

Here we find a clear definition of religion and implicitly civilization. They are measured by how far we have progressed in the manifestation of divinity. A cursory look at history shows that we have not even progressed in the manifestation of humanity. What is the cause of this?

Human history shows that the most diabolical idea ever conceived is that of racial superiority. History is replete with episodes of colonization, slavery and extermination of so-called “inferior races.” Racism took on a scientific garb in the post-Darwinian period and theories of eugenics emerged to justify imperialism, slavery and extermination. Surprisingly, these theories were supplied by the philosophers and thinkers of the age. For instance, Voltaire wrote,

It is a serious question among them whether the Africans are descended from monkeys or whether the monkeys come from them. Our wise men have said that man was created in the image of God. Now here is a lovely image of the Divine Maker: a flat and black nose with little or hardly any intelligence. A time will doubtless come when these animals will know how to cultivate the land well, beautify their houses and gardens, and know the paths of the stars: one needs time for everything.¹⁴

This is from a man who is considered to be one of the principal philosophers in the “age of enlightenment.”

Schopenhauer wrote,

The highest civilization and culture, apart from the ancient Hindus and Egyptians, are found exclusively among the white races; and even with many dark peoples, the ruling caste, or race, is fairer in colour than the rest, and has, therefore, certainly immigrated, for example, the Brahmins, the Inca, and the rulers of the South Sea Islands. All this is due to the fact that necessity is the mother of invention, because those tribes that emigrated early to the north, and there gradually became white, had to develop all their intellectual powers, and invent and perfect all the arts in their struggle with need, want and misery, which in their many forms, were brought about by the climate. This they had to do

in order to make up for the parsimony of nature, and out of it all came their high civilization.¹⁵

The fact that Schopenhauer singles out the Hindus and the Egyptians is significant, for at the time, he wrote that it was becoming increasingly clear from reports of archeologists excavating in India and Egypt that these nations were rooted in advanced civilizations and cultures. This was conveniently explained by the “Aryan model,” which proposed that ancient India and Egypt were colonized by an “Aryan migration”. This model was amplified and expanded by the historians, philosophers and scientists of the 18th and 19th centuries and thus, this view of world history acquired academic sanction. This is not an exaggeration.

It is a common belief with both the educated and the uneducated that “everything began with the Greeks.” We were all taught to believe that mathematics, science and philosophy all began in ancient Greece and this has led to a Eurocentric world view. The truth of the matter is that many cultures and civilizations have contributed to the development of mathematics, science and philosophy, and this fact must be acknowledged and amplified. Some historians and scholars, to counter the Eurocentric view of history, have posited an “Afro-centric view” and have offered much evidence for this viewpoint. This has generated a great deal of controversy. For instance, Cheikh Anta Diop had proposed the theory that all of humanity was born in Kenya and that this was a black race that migrated to other parts of the world. After countless millennia, the pigmentation of their skin changed to

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adapt to the colder climates where there was less sunlight. This resulted in the lighter-skinned races. This theory has now been supported by the latest scientific evidence. In a recent article in *Nature* by I. Olalde et al., there is a report of a genetic analysis of two ancient European archaeological specimens, nicknamed “La Brana 1” and “La Brana 2”, from 7,000 years ago that revealed they had dark skin. Perhaps, Adam and Eve were black.

What I would like to propose is the thesis that modern civilization arose from a varied number of sources, the primary ones being African and Asian. This is not an original idea. It has been proposed by others before and has met with much criticism and controversy. But the latest researches in science are supporting the thesis that Greek civilization had roots in Africa and Asia.

In his three-volume epic work *Black Athena*, Martin Bernal argues that classical civilization, which we normally attribute to the Greeks, had Afro-Asiatic roots. Indeed, his first volume is titled “The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985” and his central thesis is that prior to the 18th

century, historians and scholars generally agreed about the varied sources of modern civilization and its indebtedness to ancient Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, India, China and the Middle East. But in the 18th and 19th centuries, at the height of European colonialism, a diabolical idea emerged regarding racial superiority. This idea fit snugly with post-Darwinian thought and led to the justification of both slavery and colonialism. Prior to the two world wars, we can see in the writings of many historians and philosophers the emergence of an anti-Semitic world view in which the contributions of the earlier civilizations (primarily the Egyptians and Phoenicians) had been expunged and the world presented with a pristine world view of the "Greek miracle." But then, new discoveries in "British India" of highly advanced ancient civilizations and cultures, as well as the new revelations regarding the Sanskrit language, led to the theory of "Aryan invasion" of India, and slowly, as the origin of the Aryans was pushed back to Northern Europe, the "Aryan model" of world history emerged. In the first volume of *Black Athena*, Bernal writes,

There is also no doubt that the contemporary passion for India drew European attention to the Aryan invasions of the subcontinent from the north. It took very little imagination to transpose from these invasions – which are attested in Indian tradition -- to Greece, where there were no extant records of such a conquest.¹⁶

This replaced the "Ancient model" which recognized the multi-national and multi-cultural contributions to modern civilization and thus the Eurocentric world view was galvanized into place. In his work, Bernal proposes a "revised Ancient model" to replace the current model. This leads one to adopt a "multi-cultural world view," which is more consonant with the evidence.

