Choice Assignment: Growing Forward

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***“Change always starts with confusion; cherished interpretations***

***must dissolve to make way for the new” (Wheatly, 2002, p. 18)***

I began this school year, knowing that it was going to be a big year of change. After five years, my current school, Yorkson Creek Middle School (YCMS) had grown far beyond capacity, so a new middle school was opening leaving the population of YCMS cut in half. Thus, at the beginning of the year, there was an obvious sense of loss and change in the building. Many of us looked at each other, waiting for the loud chaotic buzz, which we had all grown accustomed to. Instead the halls seemed empty, the staff room was a ghost town, YCMS had experienced its own Avengers snap, half of the lively culture gone. Our school community had lost half the students and half the staff, leaving the building mourning for what it had lost, whilst being placed into a state of newness. As a member of the opening staff, I had been a part of the school community since the beginning, I had chosen to stay, to play a role in the reboot of culture and community that we had been forced into.

During the first class, we were prompted to reflect on our current school community, and in that moment, I realized that I truly was in a place of flux around how I felt. At that moment, I took the time to begin critical reflection on the state of the school in the wake of the split. I had already begun to question my place in the aftermath. Had I made the right decision, was I ready for the hard work of rebuilding community and moving forward with a new direction in a building where I had invested so much already in creating an inclusive culture.

It was amidst this quiet reflective time, that I imagined YCMS as an over pruned tree, and started to view schools as trees. Through this metaphor, I hoped that I could answer some the questions I was grappling with, most importantly whether I was branch that was destined to stay, or should I have been pruned as well? Did I belong on the branches of the new tree?

***“Talking about teaching through metaphors can make us available to ourselves,***

***and to each other, in fresh and surprising ways.” ~ Parker Palmer***

A tree is quite simply planted in a spot and there it grows. Schools are built on the land provided to them, in the community that it will service. At first, it is simply a seedling, a shell of building with all the necessary pieces for it to grow. Schools cannot change the soil they have been planted on, for this is the community they are given. Each year, it grows stronger and taller, based on the programs and the people who grow together, alongside one another to create the tree. Teacher’s like branches grow in different directions, but hopefully in balance, for the health of the tree. We are all individuals, but our individual branches come together to create a vibrant and healthy tree.

The environmental factors that the tree is exposed to include school board initiatives, government influences, and the union. These influences are often outside the control of the tree, but they do have influence on the overall health of the tree. An environmental factor, the need to open a new school, impacted YCMS this year, for its size became too much for the soil. It became necessary for the tree to be divided in half, to be over pruned.

Moderate pruning each year promotes new growth, it strengths the tree, it makes. Therefore, as teachers and students come and go, these small adjustments help the overall health and long-term viability of the tree. As the tree grows, some branches may break off or go in their own direction, but these changes are usually subtle and often go unnoticed, for they have little impact on the health of the tree. However, over pruning does have an impact. When over pruning a tree, it becomes susceptible to disease, it needs special attention and care. The tree becomes vulnerable to infection and dissent, it is harder to fight off the disease without a healthy tree. It is in this state of over pruning that I am left wondering, how do we ensure we prevent the tree from getting infected? How do we ensure that toxicity doesn’t get into the roots? How do we grow together? How do we grow in a healthy direction? What happens if I don’t want to be part of this tree anymore? Should I have chosen to be pruned? These are just some of the questions I have been grappling with as I try to make sense of my place in the wake of such a massive change in school composition and culture. I find myself searching for a solution as to how community can be maintained and/or move forward in the face of loss. Ultimately, trying to make sense of whether I want to move forward in the community and how do I and those around me stay healthy in the midst of such massive change?

***“We have a hard time talking to each other without falling into competition and even***

***combat, into an unconscious rhythm of defense and offense that allows***

***for little openness and growth” (Palmer, 1993, p. 10).***

***“As educators, we need not only to resist the notion that our institutions are immutable, but to take responsibility for instituting and implementing***

***the needed liberating changes”*(Shield & Edwards, 2005, p. 115)**

Mind swirling with questions, this is where I was finding myself ‘stuck’, wondering what may come out the change, while watching teachers retreat to their corners, unwilling to engage unless it suited their personal agenda. Truthfully, I believe that YCMS has had a history competing agendas, even before the split into two schools. Did the split just expose them at some greater level? When the school first opened, it was after a brutal strike; furthermore, we first met and bonded as a staff on the picket line, griping over a variety of factors. After the strike, the first staff meeting started with the principal telling us that we were all thoroughbreds, the best of the best that had chosen to come to this amazing school. You’d think this would create a positive base culture; however, I believe that it left many teachers confident that their initiatives were perfect and that they did not need to consider the perspectives of others. Now, in the wake of change, many of these teachers have stayed and under new leadership. They are now getting defensive of their views and their programs, stating that they came to this school with the promise of that; however, it is no longer the same school. The early tones of this fall became less about moving forward together and more about ensuring individual agendas were secured in place. I believe, that in thriving building, we are all learners that are open to learning, because we feel safe, there is a sense of belonging among the staff. When staff feel as if they belong, they are more willing to be vulnerable and open to new ideas, and less protective of their own agendas. However, at the first sign of perceived trouble it is easy to get stuck on what we believe is best, and struggle to listen to the messages of others.

