

How I Learned to Combat the Effects of Racial Battle Fatigue

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I will never forget how nervous I felt stepping onto a yellow school bus for the first time. While most children reach this milestone by the age of five, I was about a decade overdue. As I walked in line behind a litany of strangers, I recall looking back at my mom, who was sitting behind the wheel of our black Ford Explorer. She smiled and nodded. I understood what that nod meant because she always gave it to me when I felt unsure. During my high-pressure tennis matches, that nod meant, “One point at a time; you’ve got this.” Today’s nod meant something, else, though. Even though these gestures only provided momentary comfort, I appreciated my mother’s ability to ease my feelings of isolation. She had given me “the talk” on the 53-minute ride to the bus stop. I wondered how many minority students had received the same lecture from one of their parents since academic institutions started to become desegregated during the mid-20th century. *Probably in the ten thousands, but not over 100,000*, I mentally estimated.

“You’re smart,” she asserted. “You deserve to be at this school just like everyone else. You’ll have to work harder, but there’s nothing that you can’t do. Never, ever let the color of your skin keep you from reaching your goals. This is one of the top private schools in the state of Virginia, and Baby Girl, you’ve gotten your place at the table.”

Mom has always spoken candidly with me. A lot of the time, she said things that I couldn’t fully process, but I always listened. So, after seeing that nod, I turned around and kept pushing forward. When I placed my right foot on the top of the ascending stairs, I pivoted my body to walk down the aisle. The bus was oddly quiet, especially for a K-12 shuttle. Even though I kept my gaze focused on the floor, I could feel multiple sets of eyes staring at me. Just as I was about to place my weighty backpack onto the floor of a vacant seat, a young brown-haired boy, no more than seven years old, pointed in my direction and yelled, “Hey, that’s Michelle Obama!”

At first, I was unable to process what had just occurred. I even turned around to see to whom he was pointing. The pale, freckled child was dressed in the Lower School uniform: a navy polo shirt and belted khaki shorts. It didn't take long to realize that I was the only person of color on the bus. *He was talking about me?!* Aside from sharing the same racial identity as the former First Lady, I could confidently report that I shared no resemblance with her. My surprise segued to indignation as the reality of what just happened began to sink in. *How could someone so young say such a racist thing?* I then became angry at myself for blaming a small child for his blatant ignorance. Thankfully, no one laughed or commented aloud, but that one comment caused me to feel deep regret about my decision to go to this school.

I was perfectly content being homeschooled and participating in a small co-op of other, like-minded families. As the crowded vehicle slowly rolled away from the parking lot and the myriad of luxury cars became a polychromatic memory, I wanted so badly to go back home. If that kid was any kind of representation of the institution's general population, I wanted nothing to do with it or the people in it.

At the time, my mother was a postgraduate student writing her thesis on Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF), a term coined in 2003 by a critical race theorist named William Smith. The conceptual framework was created to encapsulate the mental exhaustion black students endure after years and years of encountering repeated acts of racism within the school environment. RBF makes it wearisome for black students to persist in school as it becomes demotivating to learn and thrive in a place that one perceives as hostile to their well-being. Mom didn't choose to homeschool me for these reasons, but delaying the effects of RBF was an additional benefit. As Mom shared these findings with me throughout my middle school years, it didn't take me long to understand that the daily micro-and-macro aggressions that I had experienced could set me on

the trajectory to live in a state of constant, toxic stress. The bus incident alone was enough for me to realize that RBF was a legitimate threat. If my math was correct, I would walk across the stage on graduation day with only 28% of the black women who started kindergarten the same year as me. My black, male friends will comprise only 17% of our nation's college graduates.

If there was one thing of which I was tremendously proud, more than my shiny tennis trophies or high standardized test scores, it was that I grew up in a strong, black family. My parents were, by no means, a common statistic that often characterized Generation X couples of color. They met in college, married over thirty-five years ago, lived in the nation's richest county where my stay-at-home mother homeschooled all four of her children (who were all from their union), and have no police record.

