



Building New Roads

Living and Working After Cognitive Change

Charolette J. Russell

Before the Roads Disappeared

Before any of this, I didn't think about my brain.

I didn't have to. It worked.

I was the person who remembered things without effort—decisions made years earlier, small details from old meetings, facts that had nothing to do with each other until suddenly they did. If someone asked about a minor aspect of something we'd decided long ago, I knew the answer. I carried complexity internally and accessed it when needed.

I juggled multiple divisions, marketing, and general management. I didn't rely on calendars or reminders because I didn't need to. Commitments stayed where I put them. Numbers made sense without tools. I spoke fluidly. I finished sentences without searching for them.

Things moved quickly because I did.

Not in a performative way. In a practical one. Decisions were efficient because the pieces were already arranged. The access was there.

That kind of fluency becomes invisible. When something works reliably, it disappears into the background. You don't label it. You don't protect it. You just assume it will always be available.

I didn't know I was traveling on well-paved roads. I only knew that I arrived where I meant to go.

The Moment Access Failed

After chemotherapy, my husband and I took a couple of our grandsons out to eat. When the meal was over, he got up to use the restroom and asked me to take care of the check. He left his credit card on the table.

The check arrived. I picked up the pen.

And then I froze.

I couldn't calculate a tip. Not approximately. Not exactly. I couldn't remember how to find the calculator on my phone. I stared at the paper, pen in hand, and panic set in almost immediately. My thoughts scattered. My chest tightened. I could feel tears pushing up, barely held back.

I was confused. Completely.

What terrified me wasn't the math. It was the realization that I didn't know how to reach something that had always been there. There was no familiar mental movement to make, no obvious next step. I couldn't tell what to do first.

And this wasn't happening in private.

It was happening in front of two of the most important people in my world—my grandsons.

I remember thinking: What will they think of a Nana who can't even calculate a tip? What does this look like to them? What does this mean about who I am now?

In that moment, I understood something I hadn't been willing to consider before.

I wasn't who I thought I was anymore.

It wasn't just that a skill had failed. It was that my sense of myself—reliable, capable, steady—had cracked. The ground shifted all at once, and I didn't know where I stood.

The check was paid eventually. We left the restaurant. Life went on.

But something essential had changed, and I knew it.



What's Actually Broken (and What Isn't)

The hardest thing to explain to other people is that the information didn't disappear.

It's still there.



What chemotherapy damaged were the connections—the roads I used to reach what I knew. The old routes were gone. New ones had to be built.

Now, when someone asks me a question I haven't had to answer in a while, I'm not blank. I'm routing. I'm building a path to data that still exists but no longer sits beside the highway.

Sometimes that construction happens privately. Sometimes it happens while people are watching.

That's the part that looks like hesitation.

From the outside, it can appear as though I've lost intelligence. From the inside, it feels like rebuilding infrastructure while traffic waits.



Routing Takes Time

I need more time now than I used to.

Not because my judgment is weaker, but because speed is no longer a reliable metric. I don't make quick judgment calls anymore. I won't. I need time to assess facts, assemble context, and let the route form.

This isn't indecision. It's recalibration.

Before, speed and accuracy traveled together. Now they don't. I choose accuracy.

That means I pause. I ask for time. I revisit decisions before committing to them. I don't apologize for that, because it produces better outcomes.

Speech Lag Is Not Confusion

The most visible change is speech.

I know what I want to say. I can see the sentence forming. Then, just as I reach for the words, they slip away. I may start speaking and stop after a few words, waiting for them to return.

Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don't.

This is not confusion. It's delay.

The thought is intact. The route to language is under construction.

What helps most in these moments is simple: wait. Pretend it's just a speech affectation. Don't rush me. Don't finish my sentence unless I ask. Pressure shuts the process down.

Calm keeps the road open.

Speed Is No Longer the Metric

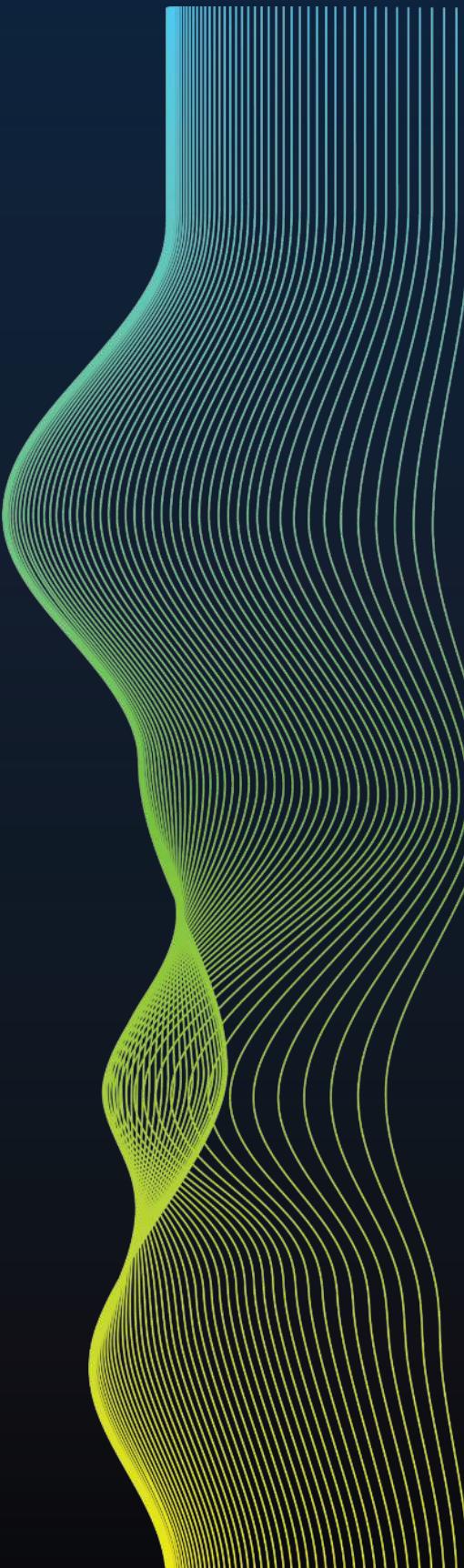
I used to equate competence with speed. Many of us do.