Bernal writes,

If I am right in urging the overthrow of the Aryan Model and its replacement by the Revised Ancient one, it will be necessary not only to rethink the fundamental bases of 'Western Civilization' but also to recognize the penetration of racism and 'continental chauvinism' into all our historiography, or philosophy of writing history. The Ancient Model had no major 'internal' deficiencies, or weaknesses in explanatory power. It was overthrown for external reasons. For 18th and 19th-century Romantics and racists it was simply intolerable for Greece, which was seen not merely as the epitome of Europe but also as its pure childhood, to have been the result of the mixture of native Europeans and colonizing Africans and Semites. Therefore the Ancient Model had to be overthrown and replaced by something more acceptable.¹⁷

According to Bernal, the Ancient Model is that Greece had been greatly influenced by Africa (notably Egypt) and Asia and that this is recorded in the writings of Aeschylus, Euripides, Herodotus and others.¹⁸ This model was accepted and acknowledged by European academics until the middle of the 18th century, at which time there was a deliberate re-writing of history. "In the new period of systematic racism," Bernal writes, "the eighteenth-century image of the Greeks changed progressively from that of intermediaries who had transmitted some part of the civilization and wisdom of the

"East" to the "West" into that of the very creators of civilization."¹⁹ Bernal proceeds to document how this academic dishonesty of the 18th-century historians and philosophers conspired with imperial interests to secure and consolidate power and wealth for the empire. To give some specific instances, the great empiricist of the British enlightenment David Hume wrote,

I am apt to suspect negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilised nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of whites, such as the ancient Germans, and present Tartars, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen in so many countries and ages if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men.²⁰

James Mill, the father of John Stuart Mill, wrote his ten-volume *History of British India* in 1818 and this became required reading for anyone going to India as an agent of the British Empire. Though he had never been to India, and though all his "information" was from garbled and biased accounts of Europeans returning from India, he wrote with characteristic arrogance and cocksure certainty passages such as the following:

Should we say that the civilization of the people of Hindustan, and that of the people of Europe, during the feudal ages, are not far from equal, we shall find upon a close inspection, that the Europeans were superior, in the first place, . . . in point of manners and character, the manliness and courage of our ancestors, compared with the slavish and dastardly spirit of the Hindus, place them in an elevated rank.²¹

In his work, Bernal discusses various factors that motivated Mill to write his history. As a result of this work, he and John Stuart Mill both became high officials in the East India Company. But apart from the economic reason for the project, what, Bernal asks, was the psychological reason behind it?

Clearly, what attracted him was not India itself but the British activities on the subcontinent. In this regard it is interesting to note that in May 1804 his *Literary Journal* contained a review of two volumes entitled *Indian Recreations* by William Tennant, a chaplain who had spent many years in India. Both the author and the reviewer were thoroughly disparaging about Indians, who, according to them, "had no history" and for whom British rule was a liberation. The newly established dogma that only Europeans were capable of having "histories," alone necessitated Mill's title *History of British India*.²²

What follows are a few more examples illustrating the prevailing racial attitudes:

Thomas Henry Huxley, the great scientist and philosopher of the 19th century, wrote in 1871 that "No rational man, cognizant of the facts, be-

believes that the average negro is the equal, still less the superior, of the white man. . . . The highest places in the hierarchy of civilization will assuredly not be within the reach of our dusky cousins.”²³

In 1858, Abraham Lincoln said,

I am not, nor ever have been, in favour of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races; that I am not, nor ever have been, in favour of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people, and I will say, in addition to this, that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And in as much as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favour of having the superior position assigned to the white race.²⁴

Of course, Lincoln goes on to say that the negro is his equal “in the right to eat bread”!

Thus the philosophers and historians of the 18th and 19th centuries contributed in a fundamental way to the expansion and consolidation of imperialism and the enslavement of colored races around the world. With such luminaries at the helm, it would be no exaggeration to say that this diabolical paradigm of race erupted in the two world wars of the 20th century. Bernal writes,

The paradigm of ‘races’ that were intrinsically unequal in physical and mental endowment was applied to all human studies, but especially to history. It was now considered undesirable, if not disastrous, for races to mix. To be creative, a civilization needed to be ‘racially pure’. Thus it became increasingly intolerable that Greece — which was seen by the Romantics not merely as the epitome of Europe but also as its pure childhood — could be the result of the mixture of native Europeans and colonizing Africans and Semites.²⁵

Given the pernicious history of racism, we can well understand why

Vivekananda would write that civilization has not yet begun.

