



Teaching and Learning Moments

Dear Former Mentor

Dear Former Mentor,

In medical school, you asked a simple question: “How can I help?”

I was disarmed; I had never been asked that before by a mentor. Unlike most of your students, I did not know which specialty I liked or where I wanted to be in 5 years. I did not know what I wanted, so I did not know how you could help.

Years later, after finishing medical school, residency, and fellowship, I sit under fluorescent office lights staring at my inbox with 2,461 unread messages, and I realize how you can help. I work at the eminent institution down the street from your office, and I am scared that I am not good enough to work here.

My box bursts with emails trumpeting the latest achievements by my colleagues—NIH grants, young investigator awards, and medals of honor from foreign governments among them. Interspersed with those messages are responses to my own previously sent emails. An abstract I submitted to a national conference was kindly declined. Proposals to contribute to a palliative care educational repository were reviewed and deferred. Recently, I received the news that a manuscript written with colleagues—one that had been revised, restructured, and reformatted with the importance of all 1,890 words weighed carefully—had been rejected by a fifth medical journal. I felt like a speck of dust being swept into a bin.

It is not the rejection that bothers me. I have been rejected before. What bothers me is that I work in an environment with some of the brightest people who are seemingly receiving only affirmative responses—a “yes” to their proposals, an “accepted” to their submissions—and they are all basking in a halo of success. This leaves me slinking in the shadows after hearing “No,” “I regret to inform

you,” and “Unfortunately we have determined....” In this environment, there is no acknowledgment of the rejections, let alone commiseration.

During the day I endure rejection, while at night I read my 2-year-old a story about a little girl who dreams of being an engineer. She creates a helicopter out of cheese and on its test run the helicopter crashes. How can she become an engineer if she cannot build a working helicopter? How can I be an academic physician if I cannot publish a manuscript? The little girl despairs until her aunt points out that before the helicopter crashed, it flew! So she goes back to tinkering and dreaming. In this story, like many other children’s stories, play is encouraged. Play is the freedom to tinker and explore with abandon, without regard to outcome.

Setbacks and failures are inherent to play, yet there is little space for setbacks and failures as adults, making play risky. In a competitive work environment, play feels dangerous.

In the weeks following my rejections, I hid my shame and embarrassment behind a mask of equanimity while sharing my workspace with colleagues who consistently published in prestigious journals. I felt small in comparison. During clinic meetings and inpatient rounds, I filtered the ideas that popped in my head because I feared they were not good enough. I was paralyzed by the fear of failing. In a teaching session I facilitated with medical residents I considered using writing and comics for reflection, but I worried the residents would balk at this unfamiliar teaching format. And there is the danger. In celebrating only success and by not creating space for play and failure, opportunities for innovation are lost.

In a moment of crisis, I sat in my colleague’s office close to tears, disclosing

all my rejections. He listened, then turned around and pointed to a bookshelf crowded with stacks of papers that he called his “cemetery of unpublished manuscripts.” He did not lay buried under these manuscripts, however. He bubbled with pride. His worth did not diminish with every rejection. Instead, he tinkered, toyed, and played with each manuscript. With this realization, my eyes sparkled—not with tears, but with relief.

Years ago, you asked how you could help. I now ask you to share your truth. Tell me about the hours spent researching, writing, revising, and submitting. Tell me about your project ideas that were tabled. Tell me the number of times your proposals were rejected. I ask this of you so we can begin to normalize the setbacks I have had and those that I will experience, so I do not experience them in isolation. And, tell me about how you continue to play, to try new things, regardless of the outcome. Because somewhere between childhood and adulthood, I, like many, lost the ability to play. Now, I too want to play.

With Warmth,
Your Grown-Up Medical Student, now a
Physician

P.S. In searching for your email, I found your obituary instead. I will not click send, you will not read this message, and I will not get a response. Yet, you have already given me the gift of clarity.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank Michelle D. Seaton and Dr. Emeric Bojarski for their insightful comments and support.

Ashwini C. Bapat, MD

A.C. Bapat is a palliative care physician, founder, EpioneMD, and cofounder, Hippocratic Adventures, Carlisle, Massachusetts; email: ashwini.bapat@epionemd.com; Twitter: @AshwiniCBapat.

An Academic Medicine Podcast episode featuring this article is available wherever you get your podcasts.