

The Morning I Got Sucker Punched by My Kid

By Mykal White

From the moment I opened my eyes, I sensed it would not be good. There, in the middle of the night, stood my eleven-year old daughter, Brysse, at the side of my bed, wearing an expression I could not immediately define. I had no idea what the hell had happened- but it was safe to assume that no- everything was *not* alright. So I sat up, clicked on the lamp and waited anxiously, for her to reveal whatever news clearly could not wait till morning. Tried not to let on right then to the controlled panic that was rising inside me.

But that all changed once the words began to tumble from my daughter's mouth. And once it quickly had become apparent to me that this girl had obviously lost her whole entire mind.

Some part of that adolescent brain of hers thought it a good idea to come and tell me about a few of the particular issues she had with my mothering. Me! After *everything* I've done for her! She could not be serious. Hell yeah - I felt angry and I felt attacked. Blindsighted. And as she carefully began to rattle off her list of my parental offenses, privately, I was seething. With every unfavorable statement Brysse made about my shortcomings as her mother, was the overwhelming urge I felt to jump up and shout "*Objection!*" I itched to tell her how little she appreciated all I do for her. Had to stifle more than a few outbursts of "*Are you freaking kidding me?!?!!*" that threatened to bubble over and erupt.

She was ungrateful. That was the problem. After all, wasn't *I* the one who had taken her to see *The Little Mermaid on Broadway* when she was three years old - with seats in the second row behind the orchestra pit? Those seats weren't cheap! But I'd made it happen because I wanted her to provide her the benefits of an enriching experience. And how many hundreds of times had I played with dolls with her even when I was bone tired? Spent money I really didn't have just to make her happy? What about the week-long vacation we'd spent in Orlando for her birthday just that summer? *Had she already forgotten about that?* Never had I missed even a single chorus concert, or school play. I'd attended every Parent-Teacher conference. Not to mention all the years that saw her clothed and fed and with a roof over her head. What made her think that any of this was okay? Or fair? She had some nerve!

Did Brysse think being a mother is an easy thing? Did she believe it should resemble something a lot closer to how it looked on TV? Could she even *begin* to wrap her young mind around the demands and sacrifices required of me everyday, as it had for years?

Expect the unexpected. That's what they say, right? Well I did NOT expect a moment like this to find me, and certainly not at three o'clock in the morning, with zero consideration from my daughter for all the hours I'd been putting in at work. How did she think things around here got paid for? *Where was this all coming from? Why was she saying these things to me?* I probably could have prepared myself to hear my daughter tell me anything other than what it was that I was actually hearing her say.

Perhaps I half-expected to learn that she had a boyfriend I didn't know about. Or news that she had gotten into trouble at school. In my mind, worse case scenarios would have been something more along the lines of her confessing to me that she'd tried a cigarette or had somehow become mixed up in a drug ring. Or making the unwelcome discovery that my daughter had just slipped back into the house, undetected, after attending the pole dancing classes she'd secretly been taking for weeks ...

Anything ... but *this*. Anything but having to listen as my little girl disclosed to me the ways I was letting her down. It was excruciating. A new kind of "worst case scenario" for which nobody had bothered to prepare me. What made this occasion all the more vinegar-flavored for me, was the quiet confidence with which Brysse spoke her truth. There was not a trace of contempt or accusation to be found anywhere in her tone. She was not throwing around frivolous complaints in some cruel attempt to conquer me through tactics of guilt. And she obviously seemed to know me a lot better than I'd been aware. It was evident that Brysse had prepped to have this conversation. Her arguments were laid out for my thoughtful consideration. But she was also able to recall specific times, days, and events that were not only relevant but tied impressively back to her claims. The girl wasn't messing around. Meanwhile all I could do was clutch at my invisible pearls and sit in stunned silence as I tried to absorb what was easily the most surreal moment of my entire parenting experience, by far.

Holy cow ... How did I get here?

It was nearly impossible for me not to think about some of the other Moms I knew, both dead and alive - and wonder how they might have reacted to something like this. Had it been *their* daughters instead of mine. Wondered how they would handle being on the receiving end of this blow to their fragile maternal egos. And most of them, I knew, would have panicked the instant they realized what was happening and they either would have gone completely berserk - or they would have shut down the whole thing and refused to hear another word of it. Because it would've been interpreted as sass or backtalk. A child not knowing her place. Disrespectful. Unacceptable.