In black families, stories of prejudice are passed down from one generation to the next through the use of storytelling and collective group memory. As a young child, I recall overhearing hushed and exasperated accounts from my parents' and older siblings' lived experiences. They would often reminisce about the cruelty they endured from their racist classmates. My mother attended a small, Catholic private school for all twelve years of her childhood. She used to recall memories of unsolicited white hands reaching for her thick, coily hair. Her classmates would ask her to touch it, or even how often she washed it, all of the time. *How could this have happened in my parents' and siblings' lifetimes? I wanted to ask. Has nothing changed at all?*

I would then compare their hardships to those of my maternal grandmother, who lived during the era of segregation. She shared stories of sneaking into work through the front door, an action that would have gotten her immediately fired. She told me once that she was chastised by a co-worker for using the white, ladies' room. "I've never felt so *unhuman*," she whispered

during her recount. Her mother, my great-grandmother, was a sharecropper who would sprinkle water into her cotton sacs after a grueling day of picking just to make it heavier, thereby receiving greater pay. She was smart in her own way. Her mother, my great-great-grandmother, was enslaved. By virtue of these stories, I was no novice to acts of racism and prejudice.

Up until my first day of “real” school, I had surprisingly never been on the receiving end of prejudiced comments. It was an occurrence that changed my life because I understood that, despite my appearance or individual personality, I was bunched into a homogenized concept of race by people who do not look like me. From that point on, I became more steeled, more self-protected. I expected such comments (or more) to suddenly appear, at any time, without any notice.

The ride from the parking lot to the school was less than ten minutes. Once parked, I emerged from the bus and remembered my mother’s words. In her studies, she was examining the notion that black people often suffer from Imposter Syndrome when they are in elite learning environments as the minority demographic. “You are no imposter,” she told me the night before. “Don’t ever let anyone make you feel that you do not belong in a place because of the color of your skin. You’re not here just to play tennis for this school. You may be one of the top tennis players in the state, but you are also brilliant. They wouldn’t have let you in if they didn’t think that you could handle it academically. Just take people for who they are. We’re all the same on the inside.”

I rehearsed those words as I walked into the all-glass Upper School. It consisted of two wings, the East Building and the Tundra Building. They were conjoined by a pedestrian bridge that overlooked a lush quad filled with folded chairs that were set up for the annual Opening Assembly. For the rest of the year, the only objects that would routinely occupy the quad were

the spike ball nets to which students would instantly sprint at the beginning of our lunch or other break periods. Even the dining room was constructed of floor-to-ceiling glass, where highly-qualified chefs would prepare a unique hot-lunch every school day. Everywhere I looked was filled with light and warmth, and I felt myself getting excited about the potential to make my mark and find community within this beautiful minimalistic space in which I would learn and grow for the next four years.

I was one of ten black students in my class of over 100 and only one of six black girls. I had to work to make a space for myself in the classroom and, especially, on the tennis court. In some ways, my reputation preceded me, and I was known on Day One as the “girl who can *really* play tennis.” Many of my peers had no idea that simply referring to me that way made me feel as if I was just the stereotypical black athlete who made it into a top-notch school only to bolster their athletic program. Most, if not all, of my teachers, compared me to either Venus or Serena Williams. The constant comparisons were exhausting. There were days when, despite the new friendships, I did not want to return. I was suffering from RBF, and I wanted to quit.

One afternoon during the same term in which I enrolled at my new school, my dad picked me up from practice. That was our little system: Mom did drop-offs, and Dad did pick-ups. I chucked my tennis bag and backpack in the back of the car and climbed into the passenger’s seat without saying a word. As he shifted his arm to put the car in drive, I got a whiff of his woodsy, yet familiar cologne. I put on my best face and greeted my father, but without looking at him directly. If our eyes were to meet, it wouldn’t take him any more than a second to realize that mine were clouded with tears. All he did was ask me how my day was; the next thing I knew, I was bawling.

“I shouldn’t have come here,” was the only discernible thing that I could say between sobs.

Dad pulled the car into an empty Wells Fargo Bank parking lot.

“Why do you say that?” he inquired.

“These people are so racist. They don’t even realize it. I am so tired of being called by the name of the other black girl in class who I don’t look anything like.”

My father remained silent. Before I continued with my rant, he took off his black Laker’s cap and placed it on his knee.

