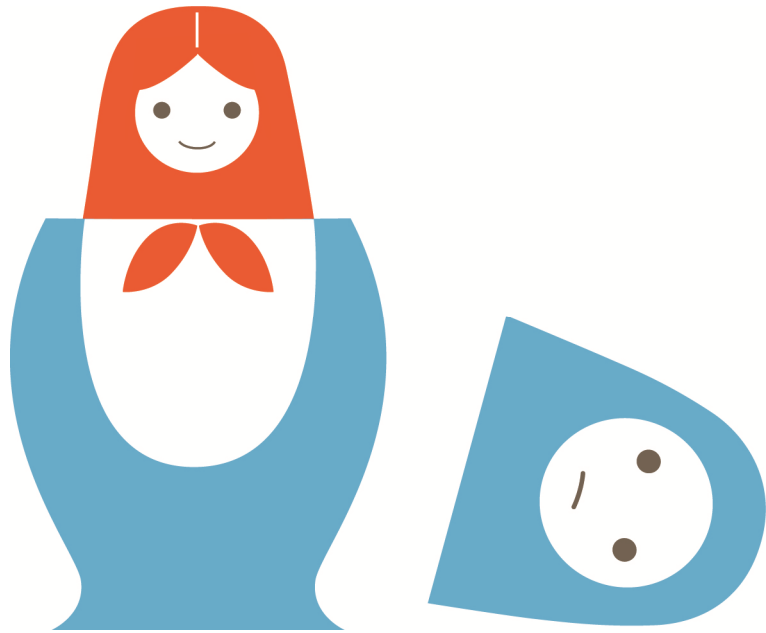


Seven Lessons to Reboot and Reframe: What a Freak Aneurysm Can Teach You



By Maria Ross
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In 2008, I was like most dynamic women: running on life's treadmill, overbooking myself, pursuing all my passions at once.

Ha. **Trying to “live my best life” almost stole it from me.**

I almost died from a brain aneurysm. My husband found me on the floor, collapsed and unconscious. Emergency scans revealed a ruptured aneurysm had caused a severe brain hemorrhage. After emergency surgery, doctors had no idea what my brain damage prognosis would be as I lay sedated and on a ventilator in ICU. I spent six weeks in the hospital, blind from retinal damage that had also occurred.

It turned out to be a gift: The hectic pace of my life finally caught up and it was time to make a change.

My recovery was amazing, according to doctors. Eye surgery improved my vision and I spent a long time getting my strength back, learning rehab therapies for the unseen cognitive and psychological deficits common to brain injury. I later learned to use the skills I still had – my voice and my writing – to become a patient advocate, dedicated to educating others about the surprising effects of brain injury and teaching doctors how to improve the patient experience. This drive to inspire led me to share my journey through my recently released memoir, [*Rebooting My Brain: How a Freak Aneurysm Reframed My Life.*](#)

As I worked through my gradual recovery and adapted to the New Me, I realized that many lessons I teach my business clients played a huge healing role. I saw that the very same strategies that a business owner needs to build a strong brand, create a transformational organization, and save her sanity also apply to our lives at large. Especially when life smacks you full on in the face and you need to reboot and reframe the conversation if you want to get back in the game.

LESSON ONE: FOCUS

With my cognitive issues, I could no longer multi-task the way I once could. And believe me, I was a master multi-tasker. I could often get more done in a day than many people could all week. I was a fast writer, and able to juggle a conference call, answering emails and sipping a latte. My husband often jokes that I was so good at this skills, I am now just a mere mortal! But for me, it's a different way to work and it impacts what I'm able to do on a daily basis and how long it takes. Tasks that used to be more automatic now take more time and concentration as I retrained my brain to make those connections again.

With my brain injury, my brain's “filter” suffered some damage. I now get overwhelmed by too much stimuli coming at me at once: information, activity, lights and sounds. And like water hitting an electrical device, I can short-circuit. I

had to learn how to focus my time and energies on one task at a time, which is really not a bad lesson for any of us to learn in this uber-connected day and age. My new mantra has become quality over quantity.

