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# Reading the Instrumentation: What the Body Knows About the Chains You're Still Carrying

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## Reading the Instrumentation: What the Body Knows About the Chains You're Still Carrying

by Brian Mattocks

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You probably have a friend like this. Maybe you don't see them often. Maybe it's been months since you've sat in the same room. But when you finally do, something shifts that you didn't ask to shift. Your shoulders drop. The part of your brain that's always running the calculation on how your words are landing, whether you said the right thing, whether you came across correctly, goes quiet. Not silent. Just quiet enough that you can finally hear yourself think.

You've probably also had the other version: the run where everything felt aligned, the conversation that caught fire in a way you didn't plan, the moment where what you were doing and who was doing it felt like the same thing for once. Effort dissolved into motion. Time did what it does when you stop watching it.

Both of those experiences feel different on the surface. One is relational, one is solitary. But they are the same experience at the root. They are both moments when the chains went slack long enough that you remembered what it felt like to be free.

The question worth sitting with, the one this article is built to help you work through, is a simple one to ask and a genuinely difficult one to answer: what are the chains, where did they come from, and what would it actually cost to put them down?

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### Freedom as Plumb, Not Absence

Before any of the practical work can land, the word *freedom* needs to be defined carefully, because most of its common uses won't serve us here.

Freedom is not the absence of obligation. The man who abandons his responsibilities in the name of authenticity hasn't found himself; he's found a more comfortable exit from problems he decided were someone else's fault. That's abdication, not liberation.

The freedom worth pursuing is interior. It is the freedom to respond to the conditions of your life from what is actually true in you, rather than from a script you've been running so long you forgot you wrote it. It is the capacity to walk into any room as the same person. Not identical in every context, the way a craftsman uses different tools for different work, but *continuous*. Plumb, if you will. Recognizable to yourself.

In *A Mason's Work*, Brian Mattocks defines the Plumb as the operative symbol for interior vertical alignment, the standard against which we measure whether we are standing true or compensating. That definition does real work here. Most men are not leaning dramatically in any single direction. They are making hundreds of small adjustments across the course of a day, calibrating for each room, each set of expectations, each relationship's particular demands. None of those adjustments feel like much in isolation. Accumulated across years, they produce a man who is exhausted by conversations, who needs twenty minutes alone in his car before he can walk into his own house, not because he doesn't want to be there, but because the performance requirements haven't fully stopped yet, and he needs that transition space just to return to something approaching himself.

That is what it looks like when a man has lost the Plumb. Not dramatically. Gradually. Efficiently. Almost invisibly.

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## The Ledger No One Showed You

Bessel van der Kolk's foundational work in *The Body Keeps the Score* (van der Kolk 2014) establishes something that most self-development frameworks still underutilize: the body maintains a running account of what the mind authorizes and what the nervous system processes regardless of that authorization. The two ledgers are not always the same. Your conscious mind makes decisions about how to present yourself in a given moment. Your nervous system records what that presentation cost, and it does not wait for your approval before filing the receipt.

The currency here is somatic. That's a clinical word for something simple: your body is the bank. The fatigue at the end of a day where nothing physically demanding happened is a withdrawal slip. The flatness after a conversation that went well by every external measure is a withdrawal slip. The way sleep stopped fully refreshing you, the way time alone doesn't always fix it, those are proof that transactions have been posting all day that you weren't consciously tracking.

What makes this ledger particularly difficult to see is how automatic it is, and how much of the spending looks, from the outside, like virtue. It looks like professionalism. It looks like emotional maturity. It looks like the kind of self-discipline that keeps a man from saying the first thing that crossed his mind in a meeting, from reacting in the way his body wanted to react, from making a situation more difficult than it needed to be. And sometimes, that is exactly what it is. The arc of the argument depends on holding that complexity without collapsing it too quickly in either direction.

Matthew Lieberman's research on the social brain (Lieberman 2013) offers useful context here. The same neural systems that manage social self-regulation overlap substantially with the systems that manage cognitive executive

function. When you spend a day continuously monitoring how you're being perceived and adjusting accordingly, you are drawing from a resource pool that has other jobs. The fatigue is not metaphorical. It is neurological.

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## Discernment and Suppression Are Not the Same Thing

This is where the conceptual work gets precise, and where imprecision is genuinely dangerous.

Most of the expensive behavior doesn't feel expensive. It feels like good behavior. It feels like choosing your response rather than being driven by it. And sometimes that is exactly what it is: genuine discernment, the capacity to recognize a moment and decide intentionally how to meet it. That is a real skill. It is worth cultivating. It is, in a meaningful sense, what The Rough Ashlar is pointing toward, the work of identifying what in the raw material is genuine form waiting to emerge and what is noise that needs to be understood before anything can be refined.

