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I Got Rejected 101 Times

Being told no is inevitable in most creative endeavors. But maybe I could win by losing.

By Emily Winter

Ms. Winter is a comedian.

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My dog wags her tail whenever I say no.

Bingo is a rescue, and I'll never know where she picked up the idea that "no" means "yes," but it's about as annoying as you'd imagine when you're trying to get her to stop eating poop, for example. On the other hand, she's the happiest creature I've ever met. So at the end of 2017, I wondered what *my* life would be like if I could turn no into yes, and I made it my 2018 New Year's resolution to get 100 professional rejections.

If 100 seems absurd, recall all those stats about how today's young adults are essentially rejection magnets: We change jobs and careers more frequently than ever before, are more likely to rely on the gig economy, relocate more and need new friends in those new cities, and we're marrying later. It feels as if the only constant is change, and that means we're forever at the whim of other people's judgments, opinions and decisions. It's unsettling at best. At worst, it's crippling.

My particular treacherous path is as a writer and comedian. My gigs tend to be short, and I'm at the mercy of "right place, right time." I can send off a great script or writing packet, or have a killer set at a packed stand-up show, but if the decision maker happens to be grumpy, or is in the bathroom during my set, or already read a similar submission, or is pals with another candidate, or thinks my look isn't trending, or used to date someone with a similar name, or thinks I'm too old, or too young, or too liberal, or too conservative, or gets laid off right before she intended to hire me, I'm back to square one, wondering what I did wrong.

As 2018 began, though, I felt empowered by the knowledge that turning my failures into accomplishments would mean I'd be gaming the system. Both acceptances and rejections would count as a sort of win, and I liked those odds.

In pursuit of 100 rejections, I put myself forward for opportunities I'd previously thought were for smarter, funnier, cooler people. And sometimes I wasn't rejected. I wrote for new publications, got a joke-writing gig on my favorite comedian's radio show and interviewed guests on my podcast who I'd thought wouldn't waste their time on me. At a stand-up show this fall, a peer told me the thing every comedian wants to hear: "I see your name everywhere! You're killing it!"

But, of course, I couldn't just take the compliment and move on. Instead, I explained that statistically speaking, I'm a giant, pathetic failure.

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And I *was* failing, more than ever. Writing jobs, script contests, auditions, magazine pitches, comedy festivals — the turndowns piled up. I'd convinced myself that this experiment would shield me from the pain of individual rejections, and guess what? It didn't. I'd be waiting on the subway platform, nonchalantly scrolling through my emails and bam! A rejection. I'd look around and wonder: "Do these commuters know they're standing next to the saddest of all sad sacks?! They must. It's obvious. I'm a bumbling fail potato."

Over the summer, two of my best friends in my field realized some of their professional dreams. I was thrilled for them. But. Well, you know the but. Alone, I got so jealous that I lay on my apartment floor and cried until a line of cry-drool wrapped around my colossal, quivering head. Then I felt guilty for being jealous, and cried about that. Then I looked at my rejection list in disgust. Why had I spent eight months clinging to defeat? What a stupid plan! It suddenly felt as though I'd spent the year cocooning myself in a comforting blanket, and just realized the blanket was made of worms.

Had it all been a terrible idea? I emailed Angela Duckworth, the author of "Grit: The Power and Passion of Perseverance," to ask her what she thought of my rejection resolution. She made me feel scientifically sane.

Dr. Duckworth explained that what I was doing was "exposure therapy"— making myself more comfortable with failure to reduce my fear of it. It was a relief, sitting at my desk, scrolling through the same inbox that contained messages like "not at this time," "not a fit" and "unfortunately," to see an expert in tenacity and achievement say that all this rejection was actually helpful. She argues that grit is more important than innate talent when it comes to success. So I kept at it.

It's the middle of December and I have 101 rejections and 39 acceptances. I'm so tired, and that's how I know I did it right. If I weren't exhausted, it would mean I'd just spent the last year asking for things without putting in the work to earn them. To me, there's nothing more off-putting than entitlement.

And when you think about it, entitlement is rampant in so many aspects of our lives. This fall, I caught up with a single friend, Andy, who was sick of going to weddings alone, and frustrated by the idea that love would find him, that “if it’s meant to be, it will be.” Waiting is its own form of entitlement, and Andy wanted to do the work. So in October, he decided to treat his search for a meaningful, monogamous relationship as if he were on the job hunt: He’d cast his “résumé” out as far as he could and go on as many “interviews” as possible until he found a great fit, making it clear that he wasn’t up for gigs or part-time arrangements. By going on a date almost every night instead of once a month, he’d put less pressure and nervous energy into every meeting.

When we compared notes, we admitted that our experiments weren’t a magic solution. Andy is still unattached, and I’m still living paycheck to paycheck. But we’ve taken more chances and come closer to getting the things we want.

So I don’t regret committing to this masochistic rejection project. It made me feel embarrassed, depressed, overwhelmed and self-indulgent. But I also felt that I was moving forward instead of standing still.

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