Focus on your priorities. There is no such thing as work/life balance. But there is such a thing as prioritizing who and what needs your attention more at certain times. Things will ebb and flow and you can tackle every single one of your dreams and ambitions: you just don't have to do them all at the same time.

LESSON TWO: BE AUTHENTIC

You can be who you are but also evolve as times change. During all those months of recovery and dealing with those cognitive issues, I had to accept the fact that there was a New Me, a new sheriff in town. Maybe other people couldn't notice, but I could tell things were different. Instead of whining and mourning the loss of what I used to do better, I accepted who I was and played to those strengths instead.

I had to work and play in a whole new way and I could sit and whine about the fact that I'm not as good with names as I used to be, or I trip over my words when I'm speaking, or I absolutely have to write everything down or risk forgetting important details more than ever before, but that's okay. **Never let anyone define you by your deficits.** Play to your strengths and promise them to the world instead.

Don't try to be something you're not – in your life or in your work – or even cling to something you used to be. Evolve, adapt, flow. You don't want to run into the disappointment both you and others will feel due to unmet expectations. Promise what you can deliver and deliver what you promise.

LESSON THREE: COUNT ON YOUR TRIBE

It's crucial to build a tribe before you need it and lean on it when times get rough. I had to rely on my husband for a lot; our roles in our house changed from equal partners to a dynamic of caregiver and patient and it was really hard. As I regained my strength, site and health, I had to rely on him for the cooking, the cleaning, the driving....which, come to think of it, doesn't actually sound that bad, does it?! Seriously, though, it was hard to learn how to be completely dependent on somebody – and do so graciously.

I've always been an independent gal: I didn't get married until I was 33 and I've always lived in big cities on my own. Getting used to asking for help on a continuous basis went against everything I am. A friend offered to write out my

thank-you cards because of my vision impairment. Other friends shuttled me to book club, networking events or even doctor appointments because I couldn't yet drive. Psychologically, I needed some help as well. Brain injury patients often suffer from lack of inertia (basically, your "get up and go" is impacted), anxiety and depression. I had to admit I needed help and reached out to therapists to come to my home. I even worked with a stress counselor when I got back into work again in order to handle I needed to do to get on with my life.

You can't live your life effectively or build a successful business alone. **You're not an island. Seek out friends, experts, and cheerleaders when you need them.** It's smarter, less painful and way more efficient. Make the right investments in your life and your business to accelerate your progress and take off.

LESSON FOUR: PRACTICE PATIENCE

Patience never used to be part of my vocabulary. I don't anyone would ever use that word to describe me! I'm an Italian and a redhead so it is just not in my DNA. But patience smacked me in the face during my recovery and I had no choice but to listen. Even though I lay in a hospital bed after just fighting for my life – shaved head, no vision, poor memory and bony, weak body – I did not fully grasp the severity of what I'd been through. I still thought my husband and I were getting on a plane for our planned two week vacation in Spain. He had to tell me about four times that the trip was cancelled because I kept forgetting.

I was ready to jump back into my life again and I thought I was going to just pick up where I left off. I thought it was going to be hospital bed to Spanish beach in 0 to 60 seconds. But I needed time to manage the cognitive deficits. I had to get my strength back, bolster my, grow my hair back. My vision needed repair with surgery and healing time. I needed practical therapy and I also needed to get my business back up and running. All of this takes time.

It's not about being lazy or not doing anything at all. **Patience is not about stagnation.** Patience is about understanding the realistic steps it's going to take for you to get somewhere and measuring your forward progress along the way. As long as you can measure the steps along the way and you're moving in the right direction, then you can keep charting the course. And eventually you'll get there.

LESSON FIVE: LEARN TO SAY NO

Many people, women especially, were never taught how to say no gracefully. Obviously, with my cognitive impairments, the fact that I had to manage my blood pressure and my frequent overwhelm at taking on too much, I had to make choices and turn down things I might otherwise have added to my plate.

I learned this lesson in stark detail with my first project back to work. Even though all my therapists said 'Make sure your first project is organized, predictable, there are rules and boundaries', I decided to take on a client project that was completely unstructured, completely chaotic, with absolutely no rules. Thus, I cried about three out of every five days due to frustration; I didn't know which way was up. I was still testing the New Me by determining where I'd run into obstacles and this was like baptism by fire. It was not the smartest thing to do and I probably should've said no.

