

Some Reflections on Rejection

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When I first came to Wesleyan in 1963, I remember attending athletic contests at which my alma mater, Trinity College, was the opponent. Wesleyan men had a favorite chant or taunt that they would sing out on these occasions: “RE-jects, RE-jects, RE-jects.” Perhaps it would be followed by this little cheer: “That’s all right, that’s okay. You’re going to work for *us* someday.” In a statistical sense Wesleyan was and is at least slightly more selective in its admissions than is Trinity. However, I hadn’t been rejected anywhere before coming to Trinity and both then and now I honor my years at Trinity as being the most important period of positive development in my life. Moreover, I had participated in Trinity athletics, and in most sports we were as good Wesleyan. Thus, I found the “RE-jects” cheer particularly galling. It took several years for me to cheer for Wesleyan, my employer, over Trinity, my alma mater, with anything like genuine enthusiasm. Now, many years later, I pull shamelessly for Wesleyan against Trinity, in part because we are usually substantial underdogs when playing our neighbors from the North. But I can still recall the pain and anger at hearing my Trinity brothers called “RE-jects.”

Much can be said about the psychology of rejection—of not being chosen, or not being among the chosen, or of having one’s invitations to the dance or the party not accepted, or, more frequently, of not being invited to the dance or the party, or of not winning the prize, of not making the cut, of not being given the uniform, of not seeing

one's name on the list of those admitted to a class, of losing the election, of failing to win approval for a mortgage application, of failing to win a promotion or the appointment to tenure, of having one's manuscript for a book or article turned down cold, of not having a call-back after an audition, of having grant applications turned down, not winning a fellowship, of failing a driving examination, or a sobriety test, or not having the qualifications to volunteer for a branch or the armed services.

In affairs of the heart, nothing is more devastating than to be rejected by the object of one's affection—man or woman, child or adult. Let us observe that the fear of rejection stands silently but powerfully in the background for both men and women, particularly as sexual interests are awakened in adolescence and young adulthood. Psychological research on the success of sexual overtures supports the conclusion that men more frequently encounter rejection than do women in this domain, corresponding to the observation that men are more likely to be sexually aggressive than are women. Even so, women do not enjoy rejection. One might speculate that some women protect themselves from rejection by not competing for affection in any but passive ways. Even so there is some support for the aphorism that, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

In the structure of the traditional family, the most severe punishment a parent can inflict upon a child is that of being disowned—a symbolic and functional rejection of one's offspring as having a claim to legitimacy. The opposite of familial rejection is the provision for offspring of unconditional positive love and acceptance—so that the child has a deep and abiding security--they will always be loved and supported by their family, no matter what. There is good reason to believe that this kind of permanent, inner

security provides the individual with a tolerance and resilience for rejections of the more transitory kind.

Our society is thoroughly, pervasively competitive. It is common for little boys and girls to want to become millionaire sports stars, to be selected as an American Idol, to become rich, famous, and beautiful, to win the prize at spelling bees and “Dancing with the Stars.” Scientists and scholars want to win Nobel prizes, authors want to write best sellers, journalists want to win Pulitzer Prizes. It follows that rejection must be extremely general and common. Even so, many a politician aspires, usually secretly, to be elected President of the United States.

But even for one so elected, the urge to win, to avoid rejection, is insatiable. I read recently a biography of Theodore Roosevelt, a man who certainly had more than his share of successes in his personal and political life—one of four U.S. Presidents selected to have his likeness carved into Mount Rushmore. It is something of a surprise to find that he aspired to the presidency again in 1916, after having been rebuffed in 1912. When he did not win nomination by either the Progressive or Republican parties in 1916, a friend offered him the consoling thought that “the people wanted you.” His reply, “If they had wanted me *hard* enough, they could have had me.” To compound his sense of personal rejection, when Congress finally declared war against Germany in 1917, he offered immediately to form a division of troops under his command, and to proceed at once to the front lines of the war, thinking perhaps to relive the glory of his days as the Commander of the Rough Riders in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. This offer was, sensibly enough, quickly rejected. But for Roosevelt, it was a stinging, personal rejection, perhaps contributing to his decline in health and death just two years later.

Rejections, large and small, are ubiquitous in our society. I know of no faculty member at Wesleyan or elsewhere who has not suffered rejection—many, many times. And yet the manner of dealing with rejection is by no means common or universal. Some can be defeated by a single powerful rejection. But some are instructed by rejections—learning from them, interpreting them as signposts from destiny. Certainly in my own career I can look back upon some failures as absolutely necessary points of guidance into major successes I have enjoyed both personally and professionally. To take but one example, I attended graduate school at the University of California at Berkeley—only because I had been rejected (unaccountably, in my own mind) at the institution I had as a first choice. But because of this, I met the woman I was to marry, who was to become the mother of my irreplaceable children. Because of this also, I established a relationship with a mentor who was to become a precious and vital intellectual, personal, and professional guide for me for the next fifty years. I shudder to think what course my life might have taken but for this crucial rejection.

At the moment one receives a rejection, it is hard not to take it as a personal reproach and defeat. Yet rejections are obviously relative and conditional, not absolute. That is, a rejection says as much about the scale of values of the rejecting party as of the qualities of the party rejected. Examples of unjust, illogical, and stupid rejections are legion. Orwell's *Animal Farm* was several times rejected before it was accepted for publication, once with the explanation that the firm did not publish children's stories. Some of the foremost scholars in the world did not make tenure at Harvard or Yale. For example, Stanley Milgram, one of the prominent social psychologists of the 20th Century, was denied tenure at Harvard. 'Balding, skinny, can dance a little,' they said of Fred

Astaire at his first audition. Beethoven's music teacher declared him 'hopeless' at composing. It is consoling, at least, to understand that not only do we have much company among the rejected, but that it is not uncommon for rejections to be quite wrong in the grand scheme of things.

A final counsel then might be to strive to take rejections along the way lightly. The Buddhist story of the two arrows provides a useful parable. Physical pain is inevitable in the course of an ordinary life. It is like an arrow that pierces the flesh. But the psychological pain that often follows physical pain is gratuitous and unnecessary. It is like a second arrow if it is allowed into existence. But if one remains focused on the first arrow, mere physical pain, the second arrow can be avoided entirely. Rejection does hurt. But one need not elaborate the rejection into anything more than it is—it is but a single arrow. The second arrow can hurt worse than the first, and can become psychologically problematic—so that one finds oneself wallowing in the voluptuousness of misery. I think of suicide, the ultimate rejection of life itself, as in most cases the product of second and subsequent arrows, self-imposed sufferings that are a product of deficiencies in mindfulness.

Rejections can be accepted--and then one moves on. We are all survivors in the midst of other survivors. My anguish at hearing the RE-jects chant did pass. If we do not engage in self-defeat, magnifying our pain and giving in to it, we shall not end up as cosmic rejects.