And ... *oh my goodness* - to think of the reality of what would live in the aftermath of an infraction as grievous as this. The enormity of the tension of strain that surely would've followed, with no choice but to hang in the air between mother and daughter from that moment and with each day onward. The unease that would likely have continued to gather and build on itself, eventually swelling to levels almost too uncomfortable to bear. And I was certain that had any of those Moms been there in that room with me and my own daughter just then, the majority would have questioned (aka: *definitely* frowned upon) my decision even to allow Brysse the floor to speak.

And I'll admit: it was HARD to listen. Really hard. Compared to this, I'd have to say that childbirth was cake and ice cream with sprinkles served with an epidural on the side. This was much *much* more difficult because my pride was at stake. And it was not in the mood for what didn't sing its praises. Neither was my ego, any better. Subconsciously, their collective desire was to drown out anything that might change my opinion of self. They begged that I clap my

hands over my ears, stick out my tongue in defiance and yell as loudly as I could something that sounded a lot like: "*La la la la la laaaaaaaa! I can't hear you! I can't hear you! I can't hear youuu!*"

But I had heard every word my daughter said. I heard every example she gave. And I refused to look away from her, even when her words made things super uncomfortable for me. Even when tears spilled down her cheeks. I resisted the urge to run, and call a TimeOut once I recognized I was only moments away from bawling like a baby. I gave myself permission to feel the warehouse of emotions that opened up, as I came to accept the brittle fact that I was letting my girl down. My beautiful baby girl that I swore I'd always love and protect, who lived at the nucleus of my heart. The daughter was so helplessly entangled with nearly everything I did.

Damn ...

Let that sink in for a moment. Feel my pain.

But here's a thought:

Perhaps I would have had a stronger leg to stand on, had I owned the title of *First Mother the World Has Ever Seen*. A title under which I could make luxurious claims of being the only woman ever to hold my new baby daughter and think only of how much I love her and all the things I want for her life. And no one else but me could speak to what it's like to find yourself in complete awe of your child. My position would provide me the moral authority to insist to the up and coming generations of Moms that the secret to successful parenting is in the songs we sing with our toddlers, the way we worry about them. I'd preach about the importance of celebrating the milestones they achieve during the early years. And to all the women nervous about the experience and begging to know how to guarantee the best possible outcome for their daughters in adulthood - only I would be capable of providing them that highly coveted answer:

I'd tell them that all they need to do is make sure that they love their girls, want them happy, and look to protect them as best we can. And in a nutshell, they'd have the secret sauce. For the most part, as mothers, we all start out with our baby in exactly the same way. Don't we? we? I know I certainly wasn't the first woman ever to hold my new baby daughter for the first time and think only of how much I love her and all the things I want for her life. The only woman to know what it's like to be in complete awe of my child. Just as it would be absurd for me to think that no other mother but me has sang songs with her toddler. Or marveled together at the power of a thunderstorm. Celebrated the milestones of my daughter's early years. Worry over her.

And it would seem ludicrous that I should make such claims because in reality, this is *all of us*. How many of us haven't done those things with our children when they're little? More or less, as mothers, don't we all start out wanting the best for our girls? Wanting them happy? Aren't we united in our basic desire to protect our kids as best we can? Right? And when we look at our daughters, are these feelings not the very emotions that most resonate with us?

And so the question then becomes:

If we are all starting out with our babies in these same, basic ways - then what happens along the way to adulthood? When and why do things change by the time our daughters become women? As a whole, why does the population of mother-daughter duos experience such an array of different and considerably difficult outcomes when it comes to the relationship established between them? How does the connection transform over time? Why does it shift from the mountains of love and joy a mother feels (especially in the beginning and during the early years) to become... something else. Something that barely leaves any trace of its former life.

At what point do the incredible moments being shared between a mother and her young daughter grow to become broken, painful, irreparably damaged? Estranged? Why does the mother-daughter relationship generally seem to support its own adversarial perception? If most moms start out with this endless satchel of love and good intentions for our girls- then at what point throughout the process of raising them, does this beautiful union between a mother and her daughter become so fractured? But you don't have to take my word for it. All any one of us has to do is look around and you'll be reminded of this tragic reality. And what could be more tragic than the mass of grown women who strive to "tolerate" their mothers, as opposed to having with them something more meaningful?

If you were to search the 'Mother-Daughter' relationship on Google, these are the words and sentence fragments served up in bold across the first several pages of results:

"The Mother-Daughter Relationship is often strained"
"Toxic Mother-Daughter Relationship"
"It is often a woman's most complex relationship"
"How to heal your Mother-Daughter relationship"

"Unhealthy"
"A tricky relationship"
"Self-esteem and Mother"
"Relationship breakdown"

Pretty favorable odds at work here, I'd say. These powerful adjectives are *commonly* used to describe a relationship considered to be the most sacred union of a woman's life. But none of those words speak to any of the love and the hope I've held in my heart for Brysse even since the time of my pregnancy. Nor do they illustrate even a smidge of the value I place on the importance of the relationship I share with her. That's insane! How does this not scare the crap out of us all? So where exactly are we going wrong with our daughters? What aren't we doing? Why must it continue to be so damned complicated?!