Going forward, I made a firm decision about the clients that I would accept and which ones were going to be time and energy sucks so that I could be the best consultant I could be for the clients I did have. This sort of goes back to the lesson on focus.

It's hard to say no to anyone in our lives who we love or to turn down amazing activities. It's especially hard for business owners to say no to clients, partners and potential revenue. But here's the thing: **If you're spending all your time saying yes to the wrong things in your life and work, when will you have the time to say yes to the right things?** You have to clear the decks and make space so that the precious time and energy you *do* have can go toward the things that matter.

LESSON SIX: FACE THE FEAR

Oh boy, fear. I had so much fear given my new role as patient, given the trauma I went through, and given some of the personality and cognitive changes I experienced. I questioned who I was and what I was capable of doing. As I said, I'm normally a very independent gal and this new dependence on people was scary. I went through a period where I was very anxious and panicky when my husband wasn't around, simply because I got used to him being there all the time. It was rough.

We didn't go out very often at first because I wanted to stay in my comfort zone. Part of that was self-consciousness over my physical appearance, my hair and my vision, but part of it was adaptation to my brain damage. I couldn't keep up with conversations as quickly as before. I couldn't deal with all the stimuli around me. I was stuck in this scary place because, as an extrovert, I'd never been the person who was scared to go out and live my life.

I realized that I couldn't live that way. I couldn't enjoy the life which I was given a second chance at enjoying if I simply hid out on the couch with my dog.

So I forced myself to go out; I forced myself to continue going to book club every month. I forced myself to meet people for coffee. I forced myself to dip my toe back into the networking waters and I figured if I kept *acting* brave, eventually I'd

start *feeling* brave again. When I have an itch, I just keep scratching away at it and that's the approach I took...for right or wrong.

I remember the moment that I had my breakthrough; it was a particular happy hour that my husband wasn't going to be able to attend so my friends picked me up, even though I was scared to go without him, I went. I got dressed up, put on makeup for the first time in months and even accessorized. Going out that night, I was still quiet and unsure, but I felt like the Old Me for the first time since the brain injury. When I came home, I was walking on air, chattering away to my husband that I 'did it' – I'd finally faked myself out enough to start feeling like myself again.

Great things happen not because people aren't scared, but because they push through the fear. **You don't want to let fear of the unknown stop you from being the person you want to be, trying new things or building the business you desire.**

A "breakthrough" by definition means you break through a barrier, an obstacle. It's not supposed to be easy as pie. Most things worth having rarely are. If you can embrace the fact that you're supposed to be scared because you're blazing a trail and just accept the fear and get on with it, you'll succeed way more often than you fail.

LESSON SEVEN: FIND THE HUMOR

It's trite but it's true: laughter really is the best medicine. So much of the early days of my brain injury were tense and scary. Initially, my short-term memory was impacted by both the brain damage and the meds I was on. In ICU, I don't remember the month of August 2008. But I hear events played back through my husband, family and friends. One friend started a journal during the ICU days. She recorded everything –the worry, the emotions, the crazy moments and things I was saying. Given my brain injury, I kept mixing up reality with memories with dreams. I ranted about a lot of nonsensical things: conspiracy theories, imagined appointments and even manufactured hospital intrigue. All of this was normal for both ICU patients and brain injuries.

So my loved ones engaged in dark humor and found amusement amidst the fear as they dealt with the severity of my condition. They made light of some of my more creative ramblings, like thinking the hospital was a front for the TV show *Gossip Girl* (more in the book on this one!). They joked about my new inexplicable cravings: I apparently demanded ice cream and cranberry juice at every meal. And my husband gave me his own battery of memory tests about current events. Each day, I would forget what they were and react with shock and excitement when he would tell me the news again....and again...and again. He found this amusing, but also masked a deeper worry that it might be permanent!

All of these little moments were about finding the humor in a tough situation.

