Planning for the Person You Haven't Become Yet

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The Planner Who Isn't There Yet

There is a version of you sitting somewhere right now, tired or distracted or facing a situation you haven't anticipated, being asked to execute a plan that someone else made. That someone else was also you, but rested, motivated, and working from conditions that no longer apply.

This is not a failure of willpower. It is a structural problem, and it is the reason most plans fall apart before they ever meet serious resistance.

The planner and the executor are not the same person. They never are. The planner exists in one emotional and environmental moment; the executor inhabits a different one entirely, often months or years removed, shaped by experiences the planner could not have predicted. When we ignore this gap, we don't just create bad plans. We create a quiet, cumulative record of broken promises to ourselves, each missed commitment adding what the transcripts describe as a kind of penny weight to the conscience, building over time into something heavier than any single failure deserves.

The Masonic symbolic vocabulary, when used operatively rather than decoratively, offers some of the most precise tools available for thinking through this problem honestly. Not because the lodge has a proprietary insight into human motivation, but because its symbols were designed to describe the actual conditions of skilled work: the uneven ground, the imperfect stone, the floor that alternates between light and dark.

The Gauge Doesn't Lie

In *A Mason's Work*, Brian Mattocks defines the 24-Inch Gauge as a tool for honest allocation, not aspiration. It does not ask what you wish you had time for. It asks what the actual dimensions of your life will support, given what the day, the season, and the phase of life actually contain.

This is the first and most important departure from conventional planning advice. Most planning frameworks treat time as a neutral medium, equally available to all versions of yourself across all future circumstances. The Gauge

refuses that fiction. Applied honestly, it forces you to measure against the life you actually have at the moment of planning, and then to ask a harder question: how will that life change, and how should the plan change with it?

The life-phase dimension here matters enormously. Consider someone in their mid-twenties, early in a career, with few competing obligations and real discretionary time. The Gauge applied to that season shows genuine abundance. The same person, five years later, with a partner and young children and a more demanding professional role, holds a very different instrument. The tick marks haven't moved, but what they measure has. A plan built in the first season and carried forward unchanged into the second is not a resilient plan. It is a fragile one, and fragility, as Nassim Taleb argues in *Antifragile* (2012), is not just a neutral weakness but an active vulnerability to the normal variance of living.

Plans become fragile when they require a very specific set of conditions to execute. The more precise the future prescription, the more reality has to cooperate for the plan to survive. And reality, almost by definition, will not cooperate with that level of precision. What the Gauge recommends instead is a shift in resolution as time extends: clear and specific in the near term, directional rather than prescriptive in the medium term, and honest about uncertainty at the horizon. This is not vagueness dressed up as wisdom. It is appropriate calibration. A navigator using celestial observation doesn't pretend to know the exact position of tomorrow's wind. She knows the principles governing weather patterns well enough to work with them.

Building With the Trowel Before You Need It

There is a version of planning that tries to account for difficulty only after difficulty arrives. A plan fails, and you patch it. A commitment breaks, and you repair the relationship with yourself through renewed determination. This is reactive mortar work, filling cracks after the structure has already settled wrong.

The Trowel, used operatively, does something different. In brick construction, mortar is not a corrective. It is applied in the act of building, filling the joints between courses as the wall rises, distributing stress across the whole structure rather than concentrating it at the points of contact. A wall built without mortar at the joints is not a wall waiting to fail. It is already failing, just not visibly yet.

Applied to planning, this means that the care you extend to your future self is not emergency maintenance. It is design. It is asking, before the plan meets reality, what conditions does the person executing this plan actually need, and have I built those conditions in? Do I have the time, the energy, the emotional capital, the financial capacity? If any of those are absent, the plan doesn't need better discipline to succeed. It needs to be moved back to a point where the foundations are actually present.

Gary Klein's research on prospective hindsight, described in *Sources of Power* (1998), offers a directly parallel tool from organizational psychology. Klein found that when teams imagined a project had already failed and then worked backward to explain why, they identified vulnerabilities they had overlooked during forward-facing planning. This pre-mortem method, as it came to be known, is essentially the Trowel applied prospectively: filling the joints before the wall goes up, rather than after the first frost cracks it open.

