

REBOOTING MY BRAIN

How a Freak Aneurysm Reframed My Life

Author: Maria Ross

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ABOUT THE BOOK

“When the hectic and meticulously-packed suitcase of your life gets dumped out all over the floor, it’s actually a blessing. You can repack it however you want. My life had whipped itself up in a frenzy of change and stress until my head (quite literally) exploded. Once the rubble was cleared away, I saw the world in sharper focus.”

Rebooting My Brain is the true story of what happens when you get yanked out of your life by a crisis—and have to get back on the ride all over again. With refreshing candor, Maria Ross shares how the relentless pace of her life came to a screeching halt when an undetected brain aneurysm ruptured and nearly killed her. Along her stubborn road back to health, her resulting cognitive and emotional challenges forced her—

sometimes kicking and screaming—to reframe her life, her work and her identity.

With humor and heart, Ross shares what it was like being blind for six weeks, how a NY Jets quarterback and online word puzzles played a role in getting her edge back and why a handmade necklace helped her regain her sense of self.

Ross reveals the keys to her extraordinary comeback and how her perspective is forever changed, in many ways for the better. Funny, touching and real, this book not only shares an inspirational story of transformation but enlightens readers about the surprising effects of brain injury...and explores the question, *“How do our brains define who we are?”*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maria Ross is a consultant, author, speaker and actress who believes that cash flow and creativity are not mutually exclusive. Her first book, *Branding Basics for Small Business* (2010, Norlights Press) received praise from marketing experts and best-selling authors. In addition to branding, marketing, and inspiration, she also writes about food and wine and has written for such outlets as *San Francisco Downtown*, *IntoWine.com*, *Sharp Skirts*, *DiningOutSF*, *Entrepreneur.com*, *American Express Open Forum* and *Seattle Business*. Maria is a dynamic keynote speaker and has also been featured in *Entrepreneur Magazine* and on MSNBC and NPR. She is a lover of animals, wine, travel, independent film, crime dramas, dry humor, football and *Jeopardy*. Maria lives in Seattle with her husband Paul and their black Lab mix, Eddie.



Follow Maria on Twitter (@redslice) on Facebook (www.facebook.com/redslice) or visit her website, www.red-slice.com.

RAVES

"A captivating, deeply authentic memoir of a devastating illness and a heroic recovery. Maria Ross' memoir *Rebooting My Brain* is a testament to one woman's personal courage and a reminder that health is a tenuous treasure."

—Carol Cassella, best-selling author of *Oxygen and Healer*

"Maria Ross weaves a tale of inspiration, love and hope about an active woman reclaiming her life after an unexpected crisis. Her humorous and honest voice leaps off the page and makes you feel as if you're talking to her over coffee, even when she's describing medical procedures. This is a must-read for anyone who's ever had the rug pulled out

from under them, not just brain injury survivors and their families."

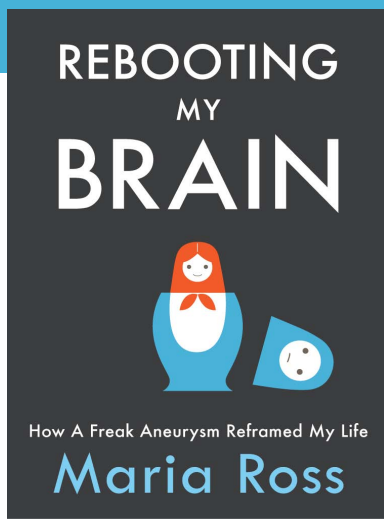
—Ingrid Ricks, author of *Hippie Boy: A Girl's Story*

"*Rebooting My Brain* is a deeply moving account of Maria Ross's brain aneurysm and her struggle to come to terms with it. She has written a memoir full of humor, grace, and hope, making it clear such a devastating injury can be overcome and can even serve as a means of discovering what is truly important in this life."

—Nick O'Connell, author of *On Sacred Ground: The Spirit of Place in Pacific Northwest Literature* and founder of *TheWritersWorkshop.net*.

CONTACT

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— SELECT EXCERPTS FROM —

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“I believe things are worse for those who can clearly remember trauma than they are for those of us experiencing it firsthand. Our own memories often protect us from ourselves, but it’s a lot harder to strike those images from the minds of the loved ones around us.”

