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Essay on dealing with rejection in academic career

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The academic life, even a “successful” one, is a life filled with rejection. We are rejected from some of the colleges we apply to as high school students, as well as some of the universities where we apply to undertake graduate study. When we graduate yet again and seek academic appointments, rejection becomes an ever-present force as never before, so common in fact that the employers rejecting us have pre-prepared form letters, which they often reuse from year to year, made up to deliver the news, sending them out well beyond the day when we have already realized that we didn’t get the job.

Even after we are installed in an academic appointment, of any variety, rejection is as present and real as ever. When it comes to publishing, even top scholars quickly become reacquainted with rejection, as it is a routine part of the effort to publish scholarly work. Rejection of academics includes students who refuse to engage our courses, never responding to our methods. Rejection is a phenomenon that confronts all teacher-scholars.

When that form letter that patronizingly thanks us for our applications but rejects us for a job arrives, or when we receove yet another article rejection, someone professionally important to us, perhaps a friend or mentor, will almost inevitably advise us not to take the rejection personally. But being told not to take a rejection personally is for many of us, I’d be willing to wager, somewhat akin to being told “Don’t worry” immediately after being diagnosed with a serious illness. Of course we will worry, and of course we will take it personally. It’s a pretty normal, totally standard human reaction to disappointing news, particularly because the production of academic work requires so much of us, so much of ourselves to produce. At least a small part of us, ourselves, our person, feels as though it has been rejected.

And the advice not to “take it personally” can be almost as bothersome that the rejection itself. We are told that we are not of good “fit” for that job, or that our article was perhaps merely pitched to the wrong journal. Don’t take it personally. And yet, we often do. We often take it personally. It doesn’t matter that the platitudes not to take it personally are, more often than not, the voices of reason, sage wisdom, clichéd, indeed, for very good reasons.

But, dammit, it is personal. Because you poured all of yourself into those job application materials. You worked long hours writing and rewriting and proofreading and soliciting advice before sending off that article draft. A little sliver of you kind of did die.

Over the past several years I have begun to learn what it means to not take personally something that is, in fact, deeply personal. I referee wrestling and lacrosse in my “spare” time, and where I encounter no shortage of external judgment on a regular basis. When an irate coach suddenly explodes and screams that I’m “a blind son-of-a-bitch” who’s always blowing calls, it’s almost by definition personal. He has insulted me, directly, publicly, in front of both strangers and people I

respect, in the course of work that I do well and in the context of a sport that I love. But officiating at increasing high levels of competition has taught me, through sheer necessity, how not to react personally. No matter how inappropriate or offensive a coach, player, or fan's behavior toward an official may become, the official is never to react.

At least, not on the same terms. On the field of play, to react in the manner of the offender, by yelling or gesturing, is to lose control, to fall to the level of the offending party, and to lose one's authority as the official responsible for the safe, fair, and sportsmanlike conduct of the game. While the contests of sport are only roughly analogous to the various academic rejections, the most important piece of advice is not to react to rejection personally.

We may need to take something personally, at least temporarily, in order to shoulder through it. By feeling the pain of rejection, rather than stifling it, we may better prepare ourselves to keep working toward our goals. If we haven't reacted personally, and if we, after an appropriate amount of mourning, stop feeling personally rejected, life and career can continue.

Even though I'm advocating here, as some sort of an amateur psychologist with no relevant credentials, that you allow yourself to feel and process the feeling of rejection, that feeling must be compartmentalized. While a rejection for a job or an article submission certainly is painful and certainly is a rejection, dwelling on it makes it harder to apply for the next job, harder to send out the next article draft. Such hesitancy is a formula for career disaster.

This is — I think — what people really mean when they advise each other not to take something personally. They mean for us not to take the rejection as one that applies to our entire selves, of our entire person, and are trying to prevent us from extrapolating a single incidence or even series of rejections — the job, the article — into a negative perception of our entire professional lives.

Finally, I think there's a case to be made that our own experiences with and of rejection ought to help us cultivate empathy for our students. Where you see, say, a C- on student paper as a frank assessment of the composition's merits, a student may see a crushing rejection of a paper into which he or she had poured tremendous effort. If nothing else, our experiences of professional rejection ought to teach us how not to personalize our students' own failures and missteps as they progress through their own academic careers, whether undergraduate or graduate. We can, through honest but not hurtful language, lessen the sting of our students' rejections, which might also make them more receptive to instruction.

In those cases where the rejection is not indeed personal, and in those exceedingly rare cases where maybe the rejection actually is the result of some personal grudge, it's essential not to react personally. We stand to gain nothing, except perhaps the fleeting satisfaction of a hot temper briefly sated. Solicit feedback on the rejection from colleagues and mentors. Keep applying, keep writing.
