

Teachers as Professionals: Caring for our Backbone

by Ardith Shirley, NBTA Staff Officer

This fall has been a challenging one for me. Early in September, I triggered an old back injury and as a result have struggled with a significant limp and reduced mobility.

They say you don't truly appreciate what you've got 'til it's gone. My experiences over the last six weeks have reinforced this fact. I have been frustrated - Woe is me! I have been bitter - Why me? I have even found myself in weaker moments resentful of those who aren't afflicted. (They have no idea what I am going through!) Although I try hard not to be negative and miserable towards these ungrateful "healthy backed" souls, I often fail. I spend my waking moments consumed with thoughts of all of the things I want to do, but can't. I do not like this vulnerable version of myself who is stuck in a "victim" mindset.

I long for the days when I too, can take my mobility for granted - to run up & down a flight of stairs without a second thought - to choose which shoes to wear based on style and comfort rather than function and stability. I swear that if I am ever better I will never take another day of a "healthy back" for granted. I vow to do every core strengthening exercise known to human kind faithfully three times every day if only I can just "get back to normal".

Sadly, if history repeats itself, when my mobility is restored (and I pray it will be!); over time, I will begin to take my health for granted again and in the words of the 1989 Canadian rapper Maestro Fresh Wes, "let my backbone slide". After all, it takes a great deal of daily discipline, self-regulation, time and energy to maintain and improve my spine. Many days it seems to require more time and energy than I have. Over time, I will forget that without a healthy backbone, everything I want to do, and be, is compromised.

I acknowledge that the all-consuming nature of this personal experience is probably shaping the way I view my professional world. Margaret Wheatley would suggest that it is in our nature to look for patterns to make meaning. It is no coincidence, that thoughts of some recent interac-

tions with wonderful, professional teachers who are struggling daily with significant systemic "ailments" - class composition issues, lack of proper resources to support



inclusion, increased technological expectations and frustrations, increasing demands met with decreasing resources (the list could go on!) - remind me somewhat of my own battle. Perhaps it is my own "victim" mindset that causes me to pick up on vibes of "That's just the way it is in education today", "Nothing will change so why bother?" "It's just easier to put up and shut up" or "I just don't have the energy to take on that battle this week - someone else

will have to..." Suddenly it occurs to me - Is it possible that as I battle with my own back issues my profession may be struggling to maintain its backbone as well?

As this question began to reverberate through my head, I happened upon an article written by Parker Palmer (one of my favourite professional authors) that I had not chanced upon before - *A NEW Professional: The Aims of Education Revisited*. The following excerpt jumped off the page at me:

"We professionals—who by any standard are among the most powerful people in any society—have a bad habit of telling ourselves victim stories to excuse unprofessional behavior: "The devil [read, 'the system'] made me do it."

*We are conditioned to think this way. The hidden curriculum of our culture portrays institutions as powers other than us, over which we have marginal control at best—powers that will harm us if we cross them. But while we may find ourselves marginalized or dismissed for calling institutions to account, they are neither other than us nor alien to us: **institutions are us**. The shadows that institutions cast over our ethical lives are external expressions of our own inner shadows, individual and collective. If institutions are rigid, it is because we fear change. If institutions are competitive, it is because we value winning over*

all else. If institutions are heedless of human need, it is because something in us also is heedless.

If we are even partly responsible for creating institutional dynamics, we also possess the power to alter them.

Only when we become accountable for the darkness we create will we be able to evoke "the better angels of our nature," inner sources of light that make both individuals and institutions more humane."

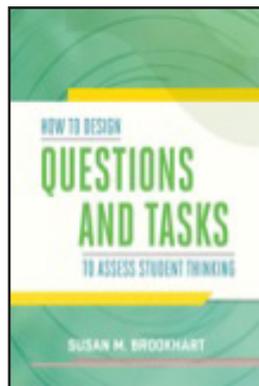
As teachers, we must not forget - **without a healthy backbone, everything we want to do, and be, is compromised — a victim mindset is not our option.** There is no denying that it takes a great deal of daily discipline, self-regulation, time and energy to maintain and improve our professionalism and the schools, classrooms, districts and system in which we work. Many days it feels overwhelming. That said, if we can see past the immediate pain of "taking on that battle today", and remind one another that as professional teachers we are "among the most powerful in any society" perhaps the hope for brighter days ahead can be restored for us and by extension our students and communities.

Here's to taking on the work it requires to maintain our healthy backbone!

Ardith

Book Give-Away!

Congratulations to **Colleen Clarkson** of Devon Middle School in ASD-W who is the winner of the September book draw. A copy of Myron Dueck's "Grading Smarter not Harder: Assessment Strategies that Motivate Kids and Help Them Learn" is on it's way to you! This month 's give away is "**How to Design Questions and Tasks to Assess Student Thinking**" by Susan M. Brookhart. Sound interesting? Drop me an email with the subject line "Book Draw" before November 30th.



May I Recommend?

The October issue of Phi Delta Kappan magazine is titled "Exploring Classroom Management" and is FULL of excellent articles around this theme. A couple of my favourites included Jonathan Eckert's, "Teach Like a Novice: Lessons from Beginning Teachers" (pp. 13-18) and Jones, Bailey and Jacobs' "Social-emotional Learning is Essential to Classroom Management" (pp. 19-24).

As we prepare to embrace a new, more balanced provincial standardized assessment regime, I found Rick Stiggin's article (also in Kappan, p.67-72) "Improve Assessment Literacy Outside of Schools Too" to be very worthwhile. Stiggins reminds us that, "assessment is a teaching and learning tool – not merely a grading tool." He also includes his version of a "Student's Bill of Assessment Rights" highlighting five rights that he champions that students are entitled.

"Which teaching strategy works best?" This is a question that many ask (...) It's an earnest question, but it's a bit like walking into a gym and asking a trainer, "so which exercise is best?" The answer, of course, depends on where you are in your fitness regime and what you are trying to accomplish." (Bryan Goodman, Educational Leadership, October 2014, pp.77.)

"In almost every elementary classroom, you'll see students reading aloud and answering questions about what they've read. It's time for that to change." Richard L. Allington, Reading Moves: What NOT to do, Educational Leadership, October 2014, pp.17-21.



Closing Quote:

***"Even when life (as a teacher) challenges us,
it's a gift beyond all measure."***

— Parker Palmer