

AGAINST RESIGNATION

Sophia Platcow

Being under the pressure of stereotype threat is like being under a magnifying glass. Everything is clear and visible; people are waiting to expose you. Your vulnerability peaks. The fear of confirming something that you know people are almost asking you to confirm is overpowering. All eyes are on you, almost as if you were the subject of a science experiment. Studies conducted by Claude M. Steele and published in his book, *Whistling Vivaldi*, communicate just what stereotype threat can do to a person. In one experiment, both men and women were given a math test. Half of the participants were asked to identify their gender before taking the test, while the other half didn't complete this step, and simply took the test. The results were fascinating. The women who took the test after being asked to identify their gender performed worse than the women who weren't asked to answer that question. For men, there was no difference in performance. Yet women's performance in math is just one of many stereotype threats.

"I first began to know the unwieldy inheritance I'd come into—the ability to alter public space in ugly ways" (1), writes Brent Staples in "Just Walk on By." Staples, an African American man, understands exactly what it feels like to be victimized by a stereotyped assumption. He struggles with feelings of discouragement, nervousness, isolation, and self-doubt. This is apparent in the way that Staples describes an encounter that he has with a woman while walking home one night on the streets of Chicago. He described the woman as "my first victim" (1). Staples makes it sound as if he were doing something wrong to this woman, even though she was never a victim, just someone who was susceptible to preconceived ideas about a young black man on the street at night: a woman who believed in a stereotype.

In his essay, Staples paints the portrait of how racial stereotypes affect him throughout his everyday life. He experienced unfair treatment and false assumptions about who he was, even in his work place. Of one unfortunate encounter, he writes: "One day, rushing into the office of a magazine I was

writing for with a deadline story in hand, I was mistaken for a burglar. The office manager called security and, with an ad hoc posse pursued me through the labyrinthine halls, nearly to my editor's door" (2). Staples is subject to feelings of discouragement and isolation, yet he doesn't seem resigned to them. When talking about a woman whom he felt he had made uncomfortable, Staples says: "I understand, of course, that the danger they perceive is not a hallucination. Women are particularly vulnerable to street violence, and young black males are drastically overrepresented among the perpetrators of that violence." He continues: "Yet, these truths are no solace against the kind of alienation that comes of being ever the suspect, against being set apart, a fearsome entity with whom pedestrians avoid making eye contact" (1). Staples communicates that, though it hurts to be constantly accused and suspected of criminal activity, he's not willing to just stand back and let it happen. It isn't easy to be constantly scrutinized, or dissected, as a possible threat, but that doesn't mean Staples can't handle it.

When talking about the times he has been falsely accused of criminal activity, Staples says, "I have been calm and extremely congenial on those rare occasions when I've been pulled over by police" (2). Staples reacts with grace and maturity, demonstrating that he is not willing to confirm the stereotypes being placed upon him. Instead of reacting with violence, Staples knows that responding with kindness will keep him, and the others around him, safe. Throughout our lives, we all encounter moments and situations that evoke feelings of fear, frustration, disgust, confusion, and denial. Discerning an appropriate yet truthful reaction is hard, as sometimes we are so filled by negativity that we are blinded by it. Staples, however, illustrates that one constructive way to handle these situations is to fight the stereotype with a mature and calm attitude.

Like Staples, I know exactly what it's like to desperately not want to confirm a stereotype. In my sophomore year, I was placed in one of the hardest math classes offered. Similar to the women in studies done by Steele, I felt the weight of stereotype threat; it definitely affected my performance. I walked into the classroom, sensing the heat of sixteen pairs of eyes; a feeling like a fire burning in the pit of my stomach made me nauseous. Stereotyped thoughts filled my head like fireflies, lighting up the idea that girls are simply bad at math. I am a girl. And girls. Can't. Do. Math. I felt like an outsider,

my lack of testosterone defining my lack of intelligence and inability to grasp the material. I felt threatened, vulnerable to their chocking laughs. How do we function, how do we take a step forward, when it feels that the weight of our incapacities is stacked on our shoulders, digging in to our bones? The eyes of others constantly remind us that every move we make is engraved with meaning: people are watching, waiting for us to confirm what they believe we are, without even giving us the air to breathe, the time to gather ourselves and prove them wrong. Feeling threatened hinders the ability to perform, both physically and mentally. It's haunting and emotionally draining to feel threatened.

Staples writes of how many young African American men turn to intimidation and violence when they feel threatened. He says, "Many things go into the making of a young thug. One of those things is the consummation of the male romance with the power to intimidate" (2). Staples watched as young men around him discovered that, when they felt threatened or without power, they could rise up and take back the power, making themselves the intimidating ones. Yet Staples doesn't want "the power to intimidate" anybody, especially women. He isn't willing to confirm the ugly relationship that exists between masculinity and violence, or masculinity and power. However, he helps to explain its cause, and why the stereotypes of African American men still exist. Sometimes, the best way for us to understand a situation is to learn from another's perspective. Staples understands from where the stereotypes pinned to him derive, and he takes this understanding and uses it constructively to devise his own way of coping with the situation. In my math class, many of the boys did possess "the power to intimidate," as every day I walked out of that class feeling subordinate to their male gaze. And this isn't a new or unique feeling for women to have. This feeling of subordination is longstanding. It also plays into why the women might fear Staples when he is walking by them late at night. In Staples' case, without even wanting to, he came off as intimidating.