A neuro ICU specialist then told him that he needed to drill a hole in my skull and insert a draining tube to flush out the blood and alleviate the pressure.

“Oh, yeah. Right. Of course,” Paul responded. *Wait....what? Drill a hole in my wife’s head?*

Paul later told me, “That was the point when things shifted from being bizarre and scary to becoming a series of routine check points. They were going to drill a hole in your head and I was expected to just accept that. After that, things that would normally have been extreme or strange simply became a normal part of the process we had to go through to make you better.”

That’s the amazing thing. We all think our lives and work are so busy and important and we couldn’t possibly take a break from them. We just keep running, running, running on the treadmill for fear it will all go to hell if we jump off. We check our voicemail every five minutes, we freak out if we forget our phone when we’re running to the grocery store, and—God Forbid—we decide not to check email while on vacation. But when tragedy strikes, time just stops. And you know what? People adapt. Nothing, *nothing* is so important that it can’t be worked around, no matter what anyone says.

...Unless, of course, they are performing emergency brain surgery.

The love and support around us was amazing and to this day still knocks the breath right out of me when I think of the countless acts—big and small—that people did...*for us*. It’s both humbling and overwhelming. Not only does your own life stop when there is a crisis, but others willingly put their own lives on hold for you as well.

Looking back, I thought I’d be able to get back to our normal routine together in a matter of days. Naiveté can be a friend if you happily forge ahead with no idea how high the mountain is to climb. You just push forward in your ignorance and don’t stop to listen to anyone. I wasn’t thinking about my sight issues or the overwhelming fatigue I would have to spend months—and even years—fighting. I didn’t yet know about the depression, the forgetfulness, the frustration I would face in the times ahead. One step at a time—that’s as far into the future as I thought.

Tears welled up as I stared in the mirror that day for the first time: my left eye was still red and swollen from eye surgery, my face was pale and gaunt from all the weight loss and my hair—my signature, my trademark, my one pride and joy—was hacked to bits. I realized for the first time what a tiny little “pea head” I had hiding under all of that hair. I felt so small, like part of me had disappeared.

Who was I if I wasn’t the feisty curly-red-haired girl anymore?

I guess I was going to have to find out.

Whoa, I thought. I have a helluva long way to go.

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But patience—a virtue with which I’ve always struggled—finally had me by the throat and I was going to have to listen if I wanted to pick up my life again.

More importantly, I learned during the many months of recovery that having more patience and acceptance didn’t mean I wasn’t ambitious anymore. Rather, patience was simply something I was going to need more of in my life if I wanted to get off the explosive track I’d been on that had caused the aneurysm in the first place.

It dawned on me that this was the beginning of reframing the way I live my life—if I wanted to have a life to live.

I had not yet learned all I would learn about what was going on in my brain. Since I felt fine, could speak, could recognize people, and could read and comprehend, I thought this whole “getting back to my life” thing would be a piece of cake. Physically, I knew I needed work. But that was much more tangible. How do you tell someone they are not as good at “prioritizing” until they actually need to prioritize?

I’m not sure any other type of bodily injury can have quite the same impact on who you are as a person as a brain injury can. I mean, your personality defines who you are, no matter what you are physically capable of. If that gets altered in any way, are you really who you were? Or is your identity something deeper, in your soul? Aren’t we really just the sum of the personality traits we act on and the feelings that we have?

And at least now, my cognitive issues had names and I was aware they existed. Know thy enemy, they always say. Articulating my issues was the first step to conquering them.

Maybe emergency eye surgery was not so bad. I’d already proven I had the strength and acceptance to handle whatever else this crazy situation might throw at me. This was once again a slap upside the head to quit my bitching and to realize that I wasn’t even supposed to be here.

When you get yanked out of your life—by crisis, death, illness or catastrophe—it’s hard enough to get back on track. But when part of what yanked you out actually impacts your initiation, focus and mood, it’s like a double whammy.

I think the secret is part stubbornness, part denial and part pure gumption. And having a support system—and amazing resources—to kick your butt quite a bit along the way.

My point is, *fight*. Fight as hard as you can against the inertia, the self-pity, the doubt and the fear.

Coddling and reassurance had worked for the early days of my recovery. But eventually that can just turn into your own prison as you hide from the world. Sometimes it’s better to face the fear head-on, over and over, and talk the talk until you finally relearn how to walk the walk. Fake it until you make it, baby. It’s painful but it works.