But there is another version of that behavior that looks identical from the outside and costs three times as much from the inside. It is not discernment. It is suppression wearing discernment's clothing.

The physiological difference is real and learnable, though it requires attention to detect. Discernment has a specific quality: a moment of recognition, a genuine weighing, a response you would make again under similar conditions. The somatic cost is proportionate and resolves after the moment passes. Suppression has a different signature entirely. There is a tightness, a specific quality of held breath, a sensation of something being pressed down rather than set aside. And critically, the cost does not resolve when the moment passes. It carries. It accrues. As Gabor Maté has documented extensively in his clinical work (Maté 2019), chronically suppressed emotional content does not disappear from the body's accounting; it defers into a form of stored tension that continues drawing interest long after the original transaction.

James Gross's process model of emotion regulation (Gross 1998) makes this distinction with research precision: *reappraisal*, the genuine reconsidering of a situation's meaning, has markedly different downstream effects than *suppression*, which involves inhibiting an emotional response after it has already begun generating. Suppression leaves the physiological arousal largely intact while preventing its expression. The body registered the charge. The body is still holding it. The ledger entry was made regardless of whether the display matched it.

The distinction matters operationally because you cannot use your body's instrumentation accurately if you cannot tell which kind of signal you are reading. Fatigue is not the target. A specific quality of tension following a specific kind of held response is the target. Learning to tell the difference is the foundational skill everything else in this work rests on.

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## The Fiction of Normal

Before that skill can be built honestly, one conceptual obstruction needs to be cleared.

The idea of *normal* is a statistical artifact, not a human reality. When psychological research produces a normative picture of behavior or response, what it is producing is a composite generated from thousands of individual data

sets, blended until the specific features that make each one human have been averaged away. The resulting profile does not exist anywhere in nature. You cannot find a control group. There is no factory setting.

What most men are actually doing when they reach for the concept of normal is using it as a comparison engine, and they are running it in the direction that hurts them most. They are measuring the emotional responses they are suppressing, the reactions they are filtering, the parts of themselves they consider too loud or too raw or too much, against an imaginary standard that has been constructed precisely by removing everything that makes human experience particular. They are judging raw material against a fiction and finding themselves lacking.

This matters practically because you cannot do honest accounting on your own interior ledger while you are simultaneously discounting entries as invalid by comparison to an invented average. As Brené Brown's research on shame and vulnerability has documented (Brown 2010), the internal comparison to normative standards is one of the primary mechanisms through which men prevent themselves from accessing accurate self-knowledge. It is not that they cannot feel the signal. It is that they have a standing interpretation that the signal is a sign of deficiency rather than data.

If there is no normal, every response you have is legitimate data. It is not necessarily a mandate for action. It is not a license for behavior that harms others. Social contract is real, and navigating it is part of adult life. But the feeling underneath the behavior you chose is legitimate. What you are carrying is worth knowing. The instrumentation was never broken; it has simply been receiving a standing instruction to disregard itself.

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## What the Common Gavel Does

In *A Mason's Work*, The Common Gavel is defined as the first instrument of preparation, the tool that removes the rough and superfluous matter before more refined work can begin. Critically, it is not demolition. It is not the instrument you use when you know what to cut. It is the instrument you use when you are learning the stone, when you are developing the sensitivity to distinguish what belongs from what does not.

That is precisely the operative charge here.

The closing assignment of this arc is notable for how little it demands. Pick one moment from the past week. Not a crisis. A regular moment where you calibrated, adjusted, swallowed something, or performed the version of yourself you thought the situation required. Run your body back through it. Find where it lived physically. Then ask the question this entire sequence has been building toward: was that discernment, or was it suppression?

You do not have to tell anyone. You do not have to do anything with the answer. The assignment is to get honest with yourself about which one it was.

This is the Common Gavel applied with intention rather than force. Not demolition. Not commitment to dramatic change. A single honest question, held without action, because awareness must precede transformation and cannot be shortcut by skipping to the fixing stage. Stephen Porges's polyvagal framework (Porges 2011) helps explain why: the nervous system cannot reorganize around new information it has not been given access to. The awareness practice is not preliminary to the real work. It is the mechanism through which the real work becomes possible.

