CHAPTER 16.

REAPING WHAT YOU SOW: REFRAMING ACADEMIC REJECTION AS A COMMUNITY GARDEN FOR WRITING STUDIES

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> The grower of trees, the gardener, the man born to farming, whose hands reach into the ground and sprout, to him the soil is a divine drug. He enters into death yearly, and comes back rejoicing. He has seen the light lie down in the dung heap, and rise again in the corn.
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> – Wendell Berry

In the spring of 2019, I set myself on the course for professional success. I was in my final year of my doctoral program—a program through which I had worked as a full-time student while also teaching as a full-time, non-tenure track lecturer at a nearby college and serving as a WPA of a writing-intensive course pilot program. I had just won my department's Teaching Excellence award, an honor made even sweeter by being the first non-tenure track faculty member to win it. My energy and optimism were never higher.

Over the next six months, I planned for my future successes by submitting numerous grant applications, a nomination packet for a prestigious state-wide teaching award, my first empirical article for publication, and I even applied for a tenure-track position in my own department—all while finishing my dissertation. I envisioned myself smiling as I opened all those congratulatory emails the next spring, and I gleefully imagined the moment when I would add "Assistant Professor" to my email signature.

I was meticulous in my planning and perfect in my process. In December 2019, after all my grants, articles, and applications had been sent out, I celebrated the coming success with my husband on our back patio, under the moonlight, beneath the bare limbs of our desert oaks.

You can guess what happened next. I received rejections for everything.

Well, not everything. I did receive one small travel grant, though, because of COVID-19, the conference was canceled and so the grant was never fully

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realized (which was disappointing at the time but inconsequential now, knowing the full scale of the virus's impact). Importantly, the virus and quarantining efforts would also thwart my dream job, to which I had been invited for a campus interview but which had then been frozen by human resources. I had successfully finished my PhD program, which, of course, felt great. And although it hadn't been on my list of "academic successes," I had given birth to my second child, a lovely, sweet baby who slept on my lap while I defended my dissertation on Zoom. While those successes were real, failing to earn more of those grants, publish my article, receive an offer for my dream job, and win that teaching award still hurt incredibly.

However, on reflection, I realize that even in all those other failures, I had been successful. When I submitted my package for the teaching award in the fall of 2019, I had also put together a nomination package for one of our graduating writing studies seniors for the student version of the award, and they received it along with all the notoriety it brought and the money that would certainly turn out to be important as they began their doctoral work in rhetoric and composition.

At about the same time, I submitted my application for the tenure-track position in my department. I had also submitted a letter of recommendation for a colleague for the endowed chair of writing at a university back in her hometown, near her family. Although my own job-search was stuck in COVID limbo, hers continued and she would go on to accept her dream job.

And when I received word that my article would not be published at that time, little did I know that another colleague had her article accepted and that she credited me in one paragraph for guiding her toward contract grading—an honor for her, as it was her first peer-reviewed publication, and an honor for me because I had led her to a transformative practice that she had something meaningful to share about with the larger writing studies community.

It seems that for each opportunity that hadn't produced for me, an opportunity had produced for someone else—and I had a small hand in those successes.

In 2018, professor and scholar Max Perry Mueller wrote about the inevitability of rejection in academia. In "Grow Your Own Rejection Garden," he dissects the genre of the "How to Get Over Academic Rejection" article—popularized by *The Chronicle*, *The Professor is In*, and other academic online hubs. He spends much of his analysis looking at how the genre offers guidance on overcoming professional rejection, specifically through finding opportunity for growth from rejection, and most importantly to Mueller's article, self-care around rejection.

Mueller (2018) goes on to describe how, after being rejected from his dream job, he began a tradition of anticipating rejection and weaving it more profoundly into his professional life. For each rejection he receives, he purchases a

small plant and visualizes that "with nurturing," the plant "will sink deep roots into its soil and grow tall branches, leaves and flowers reaching toward the sun." In short, he uses his professional rejections to create a literal rejection garden. He often gifts these plants to colleagues, citing cultural wisdom and empirical research on the construct of happiness, that happiness comes from focusing on the wellbeing of others rather than on ourselves. Mueller's literal rejection garden is a beautiful and proactive way to deal with the feelings of failure that are written into our jobs.