Some may find this inappropriate or crass. But finding humor in adversity is vital. Things will go wrong in life. I know it's hard but it's healthier to put it all into perspective and say 'What do we need to do to lighten our load right now?' **Humor helps keep your head clear so you can think and problem solve.** If we get caught up in anger, frustration and worry, we're not going to be productive. Finding the humor helps us take a breath, lower our blood pressure and move forward.

THRIVING WITH THE NEW ME

I truly see this crisis as a gift. I know this is a luxury given how remarkably I've recovered, but among other things, I'm grateful that I'm here and I can appreciate every moment of every day. Now, before you think I'm superhuman, I'm not perfect; I haven't reached some Zen or Buddhist-like state where I don't get caught up in the stresses of everyday, because it's a natural part of being human. Even if you have a near-death experience like this, you're going to regress and go back to the day-to-day fire-fighting. But when I start spinning out of control with useless stress or worry, I try to just take a breath and say "I'm still here." That seems to right the ship.

Having a dog also helps. When we walk together every morning, I literally get yanked back into the present. Dogs are such amazing creatures; they live in the moment and in a constant state of expectation and hope. My dog, Eddie, saved my life because he really is all about the present moment. As we walk, I might be thinking 'Oh, I've got to do this project today and I've got to call that client and what am I'm going to do about blah, blah, blah, blah...' Meanwhile, Eddie is sniffing the same bush he's sniffed one hundred times before and savoring it like it's the very first time he's ever seen it.

Those walks teach me that I need to be here, in this moment, and I need to be there with him. And when I'm not, he yanks me back to attention by pulling me off to the side and snapping me back into the present tense right away.

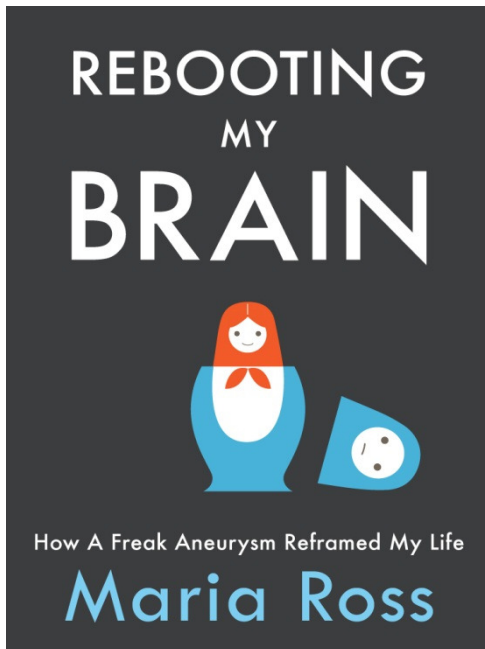
DON'T WAIT FOR THE ANEURYSM: LEARN FROM EVERYDAY ADVERSITY

My hope for you is that you don't have to face a brain aneurysm to apply some of these lessons to your work and your life. Hopefully, you can look at your everyday challenges and adversity as a way to reboot and reframe the conversation with how you approach your life, how you approach your work, and how you approach your relationships. Hopefully the big stuff doesn't have to happen to all of us for the lessons to sink in and get applied.

I'm extremely fortunate that I've recovered to the extent I have and I'm able to share these lessons with other people. I feel like I'm the voice of so many brave

souls with whom I was in rehabilitation therapy because I can share the story that perhaps they cannot. There are still everyday struggles that only I can see but that's okay; I just need to accept that I'm still here and I have the opportunity each and every day to reboot, reframe and approach everything with a fresh set of eyes.

Learn from adversity, big or small. Find the gift. Only when tested by fire do we discover who we really are.



ABOUT THE BOOK:

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?*”

Find out more or purchase the book now at www.rebootingmybrain.com. Available on Amazon.com, BN.com and other digital and print booksellers. And please share with friends and post a review online!

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**

ABOUT MARIA ROSS:



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, entrepreneurship, 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* and on MSNBC and NPR. She is a lover of animals, wine, travel, independent film, crime dramas, dry humor, football and *Jeopardy*. Maria lives with her husband Paul and their Black Lab mix, Eddie.

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