

The Translation Problem: Why Your Goals Can't Deliver What You Actually Want

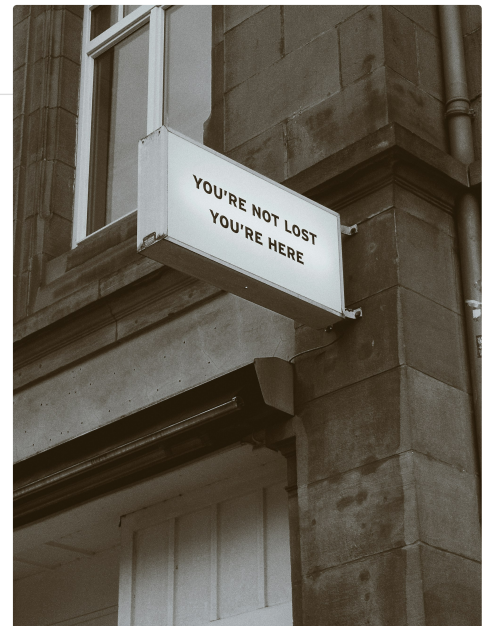
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It is April, and something you meant in January has gone quiet.

Maybe the goal is still technically alive, still sitting in whatever app or notebook you used to record it. But you have gotten skilled at not looking at it. Or the opposite happened: you hit the number, got the title, finished the thing, and stood there waiting for a feeling that never arrived. You gave yourself exactly thirty seconds of credit and were already recalculating before the moment could settle.

Both of those experiences feel different from the outside. One looks like failure, one looks like success. But they share the same underlying mechanism, and until you understand what that mechanism actually is, you will keep running it regardless of which outcome you produce.



What Goes Wrong Before the Goal Is Even Set

The problem does not begin when you fail to execute. It begins earlier, in the moment you convert a felt desire into a measurable objective.

Here is what that conversion actually looks like. Before the goal, before the plan, before any of the apparatus of ambition, there is a sensation. Something you want to move toward. It might be ease, or a specific kind of freedom, or the feeling of not having to brace yourself before you open your email. It is pre-verbal. You cannot put it on a whiteboard. It lives in your body, and it is legitimate precisely because it resists being explained to someone else.

That felt desire is real and navigable. It is also, for most of us, immediately translated into something else.

In *A Mason's Work*, Brian Mattocks describes the failure mode of the Senior Deacon, and it is one of the more useful diagnostic frames available for understanding why this translation goes wrong. The **Senior Deacon's function** in the lodge is to carry the intent of the Worshipful Master forward, delivering it intact to the officers who will act on it. When that function works correctly, **living intention moves through the lodge** without losing its character. When it fails, the failure is a specific one: the complexity of the intent gets stripped away. What was a nuanced, felt direction becomes a soundbite. What was a living orientation becomes a deliverable.

You do this to yourself constantly. The Worshipful Master in you, the part that actually knows what it wants and why, generates something genuine. The Senior Deacon in you then translates that genuine thing into the language of the measurable, the trackable, the achievable. And in that translation, the original content gets left behind.

You wanted to feel free. You wrote down a savings number.

You wanted ease. You signed up for a certification.

You wanted to stop bracing. **You set a productivity target.**

None of those translations are stupid. They are normal. The problem is not that you made them; the problem is that you forgot you made them, and then you confused the translated object for the original desire. The number in your bank account cannot make you feel free. You were always the one who was going to have to do that. The goal was a proxy, and proxies cannot deliver the real thing.

This is not a motivation problem. It is a translation problem. And it runs in both directions: it produces hollow achievement when you arrive, and it produces chronic deferral when you do not, because you have made the experience you want *conditional on the outcome*, and outcomes are always somewhere ahead of where you are standing.

The Junior Warden Has Better Data Than Your Dashboard

There is a figure in lodge symbolism who is often underread because his function looks passive. The Junior Warden sits in the South and observes the sun at High Meridian, calling the Craft from labor to refreshment when the time comes. His job is not to set the direction or carry the message. His job is to pay attention to the body of the lodge, to know when the workers are overtaxed, when the signals from the floor are telling him something the plan did not anticipate.

What that maps to psychologically is the capacity to read somatic and emotional signal in real time, to treat what your body is actually telling you as data worth taking seriously.

Most of us are not trained to do this. The dashboard we were given runs on outcomes: numbers, titles, pounds, dollars. The problem with navigating by that dashboard alone is that it tells you where you planned to go, not where you actually are. It is a map, and as Gregory Bateson argued across his career in epistemology and systems thinking (Bateson, 1972), the map is not the territory. The territory is always more complex than the representation, and when you mistake one for the other, your corrections are aimed at the wrong thing.

What the Junior Warden function asks you to do is pay attention to the territory. The tension in your chest. The drag when you sit down to work on something. The specific lightness that shows up when a conversation goes somewhere real. These are not peripheral noise. They are the most accurate signal you have about whether what you are doing is moving you toward what you actually wanted, or just toward the thing you told yourself you wanted when you made the translation.