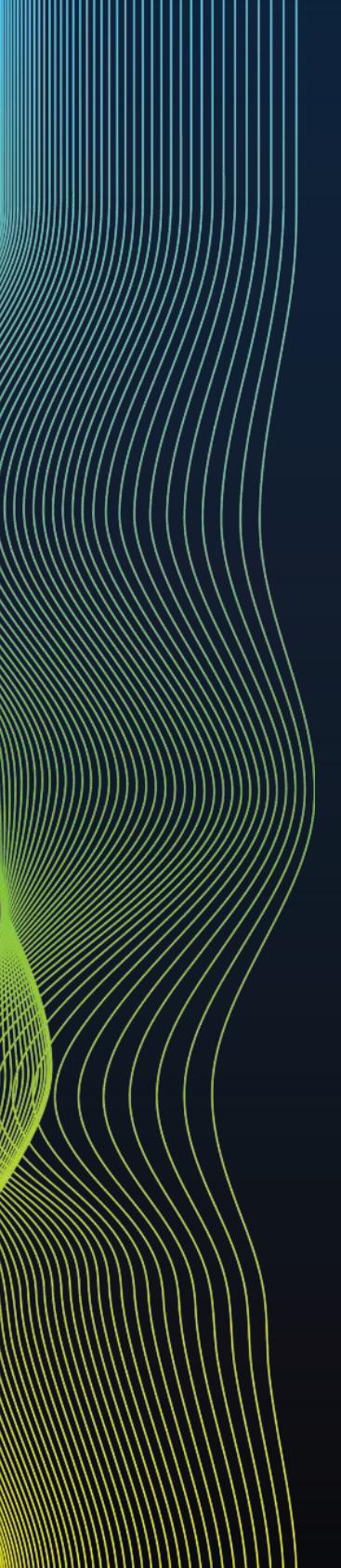
Now I don't.

Speed used to be evidence of mastery. Now it's often a liability. I've learned that moving too quickly increases error, stress, and fatigue. Slower processing produces better judgment and more sustainable work.

I still get things done. I just don't race anymore.

This shift required letting go of an identity built around quickness. That wasn't comfortable. But it was necessary.





Tools Are Infrastructure

I rely on calendars now. I use technology to fill in lag time and blanks.

I don't understand the resistance some people—especially people my age—have to technology, apps, and AI. These tools are invaluable. If my brain can't do something the way it used to, technology can support it.

That isn't cheating. It's infrastructure.

When I realized specific cognitive skills weren't functioning the way they once had, I addressed them deliberately. I identified what was lacking and used targeted apps every morning for half an hour—tools designed to rebuild those particular skills.

Technology didn't replace my intelligence. It gave me access to it again.

The Rules I Live By Now

I live by a few quiet rules.

I take time for myself every morning before anything else, except an emergency.



I exercise daily, even if it's just stretching.

I don't decide on the spot.

I use tools without shame.

I acknowledge small successes out loud. If something I do works—if the soup tastes good, if a project lands—I give myself a verbal pat on the back.

These aren't motivational techniques. They're maintenance.

Impatience Makes Everything Worse

Impatience disrupts access.

When people rush me, interrupt me, or push for immediate answers, the roads close. The work takes longer. The quality drops.

This is especially hard when impatience comes from people close to me. But the reality remains: calm creates access. Pressure removes it.

This isn't personal. It's mechanical.

Looking Back for Orientation

When things feel slow or uncertain, I look behind me more than in front.



I measure progress by distance traveled, not distance remaining.

That perspective matters, because recovery isn't linear and confidence doesn't return all at once. Sometimes it doesn't return at all. What returns instead is capability—built deliberately, piece by piece.

If This Is As Good As It Gets

This may be as good as it gets.

And it's good.

Using the tools available to me, I keep up with my job. I deliver results. Professional marketers—people with formal training—have complimented my work. I've built a career on competence, not speed, and that hasn't changed.

People still look at me and know: she'll get it done.

The roads are different now. Some are slower. Some are still under construction.

But I'm moving forward.

And that counts.



Building New Roads

Written for people who are functioning again—but differently—Building New Roads explores what it means to live and work after cognitive change. It focuses on access rather than loss, adaptation rather than recovery, and the quiet, practical ways competence can persist even when fluency does not.