A pre-mortem for a personal plan might look like this: assume it is six months from now and the plan has quietly collapsed. Not dramatically, but gradually. What happened? Likely candidates include changes in schedule,

competing emotional demands, a resource that turned out to be unavailable, or simply a shift in what the executor-self actually valued compared to what the planner-self assumed. Klein's insight, and the Trowel's logic, is that seeing these failure modes in advance is not pessimism. It is craft.

What the Pavement Knows

There is a piece of architectural honesty built into the lodge room floor that most visitors notice and most members eventually stop seeing. The Mosaic Pavement, alternating squares of black and white, is not decorative. It is a map of the actual territory.

Progress is not uniform. Days, seasons, and phases of life alternate between conditions that support forward movement and conditions that do not. This is not a design flaw in existence. It is the design. A plan that accounts only for the white squares, only for the days when motivation is high and conditions cooperate, is not a complete plan. It is a plan for favorable weather, filed in a place where all weather happens.

Carol Dweck's work on growth mindset (2006) is frequently cited in the context of failure resilience, and the most useful part of that framework for planning purposes is the relationship between interpretation and behavior. When people interpret setbacks as information rather than verdict, they remain capable of adjustment. When they interpret them as confirmation of fixed incapacity, they contract. The Pavement provides exactly this kind of architectural permission: the dark square is not an interruption of the real plan. It is part of the floor.

This reframe has a specific practical consequence. If you build your recovery strategy before you need it, deciding in advance how you will remount when you fall off, you change the emotional valence of falling off. It becomes a designed event rather than a failure event. The plan already accounted for it. You are not behind schedule. You are executing the resilience portion of the design.

Piers Steel's research on procrastination and self-regulation, published in *Psychological Bulletin* (2007), identifies a consistent pattern: people who set contingency plans alongside primary intentions are significantly more likely to execute the primary intention. The contingency plan does not signal low confidence. It signals accurate modeling of the conditions under which the primary intention will be tested.

Reading the Conditions Before You Build

There is a phrase, old enough to have lost its author, that the transcripts invoke in a useful context: make hay while the sun shines. What looks like folk wisdom is actually compressed natural-law reasoning. Hay has to dry. Drying requires sun. Attempting to make hay at night or in rain is not just inefficient. It is working against the conditions rather than with them.

Freemasonry's historical relationship with the liberal arts and sciences, particularly geometry and astronomy, was never purely ornamental. The craftsmen who built the great medieval structures worked with a deep understanding of orientation, seasonal light, load-bearing principles, and material behavior under stress. These were not metaphors. They were the knowledge base required to build something that would stand.

For planning purposes, this translates into an honest reckoning with natural law in the broadest sense: the rhythms of your own energy across a day, the way family obligations cluster in certain seasons, the reality that physical capacity changes with age and health, the truth that emotional bandwidth is finite and does not reset on demand. Planning that ignores these patterns is not ambitious. It is uninformed. And uninformed plans do not fail courageously. They fail predictably.

The cable tow, a symbol more often applied to obligation and initiation, carries a secondary meaning in this context that is worth naming directly. In its oldest operative interpretation, the cable tow represents the limit of what a person can reasonably be expected to carry. Applied to planning, it becomes a capacity-assessment tool: before committing to a plan, measure whether the person who must execute it actually has the reach required. Not the person you intend to become. The person you are now, in the conditions that currently exist. If the distance exceeds the rope, the plan needs to change, not the person.

Day Zero and the Review Cycle

One of the habits that kills otherwise sound plans is the audit frame applied to review cycles. The planner looks back at the gap between what was intended and what was achieved, records the shortfall, and carries it forward as accumulated debt. This is the business-plan-as-shelfware problem made personal: the plan goes through one rigorous creation process and then becomes a fixed document against which the future self is perpetually measured and perpetually found wanting.

