

# THE VALUE OF FALLING APART

by Sam Oh Neill

It takes some time to be able to talk about something like this. An emotional breakdown is a deeply personal thing. Old fears subside but similar feelings bring back those stronger sensations. When you talk about such an experience people are struck with confusion and fear: why is he telling such a personal story—uh oh, that could be me. Some people have shared with me their own experience with personal crisis. There is no sign of mental weakness or personal flaw, only a strong sense of growth. Yet, we have trouble admitting that we have fallen apart. I think it is important to share my experience and explain what I have been able to learn about myself and the kind of workplace we need.

I usually start from the point of the breakdown but there were factors that led to that moment. I had chosen to leave a position where I was well respected. I was doing an excellent job and decided to take a job in a classroom with very volatile students. I was dropped in with no transition plan. All attempts to make up for the lack of forethought tended to make matters worse. The principal quickly concluded that I had somehow fooled her into making a hiring mistake. In a meeting she openly wondered how she had made the mistake. One day she came unannounced with the superintendent into the classroom. I had been careful to contact the union when I had become aware that things were not right. The union arranged that I would be found a different assignment and the superintendent, literally, waved off any formal complaint from the principal. Despite a whole department of people trained to observe unusual behaviour, no one, least of all me, had noticed that I had gone into shock.

I worked at the new assignment for three years. I got involved in theatre productions designing sets. I sat on committees. I went through the motions and fulfilled the role of someone working in school. My work in the classroom was not nearly as inspired as it had been in the job before that traumatic event, except for the occasional brilliant idea. There are always people who pick up on weakness and either help or attack. An EA, I learned from another EA, had been sabotaging my authority in the classroom. I went into work, provided programs and followed the rules. My passion for teaching was fading and that EA had some small influence.

Driving to work one day I found I could not see the road. My eyes had filled with tears. I had to pull over. I called home. I asked my wife: Do you love me? Of course she said yes. I told her I was falling apart. She said I should do what I needed and that she would be there for me. That part was very important.

The look of shock on the secretary's face as I darted into the office spoke volumes. Speaking with the principal I was surprised when she was very supportive. I took time off for counselling, but was determined to finish the year. When I returned, the V.P. invited me into his office. He told me some kid he had

cut from a team once had thanked him. The kid had never wanted to play. The next year I was transferred to teach in alternative education. I had become one of those teachers shuffled from school to school because there was a problem.

What was the problem? At the core I had not changed. What counselling, and in an odd way that V.P.'s story, showed was that I had lost sight of my purpose. Falling apart strips everything down. It helps to be able to look from the perspective of starting anew. I started asking questions: What did I want from teaching? What would I do other than teach? What was the purpose of teaching? Things started to fall into place as I started to seek answers for these and other such questions.

The very personal confrontation with my own developmental process helped me to recall that the reason I got into education was a fascination with how it is that people become. I began to inquire into the purpose of schooling. I got involved in every initiative. Working in alternative education with students on the fringe of disenfranchisement helped with this internal quest especially as it broadened out to the purpose for schooling.

We spend so much time caring for the developmental and academic needs of our students that we forget that we are developing also. Those in the thick of a crisis don't know that they are not even meeting the students' needs. They are simply surviving their days. It takes courage to have a conversation that recognizes the need of a colleague. Everyone knows, at some level, how a breakdown feels. It makes people nervous. Everyone has felt themselves slipping. They fear the possibility. Administrators need to be aware and not simply assume that the person is not fit for the job. Staff as well as students, need a humane approach.

We must define our own purpose and bind our actions to it. This realization has helped in my approach to my students as they seek to discover themselves. It has improved my relations with colleagues. I have had valued conversations on reasons for working in schools. For anyone to involve themselves in the process of another's learning is an exceptional thing. Learning goes beyond school and teaching is more than meeting curricular demands.

The value of falling apart is that we get to see all the pieces anew. A terrifying thing when it happens, we are able to clear through things peripheral to the real work of schools. That work is in developing people to become able to think for themselves. That doesn't just apply to the students. Schools can be about learning. Learning is a human endeavour that helps us discover ourselves.

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