The challenges of the present must be viewed as opportunities for humanity. If our history has been marred by violence, we must counter that with non-violence. This was an impressive underlying theme of the 20th century in which countless spiritual personalities in many countries and cultures arose to teach us the way of non-violence, beginning with Mahatma Gandhi. In his autobiography, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “Gandhi was able to mobilize and galvanize more people in his lifetime than any other person in the history of this world. And just with a little love and understanding goodwill and a refusal to co-operate with an evil law, he was able to break the backbone of the British Empire. This, I think was one of the significant things that ever happened in the history of the world.”²⁶

Even after Gandhi, the problem of racial prejudice and inequality exists. The challenge of the 21st century is to break out of these racist paradigms and build a new planetary civilization in which all races and nations participate. We are far from this ideal since we are still trapped by the walls of racial prejudice. However, we have made some infinitesimal progress through the struggles of spiritual giants like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., and this gives us hope. Still, more work needs to be done.

Almost a century ago, Rabindranath Tagore had identified this planetary problem and warned that humanity must come together and build a new world or face annihilation:

The whole world is becoming one country through scientific facility. And the moment is arriving when you also must find a basis of unity which is not political. If India can offer to the world her solution, it will be a contribution to humanity. There is only one history — the history of mankind. All national histories are merely chapters to the larger one.²⁷

Examining Indian history from ancient times, Tagore concluded that from time immemorial, India has been trying to solve the problem of racial harmony now confronting the planet. Related to race is the question of culture and multiculturalism. Several European countries have declared that multiculturalism doesn’t work and have initiated laws to that effect. There is quite a bit of tension on this question around the world. We must search for a practical solution.

In a lecture delivered in America in 1917, Tagore said,

If education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man, and civilization is measured by the extent to which we have given expression to this divinity, then it follows that civilization must be measured at least by our expression of humanity.

The problem of race unity which we have been trying to solve for so many years has likewise to be faced by you here in America. Many people in this country ask me what is happening as to the caste distinctions in India. But when this question is asked me, it is usually done with a superior air. And I feel tempted to put the same question to our American critics with a slight modification. 'What have you done with the Red Indian and the Negro?' For you have not got over your attitude of caste toward them. You have used violent methods to keep aloof from other races, but until you have solved the question here in America, you have no right to question India.²⁸

Of course, this is no answer to the question as Tagore was well aware of it. So he said,

In spite of our great difficulty, however, India has done something. She has tried to make an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them where they exist and yet seek for some basis of unity. This basis has come through our saints, like Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya, and others preaching one God to all races of India.²⁹

To clarify, Tagore is not saying one religion, but one God. For countless millennia, the saints and sages of India have given the eternal truth that by whatever name you address God, whether it is Ishvara or Allah, we are all praying to the same eternal Reality. This is the message of the harmony of religions, exemplified dramatically in the life of Sri Ramakrishna.

After having written his treatise on world history, Toynbee wrote,

Today we are still living in this transitional chapter of the world's history, but it is already becoming clear that a chapter which had a Western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in the self-destruction of the human race. ... At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is an Indian way. ... Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violence and Sri Ramakrishna's testimony to the harmony of religions; here we have the attitude and the spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family – and in the Atomic Age, this is the only alternative to destroying ourselves.³⁰

The extent to which the human race can put this into practice will determine if we have, as a world community, started our march towards civilization. According to Vivekananda, this march must begin with education. In an interview in *Prabuddha Bharata* in 1898, Vivekananda said "true education . . . is not yet conceived of amongst us." When asked how he would define "education", he replied, "I never define anything. Still, it may be described as the development of faculty, not an accumulation of words, or as a training of the individual to will rightly and efficiently."³¹ In our information age, we are apt to confuse information with education. Warning us presciently against this, Vivekananda wrote, "Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all

your life. We must have life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas. If you have assimilated five ideas and made them your life and character, you have more education than any man who has got by heart a whole library."³² From this passage, we begin to converge on Vivekananda's idea of education as character-building. Again, in a lecture on "Breathing", he elaborates: "Education is not filling the mind with a lot of facts. Perfecting the instrument and getting complete mastery of my own mind is the ideal of education."³³

This brings us to the essential point. If education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man, and civilization is measured by the extent to which we have given expression to this divinity, then it follows that civilization must be measured at least by our expression of humanity. In this age of scientific atheism, this may be a better measurement, since clearly we are not there yet. The human being has infinite potential. The goal is to express this through work or worship, through knowledge or psychic control, or by any combination of these. That is the essence of religion and if we practise it in earnest, we will have embarked on our march towards civilization.