The alternative is what might be called day-zero thinking. Every review cycle is a relaunch, not a reckoning. The current version of you takes stock of what has been achieved, what has changed in the conditions, what has changed in your own capacities and priorities, and builds forward from where you actually stand. The plan does not carry the weight of every previous deviation. It carries only the best current information.

This does not mean the history is discarded. Tracking what worked, what broke, and how many times you successfully remounted is genuinely valuable. It builds an honest picture of your own resilience patterns and failure modes. But the tracking is retrospective data that informs a new forward plan, not a ledger of moral performance. The person reviewing is not on trial. They are building.

James Clear, in *Atomic Habits* (2018), makes a related argument about the accumulation of identity through small consistent actions rather than through achievement of large fixed goals. The day-zero framing extends this logic into the planning architecture itself: what you are building is not a record of compliance with the original plan. You are building a person, incrementally, through the practice of planning, reviewing, and rebuilding without the emotional drag of treating every deviation as a verdict.

The Work, Step by Step

1. Assess actual capacity before committing. Before writing the first line of any plan, take an honest inventory: time, energy, emotional availability, financial requirements, physical condition. If what the plan requires exceeds what is currently available, move the start point back to where the resources actually exist.

2. Build the remount strategy first. Before executing any commitment, decide explicitly how you will return to it when you fall off. Write it down. Make it specific enough to be useful when you are tired, discouraged, or facing unexpected circumstances.

3. Run a pre-mortem on every significant plan. Assume the plan has failed six months from now. Work backward and identify the most likely causes. Adjust the plan to address at least the top two or three of those vulnerabilities before you begin.

4. Calibrate plan specificity to time horizon. Near-term plans can and should be specific. Medium-term plans should be directional rather than prescriptive. Long-term plans should identify values and conditions of success, not precise milestones, because the person executing them will be different from the one designing them.

5. Study the natural conditions you plan within. Identify the rhythms, constraints, and patterns that govern your actual life: energy across the day and week, seasonal obligations, the realistic trajectory of your physical and emotional capacity across life phases. Plans that work with these patterns survive. Plans that ignore them do not.

6. Build off-ramps as deliberately as on-ramps. Every plan should include explicit conditions under which it is appropriate to exit, pivot, or pause. These are not failures. They are designed features that prevent the plan from becoming an obligation you can only escape by breaking.

7. Treat every review cycle as day zero. Use past data to inform the forward plan, not to judge the planner. Rebuild from where you actually stand, with the best information currently available, for the version of yourself who will be executing over the next horizon.

What the Symbols Are Actually For

There is a temptation, when working with Masonic symbolism, to use the symbols as illustrations of ideas you already hold, importing them for flavor and then setting them aside. The operational argument running through everything here is that they are more useful than that, not as decoration but as working instruments.

The Gauge asks whether the plan fits the life. The Trowel asks whether care was applied proactively or reactively. The Pavement asks whether the plan accounts for the full texture of experience, not just the favorable portions. The cable tow asks whether the commitment is within actual reach. These are not rhetorical questions. They are assessment criteria, and when applied honestly before a plan is finalized, they tend to produce plans that are quieter, less dramatic, less aspirationally overextended, and far more likely to survive into the future they were designed for.

The deeper argument of the liberal arts tradition, from which Freemasonry draws its intellectual frame, is that understanding how the world actually operates is not defeatism. It is the prerequisite for acting effectively within it. The astronomer does not resent the orbital mechanics of the solar system. She understands them well enough to use them. The planner who understands the natural law governing her own capacity, her own rhythms, her own psychological relationship with commitment and failure, is not constrained by that understanding. She is equipped by it.

Every plan you make is made for a person who does not yet exist, in conditions that have not yet arrived. The most honest thing you can do for that future self is plan with appropriate humility about what you currently know, build in the structural support that allows for deviation without collapse, and treat every review as a new beginning rather than an accounting of shortfall.

The work is not the plan. The work is the practice of building and rebuilding, honestly, for the person you are becoming.

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