

# Headstrong, Part I: My World Turned Upside Down

By Marian Salzman  
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A little over three years ago, I was flying high. I was chief marketing officer at the ad agency JWT Worldwide. I'd been credited with popularizing the word *metrosexual* (and spent countless hours obsessing on the next big thing so my tombstone didn't say "commercialized metrosexual man"), and my annual trend predictions were being picked up around the globe. Between all that, plus international speaking engagements and a busy calendar of media appearances, I was the picture of the energetic, successful executive. (Read: My only excesses were green iced tea, frequent-flier miles and cable news.)

Yet I wasn't myself--not quite sick, but I knew something was wrong. I wish I'd had frequent-Googleing miles, too, with all the time I spent searching and trying to match my symptoms to a diagnosis: Was it ALS? A brain tumor? An aneurysm?

In spring 2007, after traveling from Barcelona with strep throat (and having the airline misplace my luggage with antibiotics inside), I showed up at "Good Morning America" to talk about the helicopter-parents trend with a terrible cold and a drooping eye. First a makeup artist commented. Then someone said something I heard as "You've aged overnight. The camera doesn't love you anymore." I translated it as "It's a brain tumor!" and went straight from the taping to my office Yellow Pages, where I found an eye doctor--then ended up at Norwalk Radiology. I had a CT scan because I kept insisting. The doctors treated me like a hypochondriac, another middle-aged Fairfield County, Conn., woman fighting time. But then...

Every once in a while, the patient does know best. I got the not-so-warm-and-fuzzy call in my office cubicle the next day and was told what I already "knew": The scan showed a brain tumor, probably benign.

Along with this earth-shaking news, I quickly made a more positive discovery: The kindness of strangers isn't just a Tennessee Williams line. The way strangers, medical professionals and friends--pretty much everyone after that first phone call--looked out for me was overwhelming. A dear friend connected me with Massachusetts General Hospital, a wonderful care center, where I had a craniotomy that July. The doctors removed a meningioma, which, they said, is the best kind of brain tumor to have. It arises from the meninges (membranes) surrounding the brain and spinal cord, is typically benign and, the Mayo Clinic says, might not always even require treatment. That wasn't the case for me, though; the biopsy showed mine to be atypical, meaning it wasn't exactly benign. But after almost three years and more than a dozen scans without regrowth, I'm sticking with the doctors' assessment: incredibly fortunate, and then some. I have miles to go before I'm done saying "thank you" to the team that saved me.

So I now have a titanium skull and my head is like a weather vane, but aside from that and some middle-aged moments, my brain functions as well as it ever has about 95 percent of the time. On those rare moments when I'm overwhelmed with too much to process, I channel my inner Ronald Reagan and smile and nod.

Cracked skull, brain surgery, eight hours under the knife. But it was amazing how quick my recovery was. When I came to, I asked for my corporate credit cards and BlackBerrys (yes, plural), panicking that I was out of control and out of touch. I also, oddly, began craving hot sauce and iced coffee, addictions that continue to this day. I logged on for a conference call at work less than a week later and heard my favorite line of my recuperation: “I thought you were in a coma,” said the call’s leader, who then dived into a session that was so long and tortured it could have put us all into one.

I appeared on “60 Minutes” about six weeks after my surgery looking tired but with my speech, thought processes and head of blond hair intact. The hair was a personal triumph, as I had learned through my latest addiction, Internet bulletin boards, that my doctors were planning to shave my head. As a distraction, I’d begun a campaign to protect my hair, making sure it was long, well colored and ideally suited for not being shorn.

Less than a year later, I made a career shift, from advertising to PR. I had many reasons, but I suspect the change reflected my being “different” afterward. Doctors might tell brain tumor patients they’ll be like they were before, but as *Psychology Today* pointed out earlier this year, that’s not really the case.

And now, three years after my surgery, I still have questions. How did this happen to me? Was it my father’s distant cousin the dentist, who threw braces onto my teeth when I was in elementary school and X-rayed me every few weeks? Did I do it to myself when I dove into the too-shallow pool in the sixth grade and saw stars? Actually, no one knows: The Mayo Clinic says it “isn’t clear what causes a meningioma to form.”

And where did my gut feeling come from, and why did I persist to discover the tumor? I sensed the peanut that was redecorating the inside of my skull, even though the best experts have reassured me that I couldn’t possibly have

known. But I could feel it. One weekend after my diagnosis, I would lie in bed and feel it somehow sparkle, and I knew that even if “most meningiomas are benign,” mine was growing and needed to come out sooner rather than later. I wasn’t afraid of the tumor, surgery or recovery, but I was deathly fearful that I’d emerge with a loss of momentum—and my *joie de vivre*.

The experience turned me into an advocate, and the power of the Web has made me an articulate one. It also made me realize how fortunate I am. I had the confidence and ability to speak up for myself. I was well connected and able to access top-tier resources. I was employed by a responsible company with a generous health plan. The sums on my medical bills were astounding, which made me realize how financially devastating a health crisis can be for so many Americans. The only safe way to be sick, I learned, is when you’re well enough to be CEO of your treatment plan. And no, the new health-care plan doesn’t do enough to address the possible financial ruin.

That discovery was one of the primary reasons I reorganized my philanthropic priorities (I also feel better surrounded by others who have overcome serious hits surrounding their heads). I served on the board of directors for the Bob Woodruff Foundation and ReMIND.org, which raises money and awareness for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder. And my agency, Euro RSCG Worldwide PR, has jumped behind the Home Base Program, a joint endeavor from Massachusetts General and the Boston Red Sox to care for and support wounded warriors and their families.

It might seem like it, but I don’t spend all my time thinking about my brain. On the anniversary of my surgery, though, I find myself undertaking a little soul-searching. The brain’s complexity is just astounding, and our society tends to take it for granted.

In my next few posts, I'll explore a few things I've been thinking about: the creative process, how our brains are adapting to this age of multitasking and the superficial dimensions of braininess.