It seems fitting to conclude with the following quotation of the West Indian poet Aimé Césaire, who wrote, "But the work of man is only just beginning and it remains to conquer all the violence entrenched in the recesses of his passion and no race possesses the monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of force, and there is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory."³⁴

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NOTES

- 1 *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (hereafter referred to as CW), Volume 3, p. 114.
- 2 There is a famous joke regarding an American reporter who asked Mahatma Gandhi what he thought of Western civilization, to which Gandhi replied, "I think it will be a good ideal"
- 3 Arnold Toynbee, in: Introduction to World Thinkers on Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, p 6.
- 4 CW, Volume 3, p. 114
- 5 CW, Vol. 2, p. 27.
- 6 Sri Aurobindo, *Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 454.
- 7 CW, Volume 5, p. 308.
- 8 CW, Volume 4, p. 358.
- 9 Matthew 5.48.
- 10 CW, Volume 4, p. 144.
- 11 CW, Volume 4, p. 357.
- 12 CW, Volume 4, p. 358.
- 13 CW, Volume 1, p. 124.
- 14 Voltaire, *Les lettres d'Amabed* (1769), septieme lettre d'Amabed.
- 15 A. Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, Volume 2, Section 92.
- 16 M. Bernal, p. 318.
- 17 M. Bernal, p. 2.
- 18 M. Bernal, *Black Athena Writes Back*, 2001, Duke University Press, p. 3.
- 19 Ibid., pp. 4-5.
- 20 D. Hume, p. 86.
- 21 James Mill, *History of British India*, Volume 2, pp. 210-211.
- 22 M. Bernal, *Black Athena writes back*, p. 228.

23 T.H. Huxley, *Lay Sermons, Addresses, and Reviews*, New York, Appleton, 1871.

24 See p. 138 of *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates and the Making of a President*, by Timothy S. Good, McFarland and Company, 2007.

25 Martin Bernal, *Black Athena*, Volume 1, p. 29.

26 Martin Luther King Jr., *Autobiography*, edited by Clayborne Carson, Warner Books, 1998, p. 129.

27 Rabindranath Tagore, "Nationalism in India", p.2.

28 Ibid., p. 1.

29 Ibid., p. 1.

30 Arnold Toynbee, in: *Introduction to World Thinkers on Ramakrishna and Vivekananda*, p 6.

31 CW, Volume 5, p. 231.

32 CW, Volume 3, p. 302.

33 CW, Volume 1, p. 510.

34 Aimé Césaire, *Return to my native land*, Penguin, 1969, p. 85

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What We Believe In

By Swami Vivekananda

(from: Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Volume 4 pp. 356-360)

I agree with you so far that faith is a wonderful insight and that it alone can save; but there is the danger in it of breeding fanaticism and barring further progress.

Swami Vivekananda
Theosophy: Inner duty - beyond duty
beyond qualities - I have done this



Photo Credit: Wikipedia

Swami Vivekananda

Jnana is all right; but there is the danger of its becoming dry intellectualism. Love is great and noble; but it may die away in meaningless sentimentalism.

A harmony of all these is the thing required. Ramakrishna was such a harmony. Such beings are few and far between; but keeping him and his teachings as the ideal, we can move on. And if amongst us, each one may not individually attain to that perfection, still

we may get it collectively by counteracting, equipoising, adjusting, and fulfilling one another. This would be harmony by a number of persons and a decided advance on all other forms and creeds.

For a religion to be effective, enthusiasm is necessary. At the same time we must try to avoid the danger of multiplying creeds. We avoid that by being a non-sectarian sect, having all the advantages of a sect and the broadness of a universal religion...

We believe that every being is divine, is God. Every soul is a sun covered over with clouds of ignorance, the difference between soul and soul is owing to the difference in density of these layers of clouds. We believe that this is the conscious or unconscious basis of all religions and that this is the explanation of the whole history of human progress either in the material, intellectual, or spiritual plane — the same Spirit is manifesting through different planes. ...

We believe that it is the duty of every soul to treat, think of, and behave to other souls as such, i.e. as Gods, and not hate or despise, or vilify, or try to injure them by any manner or means. This is the duty not only of the Sannyasin, but of all men and women. ...

Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.

Religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man.

Therefore the only duty of the teacher in both cases is to remove all obstructions from the way. Hands off! as I always say, and everything will be all right. That is, our duty is to clear the way. The Lord does the rest.