In its currently over pruned state, it has been difficult for many on the staff at YCMS to have tough conversations about moving forward. My perception is that many view some of the changes as personal attacks versus opportunities to move forward in a new, stronger direction. Since September, there have been several time where I’m sitting in meetings where nothing is getting accomplished. Why? Because no one is listening, no one is engaging in genuine conversations. I have been struggling to push my bias away and try and see the whole picture, where is this all going? Is it the right directions for me? These moments lead to confusion about how I can move forward with this staff or even if I can. Nevertheless, I keep holding onto hope that the majority of the staff does not want to be in this state, I trust that many of them want us to build a healthy striving community for both staff and students.

***“The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student***

***accomplishments than anything else” (Barth, 2006, p. 1)***

***“We have to listen more, not less. And we have to be willing to move into the very uncomfortable place of uncertainty” (Wheatly, 2002, p. 18).***

Since September, I have been trying to put my finger on a solution or an explanation for why I felt so uneasy and negative at work this year. As I bounced around my tree metaphor and read and read and read, I had my final aha moment during a professional development session in Nashville. Rick Wormeli was discussing reflective coaching and during the presentation, he talked about how difficult change can be for teachers. He went on to state that there is grief in accepting new ideas, that there needs to be some sorrow and pain for us to properly move through change. In that moment, I realized that YCMS is currently experiencing a mourning process, one where we have lost some of our identity, which included some of our colleagues, and our programs. In essence, the school is going through Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief (*On Death and Dying*, 1969): Denial/Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. YCMS is in mourning and with this becomes the need for us to move through one or more of these stages. We have all be forced to let go of something we held dearly, whether it was a colleague, a program, or the different sense of community that came with being such a large school. Moving through one or more stages individually and collectively is an important process as we now must accept the new reality, for we have to let go of something we once valued. There needs to be room for sorrow, as we accept the new reality of our school. Upon further reflection, I began to realize that this is where some of the dissent and arguments are most likely stemming from. It is quite possible that all of us are at different stages of the grief process; as a result, coming together becomes more difficult. For if we are all at different stages of accepting the new reality not all of us are ready to acknowledge the sadness and move through the pain. If people are not ready, how can they start working together for the overall health of the tree? As individuals within the greater structure of the tree, we tell each other our own truths each day. We hold on to the truths we believe, because we do not want to feel the pain or the sorrow that comes with the change. As we grieve, it is natural to let our egos can stand in the way. Ego is an easy defense mechanism, for we know ourselves best and therefore I know best. However, in order to heal we need to lean into the sorrow, be vulnerable, take opportunities to mourn together. We need to honour what was and find ways to create what can be possible

***“All systems go through life cycles. There’s progress, setbacks, seasons. When a new effort begins, it feels like spring” (Wheatley, 2011, p. 10).***

As a person who has experienced extreme loss in my personal life, I took time to pull back the lens on YCMS and look at the situation through a sensitivity that people in the building are experiencing loss and are grieving. Through this larger picture I can see that teachers are not necessarily competing for their own agendas, instead they are ‘bargaining’ to make sense of their new reality as well. We are all finding ways to move forward as a result of the loss of friends, programs, even the pure energy that a large school brings with it each day. As such I am brought back what I believe was my biggest question: do I want to move forward in the community and how do I and those around me stay healthy in the midst of such massive change?

***“Let's extend the compassion to others we seek for ourselves and honor the grief process that happens when asked to give up something we've held so tightly all these years—a truth, reality, perception, or practice—as they struggle to accept something new. Instead of leaving them to struggle alone, we can walk that path together”(Wormeli, 2018).***

***“When leaders take the time to be sincerely aware of their staffs’ emotions, teachers feel that their leaders care about them and will be loyal and committed” (Moore, 2018, p. 76)***

Through quite reflection, reading, and discussions with those close to me, I have come to this conclusion: I know I need to stay as a leader within this community of learners right now. I need to help it move forward and support the vision of the other leaders in the building. I need to stay and help the school heal. I believe that if I leave, I will become one more aspect of the tree that others will mourn. I have faith that together as a staff we can heal the tree. We need to recognize that the change cannot be undone, that we cannot return to what was, but we can move forward towards something better. It is time to fight off potential disease and come together. Together, through open dialogue, honest conversations and active listening, we can grow into a stronger, more balanced tree. I need to be honoured to have the chance to once again grow with some amazing people. It is time to grow forward.

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