

# Surviving rejection – How accepting the most basic human needs will help you grow and develop

By Thea Mikkelsen

Everyone knows that it is impossible to spend your entire professional life as a creative without experiencing at least once your work being rejected. Since a professional creative life will definitely experience rejection of one's work, we will have to find ways to endure the anxiety of rejection as well as rejection itself.

The fear of rejection is something we all know, and it is associated with our deepest need to be in a relationship where we are safe and can be ourselves. The rejection therefore also awakens all our most primitive defenses. Whereas most of us have learned to deal with the small, everyday rejections, which can range from not being the first one to the bar to the feeling we get when our friends do not call back, it is more difficult when we have our creative work rejected. And there is a very good reason for this.

To find ways to relate to potential and actual rejection and overcome the anxiety of having to present one's ideas over and over again, it is worthwhile to look at what is lurking in the emotional space of rejection and how we can deal with it so that we do not lose heart when presenting our work.

## **The root of the pain**

The pain of being rejected hits us at the deepest emotional level. It's the part of our psyche that goes back to our earliest memories of being rejected in our attempts to make contact with the adults around us and the powerlessness we felt when we did not succeed. It could be small failures, as if the adults had their attention elsewhere and we felt powerless and had to endure this condition and feel the fear of being destroyed in the process. Or it could relate to major failures where the adults did not protect us and let us manage ourselves long before we were able to look out for ourselves.

When our creative work is rejected it not only awakens the memory of former rejections but also replay a situation where we are defenseless. Creative work comes from our secret mental spaces – spaces that are partly secret to both others and ourselves and constitute a condition where the mind is absorbed in what has been called reverie. When something new is created, it will for long periods have its primary existence as some sort of dream in the creator's mind and what is written down on a piece of paper or drawn will be an attempt to get closer to the desired expression. In other phases of development, what is shown will be a dialogue between the original intention and the form that the work itself begins to take, and which can lead it in new directions that could not have been foreseen. In either case, it will be difficult for the creator to have a clear picture of what it really is that is being presented because it is still part of a much larger inner landscape. This makes the rejection of creative material more difficult to deal with than rejection itself.

The English psychoanalyst Donald N. Winnicott describes how we retreat to a private inner space where our conscious knowledge and experiences meet our more or less conscious inner imaginary universe when we work creatively. It is in this inner unchallenged space, as Winnicott calls it (Winnicott, 1974), where the objective and the subjective meet. Here, we create new stories, and situations that constitute the raw material for the work on creative projects.

As Winnicott writes what is special about this inner space is that what is happening here is not suitable for others and their perceptions of us and our work. It is an inner space that is completely our own and we experience being revealed as human beings when we show something created from this place (Winnicott, 1965).

This "inner resting place," as he calls it elsewhere, is not just something people who work creatively have. But it is only creative people who show others what has been produced in this

space in its pure form. Therefore, one feels a special sensitivity when one has to present creative work to others before it is finished. Regardless of the nature of the material, whether it is a lighthearted subject or a dramatic conflict, showing something from inside this unchallenged inner resting place means exposing oneself. One shows something that has not yet found its public form and significance, but which is still living material.

### **Narcissism and the unchallenged inner resting place**

The unchallenged inner resting place, according to psychoanalysis, is associated with our early stages of development and especially what has been called primary narcissism. In primary narcissism, which must be understood as both an early stage of toddler development and a lifelong level in our mind where reverie is the dominating state of mind, we recognize ourselves in the loving gaze of the primary adults around us and we create the sense of who we are and what it means to be an individual based on this enjoyment. In this process, the unchallenged inner resting place is created as the place in our mind where we feel we grow as human beings by letting our inner sense of pleasure and excitement as well as elements from the outer world meet and become creative expressions.

For some people and for many different reasons, this condition can evolve into what we usually call narcissism but which in the terminology of psychoanalysis is called the secondary narcissism. Here the emotional fullness disappears from the inner space and we can only feel ourselves through the identifications we create with the world around us. In this case, we only have the experience of being ourselves if we are in a clear relationship with attractive objects around us. It can be status objects or desirable situations. If we are primarily connected to ourselves through attractive objects and situations we deal with successfully, we call it narcissism and this kind of narcissism can as the primary narcissism be a strong driver for creative work.

### **The narcissistic violation**

As has been described in both the psychoanalytic management literature (Kets de Vries) and in the research into professional creativity (Simonton), a certain degree of secondary narcissism is needed to maintain the desire to place oneself in desirable situations and be willing to deliver the work it takes to get there.

When our creative work is rejected, we will be affected by both the primary and secondary narcissism. The experience may make it difficult for us to hold on to our own self-image, which can lead to the anxiety of annihilation. This is also called a narcissistic injury and it can feel very aggressive.

