

summer



institute

# The Fellow Who Collected Rejections

BY BARBARA GILES



Following the Inland Area Writing Project (IAWP, California) Summer Institute in 1999, fellow Richard “Rick” Hartwell began to collect rejection notices in a big binder. He filed them in plastic sleeves along with copies of the submitted pieces and the query letters that accompanied them. Then he showed them off to others. This was a first for our project. Why would a person build a portfolio of rejections? The answer begins with the summer institute.

That summer, for the first time, the IAWP Summer Institute team required a professional writing piece from all participants. Our team decided that the inquiry work in prior years had been unfocused and, from the point of view of the participants, without purpose. I was given the responsibility of building professional writing into our institute, partly because I had been published and partly because I believed that we needed to expand our repertoire beyond expressive writing. Teachers, it was my conviction, should be contributing to their own professional journals.

As I planned my introductory presentation for the group the first week, it occurred to me that some of my colleagues had not read many journals. Short on time, they often did not even know these publications existed. Therefore, before they could write for publication, it was imperative that they become familiar with the variety of journals available as well as the types of writing found

between their covers. I brought in my collection of journals, borrowed other titles from colleagues, and asked participants to bring in any that they had. Distributing the journals, I gave the participants a task: for the next 45 minutes, they were to thumb through these publications, skim articles, and list the types of writing that they discovered. They would then share their findings. Many were amazed that not all articles were “scientific.” Instead, they discovered narrative voice, poetry, book reviews, and opinion pieces. They also discovered that many journals have a “call for manuscripts” that might help connect them with a journal looking for a piece that matched their interests. We ended the session talking about types of writing we might be interested in pursuing.

The following week, time was set aside for participants to read journals, access our writing project library, and make trips to the university library. By the end of the second week, the teachers were to have a focus for an article so they could begin work. About half of the group was ready. The facilitators and I met with the others to help them narrow the possibilities. By the end of the summer, they were expected to have a fairly complete draft.

Three hours a week were devoted to reading, researching, and writing on this project. Participants also met with their inquiry groups during this time for assistance. (This was a group separate from their regular writing group, with a facilitator to assist.) They were also free to read



excerpts of their work in progress during their regular afternoon writing groups.

Two-thirds of the group completed first drafts ready to be shared on the next-to-last day of the summer institute. The others provided enough bits and pieces of their writing to suggest the direction they

were going with their work. Several participants

decided to submit their work for publication. Catherine Humphrey had a piece published in *The Quarterly*. Rick sent off three pieces for publication that year and proudly shared his rejection notices. This did not defeat him. When he came back as facilitator in 2000, he helped me plan ways to make this experience a better one, making available his binder full of rejections. Anyone who valued the experience of writing for publication that much was to be listened to.

In our planning sessions, Rick talked about the pieces he wrote in the last year, his excitement, and his rejection notices. He indicated that he was moving forward this year and was determined to be published. We worked with our facilitators and crafted more carefully their responsibilities in the inquiry group. They needed to invite people to share their ideas from the beginning, help them find resources, and facilitate the task of writing for publication. We

duplicated the current "calls for manuscripts" to which we had access. Carol Jago, editor of *California English*, came to talk to us about submitting work to that journal. This really seemed to inspire our participants. She made it seem possible. At the end of that summer, all had drafts, revisions, and works in progress in their portfolios. Additionally, Stephanie Elliott and Louise Herington were published during that school year. And Rick? Three journals accepted his work.

When my tenure as co-director of the summer institute was over, Rick took over as facilitator in charge of professional writing (a new position) in 2001. He continues to add his twist to the summer institute, and as a result, a growing number of our teachers have been published in a variety of journals. In fact, since the summer of 1999, a total of 35 pieces written by our teacher-consultants have been published. And just as we celebrate these successes, we continue to find validation in our rejection notices. They are evidence that we are alive and writing.

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