Going back to 2019 and 2020, it's clear that while I wasn't planting a literal rejection garden like Mueller, I was indeed cultivating a metaphorical one. Looking back at all the rejection I had, but all the success my writing studies colleagues and students had, I was able to reframe my feelings of rejection in terms of how my labor was fruitful for others, and it hurt a little bit less. In short, I could see the work I had done as contributing to a community garden of writing studies. Though my plants failed to produce that year, even with my meticulous planting, watering, and weeding, I had been simultaneously invested in the gardens of my colleagues and students, and theirs bore fruit. Our community garden had been successful.

The rejection I took on that year had felt devastating initially, and even realizing how I had a hand in the success of my colleagues and students didn't magically make that pain disappear. As we all know, professional rejection hurts to the core, and, at times, it's hard to separate that rejection from our own personal worth. In "Why Is Academic Rejection So Very Crushing?" educator and academic writing coach Rebecca Schuman (2014) argues that the deep pain of academic rejection is due to our academic self-conceptions or the notion that those of us working in academia do so because we see our teaching, writing, and research as the embodiment of who we are at our core. So, a rejection of our professional self is a rejection of our personal self. Schuman herself describes a particular moment of academic rejection in which she hoped to die by some terrible accident and be done with it all.

Schuman's (2014) confession is a reminder that the pain of failure and academic rejection is very real, and it's not a topic that's often discussed. Retrospectively, I wonder about all the faculty who helped me along the way. What failures were they experiencing while they prepared me for my first conference presentation or while they wrote letters of recommendation for my graduate studies? My memory is void of conversations about academic failure in general, and I only remember learning about their professional work in the context of publications and presentations—all typical forms of academic success. How might we further cultivate success for our colleagues and students if we had more open conversations about failure? How might we address the issue of rejection

and crushing academic self-conceptions if we allowed those topics to come to light more often?

Reframing rejection and failure as part of a larger task of building a community garden in the field of writing studies won't bring an end to rejection or the pain that comes with it. But, as Schuman (2014) notes, "The goal should not be to avoid rejection in a profession where rejection is unavoidable. The goal should be to address the core existential issues that make said rejection so painful." If those elders and scholars are correct about happiness—that it comes from tending to the well-being of others—then focusing on tending to the community garden of our field should, at the very least, help us bear the pain of failure when we encounter it, which we unavoidably will. And having more discussions about failure should help others bear the pain, as well.

Importantly, the repercussions of failure are different for each of us and for our students, depending on our identities and how we are positioned in our institutions. As a white, able-bodied, cisgender faculty member, my failures are rarely attributed to my demographic characteristics, which makes failure a little easier to handle, perhaps, and I have few *-isms* beyond a mild language disorder that challenge my work, potentially offering more opportunities for my success. However, if I choose to tend to my colleagues' and students' gardens while tending my own, then it should follow that our community garden will be more diverse, too, and any good farmer knows that a monoculture is bad for crops. In truth, interplanting, or planting crop varieties that complement each other, may be easier or more difficult depending on where we do our academic work. At my own institution, our mission is to teach and serve what we identify as "the new majority," a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse and primarily first-generation college student body. For me, at my institution, with the privileges that my identity imbues, reframing rejection and failure as a community garden not only brings me a little more happiness when I fail, but it also feels like an important ally move.

Jean Giono (1985), in the novella *The Man Who Planted Trees* (accompanied by Michael McCurdy's breathtaking wood engravings), tells of a man who planted trees in a mountain range without any requirement to do so, eventually planting an entire forest, which in turn offered small villages the opportunity to thrive in valleys that were once too rocky, dry, and windy to be hospitable. The man's work is tedious and takes decades to come to fruition, and the man encounters failures along the way, but in the end, he is successful. In the closing paragraph of the book, Giono writes of that man:

> When I reflect that one man, armed only with his own
> physical and moral resources, was able to cause this land . . .

> to spring from the wasteland, I am convinced that in spite of everything, humanity is admirable. But when I compute the unfailing greatness of spirit and the tenacity of benevolence that it must have taken to achieve this result, I am taken with an immense respect . . .

Of course, Giono's description is of a fictional man who plants an entire forest on his own. Academics are not called to do that kind of solitary work, as the pursuit of knowledge and the development of practice rely on collaboration and discussion. But the larger application of Giono's story is this: Academic failure and rejection are inevitable to our work. There will always be pain when our grant applications are turned down or when an editor passes on our proposals. But if we focus on more than just our work, if we also tend to the work of our colleagues and students, if we can reframe failure as a community garden, we just might plant a forest.

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