



Commentaries

– Rejections –

THERE IS A WONDERFUL YOUTUBE SPEECH given by Jon Nakamatsu called, “I’m a Loser.” He was the winner of the Van Cliburn piano competition in 1993 and was serving on the jury for the same competition several years later. He is one of the great classical musicians of our time, and, if you listen to his talk, you will agree that he’s a most sensitive and thoughtful man. He discusses his many “failures” in competition over many years until he won the Van Cliburn, one of the most competitive piano competitions in the world. He describes not making the first cut, as well as scoring higher but not winning, hence “losing,” many events, all of which were of lesser significance. He even describes a judge, trying to be supportive, suggesting that he refrain from playing Chopin, since Japanese are unable to interpret his music properly, that is, with the same sensitivity as Europeans. Nakamatsu’s point was, of course, that no one wins all the time, and that there should be no stigma in losing.

As in the world of music, literary submissions are routinely savaged and few authors are “winners.” Revealing the all-too-human failures of the rejecters, the people who judge submissions, are published collections of rejection letters of works that subsequently became famous. You can imagine the gnashing of teeth in the publishing houses that rejected the first Harry Potter book. Tony Hillerman’s books were thought to be well written but an editor suggested *that the “Navajo bit”* should be deleted. Jack London wrote about his many early failures in his novel, *Martin Eden*, and made a point in his later, famous years, both as the character, *Martin Eden*, and in real life, of forcing editors who wanted to publish his new work to publish his old rejected work. Rubbing their noses in it was part of his game plan. “*Gone with the Wind* is going to be the biggest flop in Hollywood history.” Anne Frank “doesn’t, it seems to me, have a special perception or feeling which

would lift that book above the ‘curiosity’ level.” And even in the “objective” sciences, discoveries, especially if they broke new ground, have often been rejected. When Rosalyn Yalow gave her Nobel Prize address in 1977, she showed slides of the nasty rejections she had received when her newly-developed techniques demonstrated that insulin and glucose control did not behave the way they were thought to. The theory that peptic ulcers were caused by bacterial infection was denigrated for decades until these very persistent researchers also won the Nobel Prize. In my own field, Stanley Prusiner, who won a Nobel Prize for helping to define and explain prion diseases, was not above denouncing the people who had rejected his theories and his papers.

And here I am, peer reviewing for a number of journals, rejecting articles, even as my own submissions to the same journals are also rejected. I sometimes reflect on an early rejection for my first “major” paper. I had observed a neuroleptic malignant syndrome-like reaction in two **Parkinson’s Disease (PD)** patients when they were taken off their PD medications for a so-called “drug holiday.” I submitted my report to the main neurology journal, from which I got a review stating that not only was this problem already reported, but, paradoxically, should not be further reported because it might make doctors fearful of using L-Dopa to treat PD. The *New England Journal* liked it but not enough to print it. *JAMA* published it, both in English and Japanese. I learned the lesson of being persistent if I believed the material was deserving and I’ve lived through this business of being rejected one place but accepted somewhere else to have become somewhat inured to the rejections.

I was recently entertained by a rejection. My column in last month’s *MHRI* was a satirical piece in the form of what a modern review of James Parkinson’s famous monograph, *The Shaking Palsy*, might look like. I chastised the author

for excessive wordiness, ornate phrasing, lack of IRB approval and for reporting on patients he had only seen from a distance and had never actually examined. My satire was rejected by a prominent neurology journal. It had been reviewed by five peer reviewers. Usually manuscripts are reviewed by either two or three reviewers. I am unsure why five were involved, whether it was due to the section of the journal it was intended for (humanities rather than clinical research) or whether the editors-in-chief didn’t like it and the first three reviewers did, so they roped in two more reviewers to kill it. I’ll never know the answer. But I found the reviews interesting. The first three reviewers found the article humorous, satirical, perhaps even caustic. Reviewer five provided the coup de grace, “This simply isn’t funny,” which is certainly not a statement one can argue with. But one reviewer was clearly incensed that I failed to understand the nature of 18th century neurology, citing a number of publications of the era and the stylistic differences between today’s reports and those, referring me to other publications of the time that I must have been ignorant of, how medicine was practiced differently then, and even wondered whether a citation I made up (*The British Empire’s Classification of Diseases*) was real or not. He/she noted that 18th century physicians wrote monographs so that my critique of the manuscript as if it was a journal submission was misplaced. And I apparently failed to understand that there were stylistic differences between writings then and now. I could not help wondering how one can parody oneself. That reviewer was able to do it. It appears that some people just can’t take a joke.

– JOSEPH H. FRIEDMAN, MD

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