“I am sick and tired of people asking me if I want to be like Serena one day. Why don’t they ever ask me if I want to be like Maria Sharapova or Caroline Wozniacki?” The tears were so thick that I could barely see the brick-and-mortar building right in front of me. “Can you just unenroll me and I’ll go back to being homeschooled again? Please!?” I was borderline wailing.

After a few moments, my father replied, “So you *really* want to quit?”

He already knew the answer, so I didn’t reply.

“Then what is this really about?” he inquired with a weak smile.

As I was still stifling my breakdown, the only thing that I could manage to do was to look out the passenger side window and try to collect my thoughts. My vision had refocused, and I watched the fallen variegated leaves whirl in the wind, which was a strong indicator that the fall season was soon coming to a close. After a few seconds, I let out a deep sigh; there was something that I wasn’t planning on telling either one of my parents about. *Ever*. I didn’t want them to confront anyone with an incautious rage in an effort to protect me. *That would only make things worse*. However, my dad’s genuine concern influenced my impulsive decision to come clean:

“I heard from Haley that Maddy’s mother is upset that I took the number one single’s spot from her daughter,” I confessed. “Both of them are complaining, saying that a freshman shouldn’t take the spot of a senior. They even said that the only reason that our coach made me number one was because I’m black. That I’m not even that good.” I almost started crying again, but this time, I managed to swallow away the knot in the back of my throat.

Dad began to rub his closely shaven salt-and-pepper-colored hair. “And you believe Haley?”

Of course I believed Haley. She had quickly become my best friend and, although we came from different worlds, we were inseparable. I had spent the night at her house several times and her parents were some of the funniest and kindest adults I had ever met. They were in politics and were friends with the Clintons, and not just mild acquaintances. There were pictures of the former president sitting on a side table in her living room. Haley’s mother was best friends with one of President Kennedy’s sisters, and they had money to burn. Yet regardless of everything that made us different, Haley always treated me like an equal. Together, we were just two girls who liked to giggle at pictures of popstar Shawn Mendes. *What would it benefit Haley to lie to me?*

I looked at my dad and nodded my head up and down.

“So, you’re upset because you think that Maddy’s mother is right?” he asked in a serious tone.

“What? No! That’s my point. I know that it’s not true, but other people don’t.”

“You can’t control what other people believe, Moriah. You can only control what you believe.”

That day, Dad and I spent over an hour in the bank's parking lot. We discussed everything that I had bottled up inside of me for the past three months, and he shared his concerns as well. He admitted that it was difficult for him when the school called for a financial donation for their Giving Fund. Him and Mom found themselves in the last donor category, only able to contribute \$500 when all the other parents were giving upwards of ten thousand or more. He admitted to worrying about how he was going to buy me a car so that I wasn't the only kid in the class who wasn't driving to school senior year. He even acknowledged that my mother hated attending all school events, especially the ones hosted by parents in their gigantic houses near the school, surrounded by perfectly coiffed lawns on the outside and marbled staircases on the inside. I had no idea that RBF didn't end once one graduated. I didn't realize that it was something that I would have to learn to navigate for the remainder of my life.

"I'm really glad that you opened up to me," my father admitted. We had been sitting in silence for the past several minutes. There was a lot to process. "That's the one thing that you should always do: Talk it out. Don't internalize other people's ignorance."

"Yeah, but, if I don't, then it seems like I'm just a complainer. You know, the Angry Black Woman trope where I see racism behind every door," I exclaimed.

"That's not true. You don't have to be angry, but you *do* have to let it out," he corrected as he slid the gear shift into drive and began to slowly pull out of the parking space. As we merged into bumper-to-bumper traffic, we didn't say any more about Maddy's mom. Dad knew that I was still thinking about everything that had happened and was rolling over my dad's advice. During the hour-long commute home, I ruminated: *How will I traverse through this life as a well-rounded, intelligent black woman whose interests often take me to places where I am, most assuredly, the outlier, simply by the color of my skin? How did other black women, like my*

great-grandmother, Nana, who was a sharecropper during the 1920s, survive the persistent onslaught of overt and covert prejudices aimed at them? What will I tell my own daughter one day?

