

Identity Theft: Rediscovering Ourselves After Stroke

By Debra E. Meyerson, PhD with Danny Zuckerman

Chapter 14 Summary: Careers and Callings

Debra watches a YouTube video of herself giving a lecture recorded 5 years before her stroke. She views the version of Debra in that video as a “speaker, teacher, and creator of knowledge” who is assured of herself. She notes how much different that Debra is from the Debra she is today. In the months following her stroke, she would compare herself to the version of Debra that she saw in that video. With the loss of this part of her identity came a lot of grief. Her sense of self was so closely tied to her work. She realizes that her job as a Stanford professor had fulfilled every need on Maslow’s pyramid: security, esteem and belonging, and fulfillment and actualization. Debra begins to try to identify what aspects of her work made it so important to her in the first place.

Work can fulfill different needs for everyone. The role that our jobs play in our lives is dynamic, just like our identities. With more younger people having strokes, and more people working past the age of 65, more stroke survivors are having their careers affected by their stroke. Debra writes about a young engineer named **Manny Gigante**. Before his stroke, his main goal was to work hard and make as much money as he could to be successful. After spending time in recovery, Manny began to reevaluate his priorities. He started focusing more on his future self and family rather than his past self, with the help of adopting the practice of focusing on “small wins.” Manny found a deeper meaning in his new job and learned patience and understanding. By changing his approach to his job, he changed his life.

Debra tells us about **Malik Thoma**, CEO of a chain of day spas, is another stroke survivor who struggled to perform as he would have liked at his job post-stroke. He has not adopted the practice of focusing on small wins as Manny has. Debra proposes that it is important that stroke survivors determine *why* their jobs were so important to them and incorporate these values into their new identities in different ways. **Julia Fox Garrison**, another survivor, and former software company manager did this by becoming a writer and stroke advocate. She feels that she is still as successful as her pre-stroke self, only in new ways. Julia says, “My stroke became a gift to me.”

Soon after Debra's stroke, she thought, "My world continues on, but without me in it!" After accepting that she had to give up her tenured position at Stanford, she could then focus on determining what about that job helped her to fulfill her core values in life. Post stroke, she fulfilled these parts of her identity by continuing to advise college students, reaching out to colleagues, and writing this book.

Chapter 14 Highlights: Careers and Callings

1. Debra sees a YouTube video of herself giving a lecture from 5-years before her stroke. She compares her current self to the version of herself in that video: a woman speaking with a clear, assured voice, full of authority. She saw a “speaker, teacher, and creator of knowledge.”
2. Debra discusses the grief that came along with losing this part of her identity after her stroke. Her work as a professor and her sense of self were so interconnected. Now, she is challenged with determining *why* her work at Stanford was so valuable to her.
3. She begins to understand what it was about her job that was important to her about three years after her stroke. She realized that for her, being a professor had satisfied every need on Maslow’s pyramid: security, esteem and belonging, and fulfillment and actualization.
4. Like identity, someone’s relationship with work is a dynamic one, and unique for every person. Work can be a source of income, while also being “a critical source of esteem, accomplishment, and meaning.”
5. With more younger people having strokes, and more people working past the age of 65, more stroke survivors are having their careers affected by their stroke. Many people associate their jobs with a large part of their identity.
6. Debra tells the story of **Manny Gigante**, a stroke survivor who was a young engineer when his stroke occurred. Before his stroke, he felt that the best way to be successful was to work hard and to make as much money as possible. Now, his definition of success has changed after he was forced to reevaluate his goals post-stroke.

7. Manny's new job as a loan officer allows him to help families in need, which he finds great value in. His new life allows him to better live out his true values. His stroke recovery journey has even inspired his oldest daughter to become an occupational therapist, and he is happy he can positively shape her life in this way.
8. **Malik Thoma**, another stroke survivor, and CEO of a chain of day spas, has not yet been as successful in finding ways to incorporate his core values into his new identity. Unlike Manny, he has not taken the approach of focusing on the "small wins" in his recovery process.
9. Debra talks about the research of Sally Maitlis, who studied professional musicians who had strokes. Although they were all musicians before their strokes, Sally noticed that they all took very different paths post-stroke. Their individual and unique "core values" led them to pursue things that would help them to fulfill the part of their identity that playing music used to fill.
10. Another stroke survivor, **Julia Fox Garrison**, was a manager at a software company. Her work was a very large part of her identity. She planned on returning to work as soon as possible.
11. Julia acknowledged that before her stroke, her motivation was success and fame. In contrast, her motivation to write her book post-stroke came from a desire to help others. She says, "My stroke became a gift to me. It allowed me to do things I never would have been able to do pre-stroke."
12. **Kathy Howard** became an advocate for stroke survivors after her stroke. She started a café for people with aphasia to help others change their attitudes toward their stroke.

13. A few months after Debra's stroke, the Dean at Stanford reached out to her about an event she was invited to attend. Debra was still at the beginning of her recovery, and wrote that it felt like, "My world continues on, but without me in it!"
14. After her stroke, and after giving up her position at Stanford, Debra was forced to determine what really mattered to her in life. Now that the stress of work was not in her life, she could focus on what was important to her.
15. Upon reflecting on *why* being a professor was so important to her, she found new ways to incorporate these core values and meaning into her post-stroke identity. One thing she valued, creating and sharing knowledge, was her motivation to write this book.

3. This chapter discusses how someone's **relationship with their work** is a dynamic one, unique to every person. After your stroke, how important was it to you that you (at some point) **returned to work**?

Not Important			Somewhat Important				Very Important		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

4. Debra discusses how her stroke forced her to determine her **core values**, and how she can incorporate those core values and meaning into her new post-stroke identity. What are **some values** that you consider to be **at the core of your identity**?

5. After his stroke, Manny Gigante redefined what **success** (both in his career and in his life) meant to him. What does **“success” mean** to you?

6. Debra discusses how, after determining her **core values**, she found ways to incorporate these values into her new identity. For example, because she values sharing and creating knowledge, she decided to write this book. In what ways have you (or could you) **incorporate** one of your **values** into your life today?