Even though Staples didn't react with aggression or give in to the stereotypes he was expected to confirm, he still dealt with frustration. He discovered, however, that by whistling Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* he could relieve some of the anxiety that he instilled in some people. When commenting on this practice, Staples says, "It is my equivalent to the cowbell that hikers wear

when they know they are in bear country" (2). Staples compares himself to being in bear country, as if he were protecting himself from people as hikers do from bears. The fact that Staples' appearance causes him to need to whistle to keep himself and others feeling safe is absurd. It's ironic that a hiker in bear country is alone, without other people to help protect her and fend off any possible attacks. Therefore, the hiker wears a cowbell to keep herself safe. Staples, on the other hand, is not alone, as he is surrounded by many people in Chicago and New York. Yet he feels just as alone and afraid as the hiker does, knowing he is in bear country. But Staples never lets his fear sink into resignation.

Bernard Cooper explores ideas concerning resignation in his essay "Labyrinthine." Cooper, as a young boy, discovered mazes in his coloring books. They were everything to him, enrapturing him within their misleading pathways. Often, the mazes would include a mouse at the beginning and a wedge of cheese at the end. The goal was to lead the mouse to his cheese. Cooper says, "Reaching the cheese has about it a triumph and finality I'd never experienced after coloring a picture or connecting the dots. If only I'd known a word like inevitable, since that's how it felt to finally slip into the innermost room. I gripped the crayon, savored the place" (1). These mazes gave Cooper a sense of accomplishment, a way to make sense of a tiny world, for just a moment. They were orderly; they always had a solution. As he grew more fascinated with the art of mazes, he began to make his own. Cooper found these mazes so exciting and perplexing that he showed them to his parents, hoping that they would find joy in trying to solve them, too. When both his father and mother seemed uninterested in attempting to solve these puzzles, the young Cooper was confused. Why were they both so willing to give up? Cooper recalls their response to his enthusiasm: "'When you've lived as long as we have . . .,' they'd say, which meant no surprises loomed in their future; it was repetition from here on out" (2). They had absolutely no interest in attempting to navigate the tricky labyrinths. Instead, both resigned themselves before the challenge.

Cooper suggests the idea that life, as a whole, is a maze. Humans experience challenges within this maze called life, yet, as Cooper's essay suggests to me, resignation in the face of our struggles can be just as bad as violence. Cooper, unlike Staples, gives in, and resigns to the hardships of life. At the

end of his essay, Cooper addresses his parents as an adult, now aware of how they felt when he would give them mazes to complete as a young boy. Cooper says, "I suppose it was inevitable that, gazing down at this piece of paper, I'd feel your weary expressions on my face. What have things been like since you were gone? Labyrinthine. The very sound of that word sums it up—as slippery as thought, as perplexing as truth, as long and convoluted as a life" (3). Cooper is overwhelmed by the maze of life as an adult, and he admits to understanding how his parents felt about mazes when he was a boy. He describes this as "inevitable," suggesting feelings of hopelessness and a despondent outlook on the rest of his life. Cooper does not offer any clear evidence of experiencing a feeling of persistence, of not being ready to resign and give up. And to Cooper, this fate was "inevitable." Giving up is weak, however, even though that's exactly what Cooper's parents did and, later, what he himself does. We lead busy lives on this earth, sometimes working ourselves to exhaustion. We put too much on our proverbial plates, and drag ourselves through the weeks with barely any energy left by the end. Can we really blame Cooper and his parents for not having the will to complete the mazes? No, we cannot. But from people like Staples, we can see what happens if we don't resign or give up.

Through the maze of life, we must learn how to resist the urge to give up, even when we are stuck in frustrating situations. How do I, in this math class full of judgmental boys, continue to work hard and succeed, despite their intimidating presence? Staples found a way of not giving into the stereotypes to which he knew that he was expected to conform. He, instead, induced a feeling of security and amiable energy in others through whistling happy tunes as he walked by: "And on late-evening constitutionals along streets less traveled by, I employ what has proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers" (Staples 2). By whistling friendly songs on the street, Staples made himself seem less "menacing" or "threatening" to those ensnared by a preconceived stereotype about his masculinity and race. This was his way of fighting resignation and continuing on, paving his own path through life.

I take my seat at the back of the math class. I pull out my notebook and begin attempting to make sense of the equations that fill the board. Questions

fill my head, and I raise my hand. I feel the glares; I sense the eye rolls of disapproval. I'm rowing my own boat, and anytime I stop for a moment to rest my arms, I'm ridiculed. I know I'm fulfilling their expectations perfectly. And though I feel the discouragement, the isolation, the heat of tears in the back of my eyes, today I will not let those feelings drown me. I don't want to resign; I want to lead my life without the fear of what others might think or say. I keep my hand confidently raised in the air. I look to my right, locking eyes with one of those boys gazing back at me with expectations about my performance in his eyes. But I don't look down: I keep my eyes pinned on him. He doesn't have the "power to intimidate" unless I give it to him.

Yes, I am a girl. Yes, I am in a hard math class. And, yes, it is full of boys. But I am a girl, and girls. Can. Do. Math.

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