We are affected by our primary narcissism in that the material we present from our inner space of production, and which thus comes from an inner protected space, does not meet with the loving gaze required for us to grow with the material and feel the pleasure of being us. But we are also affected by our secondary narcissism by being excluded from the community with which we identify and other attractive products and situations which, in relation to the drive of secondary narcissism, are what make us experience ourselves as human beings worthy of being respected.

The rejection of the creative project can thus feel like a total elimination of ourselves as worthy and competent people. Most will experience a degree of uncertainty about who they are and whether they are even a person when their projects are rejected.

But since this is a situation everyone has to go through from time to time, what can be done to endure it?

### **The victory and the failure of the psychic defense**

A feature of primary narcissism is associated with the early human condition, which we recognize in the young child and which remains an emotion within us, an emotion that Freud has called "His Majesty the baby." It is the primary feeling of being chosen and having access to an

inner greatness. For a professional creative to endure rejection and to get through the narcissistic injury they cause and rediscover the personal meaning of creation it is absolutely necessary to stay in contact with this feeling. It's the feeling of carrying through with something important, something that one can give as a gift to the world. This feeling has been called a adaptive grandiosity (Wohlson, 1995) and thus denotes our ability to remain connected to the inner feeling of greatness that we develop through deep loving relationships.

This feeling is what can get one through periods of rejection and help one move forward. And therefore it is vital not to get too mired in rejection and let it occupy so much space in one's mind that the feeling of inner greatness is forgotten.

But one must also be aware of what is called a manic defense, the term for what happens when we do not accept rejection and show no interest in the reasons behind the rejection. This can develop into a sense of omnipotence and thus a sense of being able to change the natural and realistic course of things. This condition is also not beneficial for the professional creative person, as it can prevent one from learning something important and not relate to a realistic framework and support network (Wohlson, 1995).

When you, as a professional creative, work from the unchallenged inner resting place, where you are both the editor who manages and the author who creates the base material, then you have full control over your universe. You are the one who decides whether something should live or die. This gives a deep sense of satisfaction and control. But if we are to succeed in transferring our project from its protected living space in our inner being to one that exists in our professional work context where there many inputs and different points of view, then we must establish a sustainable self-management system. As the American psychoanalyst Wohlson explains after having worked with hundreds of professional creative people, it is they who retain the feeling of a adaptive grandiosity who succeed in coming back after repeated rejections. When you send your work to others to get support or establish collaborations, you will experience a loss of control. The whole social context in which you submit your work is suddenly crucial to the fate of the project. In this phase, we typically struggle with thoughts about whether the recipient has the necessary skills to understand us. And there is the fear that if they do not get it, we are then excluded from that all-important professional community we feel we need to be part of.

### **The way forward**

The deeply personal task for us as professional creatives is to find a way in which we establish a methodology that we can use every time our work is rejected, and which can help us return to a dialogue and a collaboration around our projects.

Most creative people can succumb to both feelings of self-glorifying omnipotence and deep emptiness in connection with a rejection and as described, neither of these feelings are beneficial for sustaining one's productive output and development. Instead, it is important to know what it takes to maintain emotional contact with a adaptive grandiosity. For some, this will mean feeling the joy of treating themselves respectfully through sports, good food, gratifying experiences and the like. For others, it may be necessary to work consciously to establish support systems around them that can stand in for the loving, selfless and respectful reflection of oneself, and which can help one recall the feeling of grandiosity. This can be done by a good friend or partner at times, while at other moments and stages of professional development there may be a need for a therapist or a coach who can help one get back on track.

### **Good advice for enduring rejections in a professional creative life**

Be aware of what your project of being creative is: Why do you want to continue even though there may be resistance?

Pay attention to how you can recreate the feeling of grandiosity when you experience rejections of your work.

Make sure you have people around you who help you maintain your emotional balance and professional focus so that rejections become opportunities to reflect on and get wiser.

Mikkelsen, Thea, 2020, *Coaching the Creative Impulse – Psychological Dynamics and Professional Creativity*, London, Routledge,.

Morrison, Nancy and John Ewaldson, 1990; "Thoughts on the Processes of Psychoanalytic Writing" 1990 *Contemp. Psychoanal.*, (26):408-419

Winnicott, D. W., 1965 *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment* New York: International Universities Press, Inc.

Winnicott, D. W., 1974 *Playing and Reality*, London, Routledge.

Wolson, Peter, 1995 "The Vital Role of Adaptive Grandiosity In Artistic Creativity" *Psychoanal. Rev.*, (82)(4):577-597.