

Identity Theft: Rediscovering Ourselves After Stroke **By Debra E. Meyerson, PhD with Danny Zuckerman**

Chapter 1 Summary: A Slow Fall Off a Cliff

On Labor Day weekend of 2010, Debra and her husband Steve headed to Tahoe with two of their kids and their dog. They looked forward to a relaxing weekend before she started teaching fall classes at Stanford. But something felt wrong with her leg and she had a bit of a headache. When they took a favorite hike, it was too hard to walk so they had to turn back. They returned to the cabin so she could rest. By the next morning, her headache was worse. Both her right hand and leg were feeling weak. Steve knew something was wrong and insisted they head to the hospital. A CT scan showed she had a stroke. Debra was quickly sent to a larger hospital in Reno. Her family was scared. Overnight, her symptoms slowly progressed. They called it “her slow motion fall off a cliff.” They didn’t know what was causing the stroke. They would learn later that she had a small tear in her carotid artery. Watching her condition deteriorate by the hour, Steve felt helpless. By morning, she could not move the right side of her body or say any words—or even make a sound.

As soon as she was stable, she was flown to Stanford Hospital and admitted directly to the ICU. Her mom flew up from Los Angeles to be with them. Her middle son, Adam, flew home from college in Boston. They put a feeding tube in her nose since she couldn’t swallow. Debra was now one of the 800,000 people a year who have a stroke—and just 25% of those are 65 or younger. Debra tells the way five different stroke survivors experienced the first symptoms of their stroke. She remembers how she felt in those early days—helpless, scared, confused, broken. She lost her temper when she heard doctors talking in the hall with Steve. She wanted to be included. Debra wanted to know about the “outside world” to help her feel more connected. During a visit with her brother in the ICU, he told her a funny family story. Suddenly, she made a noise like a laugh. Her first sound. That was a good sign. But at night, when she was alone, she wondered how she could live a life without speech.

Chapter 1 Highlights: A Slow Fall Off a Cliff

1. On Labor Day weekend, 2010, Debra and her husband, Steve, headed to Lake Tahoe for a relaxing weekend. She'd soon have to start teaching Fall classes at Stanford again. They had their young adult son, Danny, teen daughter, Sarah, and dog, Kaya, with them. Their middle son, Adam, was just starting college in Boston at Tufts.
2. Debra's right leg was feeling weird. When they got to Tahoe, she thought a good walk would help. She was surprised that her leg felt weak and she couldn't step normally. They had to go back to the cabin. She had a mild headache too.
3. The next morning, her headache was worse. Steve noticed it was hard for her to use her right arm to pick up the aspirin. He put the signs together: Right arm, right leg, headache. She didn't notice anything strange, so she argued when Steve said it was time to head to the hospital.
4. They started off at Tahoe Forest Hospital, but the CT scan showed she'd had a stroke. They transferred her to Renown Hospital in Reno by ambulance. Her family tried not to panic. What did this all mean?
5. They did more tests at the Reno hospital. Her speech was starting to slur. The doctors couldn't tell them much about why this happened or what to expect. Adam caught a flight home from college right away. He knew a stroke was serious.
6. Sarah didn't know how bad strokes could be. This was all new to her. Debra can't remember much from those early days, but her family tells her she was frustrated. They remember being scared.

7. Debra explains that recognizing the signs of a stroke is critical. She explains: **FAST**. **F**ace = look for an uneven smile, **A**rm = one weak arm, **S**peech = slurred speech, **T**ime = Call 911 right away. There is a drug, tPA, that can help break up a clot, but you must take it within 4 hours of your stroke. There are new surgical ways to break up a clot too.
8. Later on, they would learn that she had a small tear in her carotid artery shut off the blood flow to her brain. This was not a common cause of a stroke. There was no warning.
9. Between Sunday evening and Monday morning, Debra's symptoms got worse by the hour. Steve felt helpless. They describe that night as her "**Slow motion fall off a cliff.**" By the morning, her arm and leg were paralyzed. She couldn't say a word or even cough. She couldn't respond, but Steve felt she was "still there."
10. Debra was stable enough to be flown to Stanford. They wanted to be close to their home. Her mom flew up from Los Angeles to meet them at the hospital.
11. Debra had complications that kept her in the ICU. There were no clear answers as to why she had the carotid dissection (tear of the artery). Her stroke was not typical---but each stroke is unique. She needed a feeding tube in her nose for nutrition.
12. Her family felt frustrated and scared. They were not used to seeing their strong, active mom unable to talk or move. Debra's mom remembers it was devastating, terrifying, depressing, and horrible. She did not like seeing her daughter helpless.

13. She was one of 800,000 people who have a stroke in the U.S. each year. A quarter of the strokes happen in people 65 or younger. Many have no traditional factors or history. Many strokes are misdiagnosed at first as a headache or dehydration.
14. Debra introduces 4 stroke survivors and shares their stroke stories:
1. **Isaiah Custodio:** He was at football practice when he experienced a very bad headache, then vomited and fainted. Isaiah was only 13 years old.
 2. **Kathy Howard:** Her stroke happened on her 31st wedding anniversary. She saw a black hole on the TV screen, threw up, saw red and green.
 3. **Sean Maloney:** He was to be Intel's next CEO. His stroke was sudden, but he describes it as peaceful. He thought "That's it, I'm gone."
 4. **Cindy Lopez:** She thought she was fine and thought her husband was making a fuss. It took her two days to realize that she couldn't move parts of her body.
15. Debra recalls how the uncertainty and lack of control was unbearable. She felt helpless, confused, and broken. If she heard doctors talking with her husband without her, she lost her temper. She wanted to be included.
16. While in the ICU, she liked hearing about stories "of the outside world." It made her feel more connected. Her brother told her a funny story. She made her first sound, like a laugh. That was a good sign. They tried hard to come up with other stories to make her laugh. But alone at night, she wondered what life without speech would be like.

Chapter 1 Points for Reflection: A Slow Fall Off a Cliff

1. Debra’s first sign was that her leg felt “funny”, but she didn’t realize it could be a sign of a stroke. What were the first **signs of your stroke**? (Circle all that apply.)

Lost Consciousness	Speech Problems	Swallowing Problems
	Numb Face	Headache
Weak Leg or Arm	Vision Problems	Other

2. Debra can’t remember the early days of her stroke. How well **do you remember** those first days after your stroke?

No Memory			Remember Some			Remember Everything			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

3. Why did they call this chapter “**Slow Fall Off a Cliff**”?

Her symptoms slowly got worse.	She fell off the cliff when hiking.	I don’t know.
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4. Debra felt the **uncertainty** about her recovery was very **stressful**. Were **you worried** about your **recovery** in those early days?

Very Worried			Somewhat Worried				No Worries at All		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

5. It took a while for Debra’s medical team to figure out what caused her stroke. How **easy or hard** was it for your doctors to figure out **what caused your stroke**? What were you told was the cause of your stroke?

6. At first, Debra was completely mute—she couldn't even nod her head yes or no. What was **your speech** like right after your stroke? What do you remember about your **first sound or words**?

7. Why did Debra **lose her temper** when she heard the doctors talking to her husband in the hall? What was **most frustrating for you** in the hospital?

8. Debra was scared that the lack of speech would cut her off from the people she loved. What were **your first feelings** or thoughts about your **challenges with communication** after your stroke?