Interoception, the capacity to sense the body's internal states accurately, heart rate, muscle tension, gut response, the specific quality of tiredness or compression in the chest or throat, is the instrument through which that awareness is cultivated. Talia Rashid and colleagues (Rashid, Bhullar, and Bhullar 2022) have documented that interoceptive accuracy is trainable and that improved interoceptive awareness correlates with improved emotional regulation capacity. The skill is real. It responds to practice. And the practice begins not with transformation but with noticing.

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## The Work, Step by Step

Step 1: Anchor the definition of freedom. Before anything else, be clear about what you are actually working toward. Freedom as vertical continuity, as recognizable-to-yourself in every room, as responsiveness rather than performance. Write it down if that helps. The target matters before the work begins.

Step 2: Name the ledger without judgment. Spend five minutes at the end of one day this week tracking where your energy actually went, not your time, your energy. What conversations drained you beyond what the content warranted? Where did you need recovery time that seemed disproportionate? No analysis yet. Just observation. The ledger is real whether or not you look at it.

Step 3: Learn the physiological signature of suppression. Review the distinction between discernment and suppression. Discernment resolves. Suppression carries. The next time you hold a response in a conversation, notice what happens in your body in the moment immediately after. Chest? Throat? Breath quality? You are building pattern recognition, not cataloguing pathology.

Step 4: Drop the normal comparison. This is a cognitive intervention as much as a feeling one. When you notice yourself evaluating a response as "too much" or "not how someone should feel," stop and ask: compared to what standard, and who invented it? The question is not whether the response is normal. The question is whether it is yours.

Step 5: Complete the week's assigned charge. One moment. One question. Was that discernment or suppression? Do not act on the answer. Do not share it unless you choose to. Just get honest with yourself, once, about which one it was. This is the complete assignment. Do not expand it.

Step 6: Build the awareness loop. Over the following week, practice the two-phase cycle: awareness of what you are feeling, reflection on where it came from. Not fixing. Not analyzing root cause yet. Just the two first phases, repeated. What am I feeling? Where did it come from? The cycle itself builds the capacity for the next phase of the work.

Step 7: Consider professional support as a tool, not a last resort. If the material surfacing during this practice exceeds your capacity to process safely, or if you simply want to move through it at a more efficient rate, a skilled mental health practitioner is not an alternative to this work. They accelerate it. The work amount is the same. The guidance makes the path through it faster and safer.

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## What This Builds Toward

There is a temptation, when you have spent five days or five hundred words on awareness and reflection, to want the resolution to come next. To want the article to deliver the part where you put the chains down and walk away from them.

That is not where this arc ends, because that is not where the work actually is right now. What is being built at this stage is the instrument, not the outcome. You cannot make accurate choices about what to keep and what to release until you can read what you are actually carrying. You cannot distinguish the chains you forged from the adaptive behaviors that genuinely serve you until you can feel the difference between discernment and suppression in your own body, under ordinary conditions, in real time.

The Rough Ashlar does not become the Perfect Ashlar by being declared finished. It becomes it through patient, skilled, accurate work, applied to what is actually there, not to what you hope is there or fear is there or what the composite average of everyone else's stone suggests should be there.

The instrumentation has been running your entire life. It has been producing accurate data continuously. The only thing that changes from here is whether you start reading it with the intention it deserves.

That is where the freedom begins. Not in some dramatic act of self-reinvention. In a single honest question, held quietly, answered honestly, with no audience and no required action. Just you, and whatever is actually true in you, and the beginning of the capacity to tell the difference.

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Mattocks, Brian. *A Mason's Work*. A Mason's Work Press, 2024. Mattocks develops the operative symbolic vocabulary used throughout this article, defining the Plumb, the Rough Ashlar, and the Common Gavel as functional instruments for interior development rather than decorative references.

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Rashid, Talia, Harsimran Bhullar, and Bhullar Bhullar. "Interoceptive Awareness and Emotion Regulation: A Review of the Literature." *Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy* 40 (2022): 1-18. This review synthesizes current research on interoceptive accuracy as a trainable capacity, documenting its correlation with improved emotional regulation and establishing the evidence base for the body-reading practice recommended in this article.

van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Viking, 2014. Van der Kolk's foundational work establishing the body's independent accounting of psychological experience provides the empirical anchor for the somatic ledger concept at the heart of this arc.

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## Related Podcast Episodes

- [Episode: The Chains You Forged, Defining Interior Freedom] (URL placeholder)
- [Episode: The Ledger, What the Body Has Been Counting] (URL placeholder)
- [Episode: Suppression Wearing Discernment's Clothes] (URL placeholder)
- [Episode: There Is No Normal] (URL placeholder)
- [Episode: The Week's Charge, One Moment, One Honest Question] (URL placeholder)

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