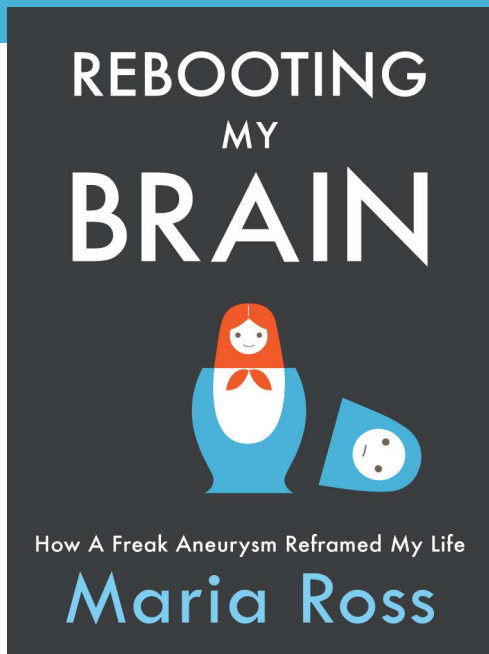
Did I come back wiser, more thankful, more aware? I like to think so. Even when stress takes over and I’m overwhelmed, I try to at least take a second and say aloud, “You’re still here, Maria. Nothing else matters.” And I breathe again.

So I went to my appointment and then drove home. Eddie greeted me like a rock star at the door, wiggling his butt, wagging his tail, doing his little happy dance and demanding attention as if nothing had ever happened in our lives.

Gotta love dogs.

Even though I had a ton of things to do, I left the computer off so I could snuggle with Eddie for a while, smile at the sun on the patio outside my office, and thank God for not being ready for me yet.

And then I went back to work.



STORY ANGLES & INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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STORY ANGLES

THREE KEYS TO GETTING BACK ON BOARD THE RIDE OF LIFE

There is nothing like an unexpected crisis to bring your life to a grinding halt and strip it down to the bare essentials. Deaths, traumas, illnesses can all yank you right off the merry-go-round of your busy life. What are the secrets to revving up and getting back “into your life” all over again?

FIVE SHOCKING EFFECTS OF BRAIN INJURY

Brain injuries of all kinds can leave someone physically “fine” but cognitively or emotionally impaired. Find out five effects of brain injury you may never have expected – and strategies for adapting to these changes effectively.

THE CHICKEN OR THE EGG: DOES OUR BRAIN DETERMINE WHO WE ARE?

A brain injury can impact not just physical abilities, but the ways in which we work, react, and think. If we define ourselves by our personality or emotional traits (“She’s a go-getter” or “He’s a neat freak”) and a brain injury changes the game, how do we define ourselves going forward? Does your innate personality determine how your brain functions or does the existing brain wiring affect who you really are?

POSSIBLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE AUTHOR



- 1.** You had an unforeseen brain aneurysm that ruptured back in 2008. Can you tell us what happened? What is an aneurysm? Were there any warning signs?
- 2.** What was it like to lose a month of your life from memory? How did your family and friends react?
- 3.** Fate, luck and coincidence play big roles in this whole tale: your husband coming home early that day, your proximity to one of the nation's leading trauma and rehab centers. How does that knowledge affect you?
- 4.** In the book, you share some surprising effects of brain injury in hopes of shedding some light. What are some of the cognitive or emotional impairments you suffered from and how did you learn to adapt? What is your message to other brain injury survivors and their families?
- 5.** You say the keys to your amazing recovery were acceptance, patience, community and humor. Can you share some examples, especially of any funny stories or poignant moments where these lessons were brought home?
- 6.** You were essentially blind for six weeks and had vision impairment for many months after your aneurysm. What was that experience like?
- 7.** You talk about the myths people have about a near-death experience. How has this experience changed the way you live your life on a daily basis, if at all? You talk about this experience as a “gift.” In what way?
- 8.** Such a life-threatening illness can be very expensive. What was your experience with the health care and insurance system, as a patient? Do you view healthcare differently than you did before?
- 9.** You now volunteer at the hospital and speak about the Patient and Family Centered Care philosophy. What does this mean and how can people be “better patients” and take an active role in their care? How can medical experts do a better job in providing care and information?
- 10.** Your dog, Eddie, playfully pops up throughout the book and plays a role. What role do you think companion animals can play in healing?