The answers to my questions did not come to me that day in the car with my dad, but they developed over time. Over my remaining years of high school, I realized that I could develop my resolve to overcome adversity by drawing from the strategies of my ancestors. *How did Nana come up with the idea of weighing down her cotton sacs with water?* I had to be smart like her. I had to ask the right questions and complete the pertinent research. I had to learn and apply the correct strategies that helped me to persist in defiance of the harmful effects of RBF. My job was to figure out a way to prevail above the stereotypes and the microaggressions and the macroaggressions and the feelings of being an imposter, so that I was not crushed by their combined weight.

My first approach was to change my inner talk. I started telling myself that not all white people see me in a negative light. Whenever I was the only black person in a class, team, or club (which continued to be a daily occurrence), I told myself that I was not an imposter; that I belonged in that space, no matter how anyone made me feel. Over time, negative assumptions about how I was being perceived began to wane, and I began to relish my place as an outlier. The studies my mother passed on to me indicated that people who have grit, or the drive to “stick with it,” are able to overlook the obvious. In my case, I made up my mind to refrain from affording the myriad micro-and-macroaggressions that I encountered on a regular basis with the power to ruin my day. Anytime that I felt drawn to let these incidents of racism get the best of me, I simply reminded myself of the tenacity of my ancestors.

Another plan of action I derived was using my physical health as a combatant of the racialized stress that hindered my mental health. Whether it was exercising or taking the oddly-shaped supplements my Mom would buy, I felt that these routines allowed me to enhance my ability in alleviating the effects of RBF.

I clearly remember sharing these findings during a particular lunch conversation I had senior year with my friend Nina. She was one of the other five black girls in my graduating class, and RBF had been getting the best of her. Even though we were a part of different friend groups, Nina and I always shared a close bond. From getting our ears pierced together at our local mall to belonging to the team that secured our school's first girls tennis state championship earlier that year, we had been through a lot together.

Some of our shared memories, however, were not particularly preferable about which to reminisce. Throughout our junior year, our physics teacher would routinely mix up our names in front of our entire, all-white class. It did not surprise us at first, as these kinds of microaggressions were commonplace for the first couple of weeks of the semester. But as time went on, we were almost amazed by how easily he recalled all of the other students' names except ours. When our teacher chastised Nina using my name, or vice versa, it was easier to focus on each other, rather than his half-assed apology accompanied by the hushed whispers of our classmates. These instances always ended the same way: we moved on with the lecture like nothing happened.

There were other times when Nina and I could lean on each other and even make humor out of our racialized experiences. I remember one day freshman year, she told me that as she was walking up the hill towards the Upper School, some senior girls pulled over and asked her if she wanted a ride. Once she got in the car, they asked, 'You're that girl who plays tennis right?' Nina

responded yes, because she did play tennis. But when they started asking her about being new to the school and nationally ranked, she realized that they thought that she was me.

“You didn’t correct them?!” I exclaimed, half-jokingly.

“I needed the ride, sis! That’s a long walk all the way to Upper School!” she chuckled. “I told them I wasn’t you *after* they gave me the ride.”

“Okay, that’s a fair point. At least you got something out of it!” I said as I joined her in laughter.

Almost three years later, I sat across from Nina at a table in the dining room and shared my coping mechanisms for racialized stress. I was a bit surprised that she had not already adopted strategies to alleviate this burden, as she had enrolled at our school years before me. But that’s the thing about RBF: I found that it affected me and my marginalized counterparts in different ways at different times. Maybe as Nina prepared to attend an Ivy League university later that year, reality began to sink in.

“So, you are just going to pretend that the stuff that’s happening to you isn’t really happening?” she asked incredulously.

“No, that’s not it,” I replied. “I’m just not going to give them any more power to upset my mood or to keep me from attempting new things. My dad has always told me that the thing that controls me is my master.”

“Good for you,” Nina retorted. “I’m not there yet.” She began to use her fork to carelessly push around the remaining broccoli on her plate. As the other seniors began to file out of the dining room, we remained at our table. After a few moments, I added, “Well, that’s not the only thing that you can do by way of self-care.”

We talked about how, until recently, black people didn't have many resources to help them to deal with RBF. In fact, I knew many people who looked like us who firmly believed that it was a sign of weakness to seek out a psychologist or talk to a counselor. Our parent's generation was often told that people who sought mental health services were weak or crazy. As a result, the effects of internalizing such stress lead to physical ailments such as high blood pressure, psychosomatic illnesses, and even some cancers.