Maybe it's because of romantic ideals of this union we've held onto; one where we tirelessly share and they dutifully listen and we aren't met with a shred of resistance along the way. And are free to teach them to be whatever we believe they are capable of becoming.

And then there is the version of these ideas that sees the confidence we come to own, as Mothers. Because we believe that we already know who our daughters are, and we have every reason to believe that we are on the right track with them. And though nothing is perfect- but things are going just fine - until our daughter wakes us in the middle of night and calls us out on the job we're doing. If we're willing to hear her out, that is. And then, of course, there's also the reality of being the mother at the center of a moment like that.

Brysse had obviously provided me with the most humbling experience of my life. Especially because I'd naturally just sort of assumed that we were doing great. So I allowed my daughter to say what she needed to say, without interruption, without my becoming angry and defensive. I listened to my daughter and I chose to really hear her. And unlike how my own mother would probably have handled it, I did not shut down. Even as her words were like hot needles pricking my very soul.

Once I was able to push past my own desire for self-preservation- I felt terrible about it. I really did. Most disgraceful of all, was my trying to figure out how I'd managed to not even notice. I was embarrassed that my daughter had to make me aware of those things in order for me to see it. Heck - I'd initially been ready to object to everything my daughter was saying and chalk the whole thing up to adolescent disloyalty. But I was right. About everything she said. Shame on me. Shame shame shame on me. I deserved to wear a dunce hat and sit, facing the corner until I'd learned my lesson. Where the only thing I could've done then, was wonder how much damage my oversights might've caused, both to Brysse and to the bond I still hoped was possible between us. And feel awkward and insecure about where we went from there.

So rather than guess, I went ahead and asked her. What did she need from me? Where did we go from here? What were her expectations around the kind of relationship she felt we should have or could have? And once we had a solid understanding of those things, I then touched on a few items on Brysse's 'Daughter Scorecard' that were in need of way more of her time and attention to make those mother-daughter goals possible. Shared my truth on what I needed from her, and some of my ideas of how I'd like to see us grow together.

In consideration for why I'd started Paperbanking for Brysse in the first place and what I'd hoped to accomplish- that moment with Brysse and the conversation that took place was a big deal for us. Huge. Life-changing. Because it let me know that I was actually getting even more from this method than I'd even thought to ask for. And though Paperbanking had initially been born from the urgent need I felt to prepare differently for my daughter's future, this moment was the first time I realized that it had given us the power to let us decide for ourselves, and in advance, the kind of Mother-Daughter duo we wanted to be.

I had already come to recognize many years earlier, the benefits that came to us by default just by integrating Paperbanking into my life as Brysse's mom. The rewards were both obvious and subtle, but easy to spot. Its influence was in the quality of the foundation I'd laid for Brysse throughout those critical developmental years. The ways it allowed me to remain in tune with her. The heightened sense of appreciation I had for all the many moments between us as well as being able to identify the ways our growth ran parallel. Seeing and capturing for Brysse, the times when our lives overlapped. Mapping for my daughter a portrait that would reflect my evolution as a woman and a mother, as well as her own.

Along the way, I found Paperbanking to be a significant ally in my continual desire to shorten the gap between the kind of mother I was and the kind of mother I wanted to be.

But on the night that saw my eleven-year daughter enter my bedroom at 3am to start a conversation around expectations and disappointment was absolutely a game-changer. It was not until that moment, that I was able to really see and experience the impact Paperbanking made on our relationship. Because it had always been a part of our life together, it'd created a

different mindset for Brysse. She understood that she could talk to me because inherently, she knew how much I valued the relationship itself. By the method in which I'd chosen to save her childhood memories, she'd also come to absorb that where she was concerned, I was focused on a much broader perspective. And so she saw the need to initiate a dialogue around "checking-in" and she saw the importance of our ability to communicate these things to each other. Accountability. And though it wasn't until later that I realized this - it was this mindset that won out over my pride. It was the reason why I was able to *Listen* and why I was able to *Hear* her. Without interruption.

What if she had never come to me at all? What if she had chosen instead to nothing and allowed those things to remain unspoken at a time when I might have been able to make the necessary adjustments? Or what if I'd let my pride shut down the entire conversation before it started? What if she had no choice but to stuff her words back down inside herself and over time they simmer and harden into resentments? How much good would it have done to either of us to try to approach these situations many years from now in the future, at a time when it would then be too late to make it better or make it right?