“Physical exercise is something that I have recently incorporated into my self-care routine,” I told her. “Working out was always something I did for tennis, but it turned out that it can also be really therapeutic. Especially after a bad day.”

“That’s a really good idea. I’m definitely going to join a gym over Christmas break,” she chuckled. “But seriously, thanks, Moriah. It’s comforting to know that you found things that help you make it through the school day. I know we’re close to getting our diplomas, but sometimes I just wanna leave this place.”

“*Trust* me,” I replied and put a hand on her shoulder. “I’ve been there.”

I replayed the conversations I had with my dad and Nina dozens of times leading up to our commencement ceremony. While one took place in an empty bank parking lot during my freshman year and the other was hashed out over chicken and broccoli in the midst of a noisy lunchroom, they both served as testaments to my personal growth as a racial minority. I would have never realized that I enjoyed being in a diverse environment with various thoughts and perspectives if I hadn't stayed at my high school. As I looked out at my close-knit graduating class as I walked across the stage, I smiled widely at my friends from various ethnicities and many different hues. As we grew together, we shared many good times and bad times together, and they never made me feel anything other than loved and accepted.

My years there were some of the best years of my life, but that is because I *decided* that they would be. I was no longer the girl who cried over a negative comment or a slight by someone who didn't even know me by the time I entered college. As much as I enjoyed the simplicity of my younger years, I felt ready to make steps toward adulthood. The memories of my forefathers sustained my hope that my future is promising *because* of who I am, not in spite of it.

On those days that seem more difficult to navigate, I sense my great-grandmother's presence, strength, and resolve to thrive, despite the odds. Leila Bell Baker grew up in Macon, Georgia and spent her entire life working as a domestic servant. I was born six months after she died in 2002, so I never got to meet her personally, but my mother and older sister talk about her quite a bit. My mother, often, tells me that "Nana would be so proud of you," when we talk about my scholarly accomplishments. Sometimes, I wonder: *Would she?* When I think about all that she went through, I consider her to be much more of a fighter than I'll ever be. She endured racial segregation and blatant discrimination in housing and employment options. She also suffered physically from the long-term effects of RBF, with such ailments as high blood pressure and depression.

When I am alone, sometimes, I'll look up towards the ceiling and close my eyes tightly. If I listen really hard, I feel like I can hear she soft voice saying to me:

"Moriah, I wish that there was some, tangible, way to show you how proud I am of you. Your great-grandfather and I only had an eighth-grade education, and here you are in an Honors College at a university that once wouldn't allow people who looked like you to walk through its doors."

"Yeah, Nana, but what inroads can I really make? I'm only one person."

“You’d be surprised what just one woman can do. Do I need to remind you how Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Well, or Rosa Parks changed the course of this country? All you need is a little bit of courage mixed in with your faith, and I know that you will do great things.”

“But times were different back then, Nana,” I’d insist.

“Honey, there’s nothing new under the sun. What was once will be again, and this country is still in need of some bold black women who aren’t afraid to rock the boat, if you know what I mean,” she’d say with a wink (I’ve heard that she was a bit of a jokester).

“What should I say? I mean if the time comes, and I’m given a platform?”

“I can’t tell you that, my love. I wouldn’t plan to say anything; you’ll know what to say (or do) at the right time. My best advice to you, dear great-granddaughter, is just to *be*. By that, I mean keep doing what you’re doing. Work so hard that you can *be* in the room when policies and decisions are made that impact people of all colors. *Be* the smartest person in the room, so that when you give your opinion, it’ll be worth adhering; *be* fearless in the face of injustice, no matter the consequences. And most of all, *be* who God made you to be, and in the right time, He will show you his plan for your life, and I promise you, it’s beyond anything that you could even imagine. You know how I know? Cause you’ve got my blood running through your veins, and you have what it takes to carry on. Of that, I am sure. And if you ever need my strength, just look up and know that I am rooting for you, Baby Girl.”

When I think about how far my family has come — how both of my parents have college degrees (my mom is currently working on her Ph.D.), how all of my siblings are graduates of higher learning, and how my sister and youngest brother both run their own companies, I am encouraged that they never let RBF get the best of them. Neither will I.