Aren't these just the sorts of things that come between mothers and daughters - either because they happen too late, never happen at all, or attempt to find resolution at a time when finding resolution seems impossible, as there is already too much water under the bridge.

Much better that these relationship matters be approached and understood earlier versus later. And the fact that my little girl knew this even before I did - is just extraordinary.

All because I had the foresight to cultivate for us, a different type of soil from which our relationship would flourish. And 'flourish' doesn't mean that mistakes stop getting made. And it definitely doesn't mean that my kid never pisses me off. Yeah right. But what it does mean is that we communicate from a place that not many adult mother-daughter relationships ever reach. Especially because its often the older we get, the harder it becomes to know where even to begin when attempting to tackle these matters around the differences in our perspectives as mother and daughter. Which is why its an enormous relief that Brysse and I have established a way to have regular communication, around our relationship and where we stand with the other. The more open we are about expectations and the more comfortable we feel with having those uncomfortable conversations, is the less likely those things are to later transform into resentments. Whether spoken or not, expectations are really just premeditated resentments, anyway.

Today, Brysse is a teenager, and based on everything I'd been told in advance about life with a teen, this was definitely the phase of 'daughter' I dreaded most. But everything - *everything*- from the way we disagree to the way we communicate, is lightning years ahead of everyone else I know. I actually *like* her. I am not nearly as stressed out as my other Mom friends. I don't panic to think of the future. Rarely do I need to be reminded of the importance of staying present. To this day, I remain as in-tune with my teenage daughter as I had been back when I was still learning to interpret the sounds of her cries. Throughout each stage of her growth and

development, I have easily been able to pick up on all the subtle ways she was changing right before my eyes, long before the bigger changes came.

What we have is just ... different. And special. And healthy. And remarkable. My desire was to prepare differently for my daughter and the future she would inevitably see. So I set out to create, for her, a sort of "bridge" to honor her legacy, but also to reflect my significance in her life, as her mother. There was no way I could deny the impressions permanently left on my life by my own mother. And I wanted this 'bridge' to be able to "find" us again at the time of her adulthood and offer her a particular blend of perspective and insight that would only make as much sense when looking back at such things, but seeing them through the filtered lenses of autonomy. A method capable of honoring our separateness as mother and daughter as much as it would, our togetherness. To have something like this in place for moms and their girls is kind of a big deal.

A loving, healthy relationship between a girl and her mother has the power to move mountains and seas. Its impact reaches far beyond a time we will live to see. The more our daughters understand about us, the better they understand themselves. Keeping in mind, the influence we have with our girls, this should not be a tough one to digest.

And little did I know, that in building this sort of pathway into an unknown future that my own daughter would one day step into, I was also creating for us, a foundation strong enough to support the weight of that future. Who woulda thought? Who in their right mind would have believed that in doing something as simple as preserving childhood memories for Brysse- our relationship as mother and daughter would be so empowered, and wonderfully heightened in ways I didn't think were actually possible.

But I'm not referring to the static, uncontextualized photos in a Scrapbook. This is about much more than the locks of hair from first haircuts, old bibs and baby shoes we look to store in a 'Box O' Memories' for our kids, and pretend they'll be excited to see again when they're older. And it's a lot more personal than our posts on social media in public reflection of our growing babies. And it's a lot more meaningful than any parenting app will ever have the ability to own.

At a glance, Paperbanking seems impossibly simple. But that's really its secret sauce. Beyond the surface of its simplicity, are the realities of its impact. It's a method for saving childhood memories, a quiet parenting tool, the missing link of The Mother-Daughter Experience. And the reason why this generation of mothers and daughters will be empowered to decide about the sort of Mother-daughter duos you want to be. Later for what Google has to say. *We got this.*

Do you know who would never have believed any of this? Me. I was the woman who, at 24 years old, cried for three days straight and swore that her entire life was over because she was pregnant. Holy cow. I was that girl! And I had no idea, all that would be waiting to meet me on the other side of Motherhood's Door. When I think back to who I was *then*, and how I'd initially felt about becoming a mother, and with *all* that I've gained since - the irony still tickles me to this day.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

You would first need to understand the elements to our Mother-Daughter foundation that first had to be laid, in order for Brysse and I to have these honest "check-in" conversations as often as needed, and without it all quickly dissolving into my spending a night in county jail.

Paperbanking has given us more than I ever could have hoped for. Already. Right now. Today.