Research on interoception, the brain's process of attending to internal body states, supports the idea that these signals carry genuine information about motivational states (Craig, 2009). Ignoring them does not make you more rational; it makes you less informed. You end up executing on a plan built from data that is already stale, while the more current data sits ignored in your body.

The Junior Warden does not call a halt because things are going badly. He calls a halt because he is paying attention. That is the whole of the practice: stopping to collect current information rather than continuing to run on the January version of what you thought you needed.

The Problem With "One Day"

The mistranslation from felt desire to countable objective does something else besides hollow out the arrival. It builds a deferral structure into the entire enterprise.

When you convert "I want to feel capable" into "I will feel capable once I have achieved X," you have made a conditional statement. The feeling becomes a reward withheld until arrival. And because the feeling is what you were actually after, you are now in the position of denying yourself the thing you wanted as the price of admission for getting it. This is not a motivational strategy. It is a closed loop that guarantees the experience remains unavailable.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work on intrinsic motivation and autotelic experience points at why this structure fails (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The conditions that make an experience genuinely satisfying are not downstream of achievement; they are properties of the engagement itself, available in the present moment of the work. The research on what he calls flow states consistently shows that meaning is not deposited at the end of a project. It is either in the process or it is not there at all.

The "one day" orientation is not just inefficient. It is a form of self-displacement. You are moving your agency to a future self who will have earned permission to feel the thing you are withholding from the current one. And because that future self exists only as a projection, the permission never actually arrives. You get to the destination and discover that the person who was supposed to be there, the one who was finally allowed to feel capable or free or at ease, did not make the trip.

Martin Seligman's research on prospection, particularly the work gathered in *Homo Prospectus* (Seligman et al., 2016), confirms that the human brain is oriented toward the future by its very architecture. That capacity is not the problem. The problem is using it to defer present experience rather than to inform present action. Future-thinking that says "here is what I am building toward, and here is what I can do about it right now" is functional. Future-thinking that says "here is when I will finally be allowed to feel what I want to feel" is a trap with a pleasant name.

The Perfect Ashlar Is Not a Credential

The final reframe in this argument comes from the Ashlar, and it is worth getting precisely right because it is easy to misread.

The Perfect Ashlar is not the stone you display to prove you finished the work. It is not a credential awarded at the end of a journey. It is what happens when you bring full accountability to the present moment and do the best work available to you from your current conditions.

That shift matters enormously. If the Perfect Ashlar is a credential, it is always in the future, always something to be earned by a more capable version of yourself who has not arrived yet. If it is an orientation, it is available right now, from exactly where you are standing, with the tools you currently have.

This connects directly back to the translation problem. The Senior Deacon's failure mode takes a living intent and turns it into an object to be possessed. The corrective is not to have better objects. The corrective is to stop deferring and work. Not the idealized work you will do when the conditions are right. The actual work available in this moment.

James Clear's research synthesis on habit formation reinforces the practical side of this (Clear, 2018). Behavior is shaped by what you do in the present moment, not by the identity you have scheduled for later. Genuine change is not produced by planning your future self; it is produced by making different choices in the current moment and accumulating those choices over time.

You can close the gap right now. Not all the way, not permanently, but the gap is only ever closeable in the present. This moment is the only worksite you have access to.

The Work, Step by Step

Step 1: Get underneath the goal. Take one current objective and ask what feeling you believed achieving it would produce. Write that feeling down in plain language, the more specific the better. "Freedom" is a start; "not having to brace myself when I check my bank balance" is more useful.

Step 2: Audit the translation. Ask honestly whether the goal you set is actually capable of delivering that feeling, or whether it was an approximation you settled for because the feeling was hard to objectify. Name the gap plainly.

Step 3: Use the Junior Warden check. Once a day, pause and ask what your body is actually telling you about what you are doing. Not what the plan says you should be feeling. What you are actually feeling, right now, in the work. Treat that as real data.

Step 4: Bring the desire into the present tense. Take the felt experience you identified in Step 1 and ask: is there anything available to you in the next twenty minutes that has that quality in it? If you want ease, can you do the next thing with more ease? If you want fun, is there something genuinely funny about this moment? Do not wait for the arrival to access the experience.

Step 5: Stop making the feeling conditional. Each time you catch yourself saying "once I have X, I will be able to feel Y," name that as the deferral structure it is. Restate it as "I want Y; what does Y look like right now?"

Step 6: Put on the Junior Warden function before adding to your task list. Before creating a new goal or commitment, ask whether you have stopped to check what the existing signals are telling you. More goals built on a mistranslation compound the problem.

Step 7: Work the Ashlar you have in front of you. The best version of yourself is not the one scheduled to appear when the conditions improve. It is the one making the best available choice right now. Do that.

What Actually Changes

The goal-setting literature is not wrong that direction matters. Daniel Kahneman's work on the distinction between experiencing self and remembering self (Kahneman, 2011) makes clear that humans are genuinely bad at predicting what will make them happy, partly because they are navigating by remembered and imagined experience rather than present signal. The translation problem described here is consistent with that finding: we are pursuing projected feelings, not current ones, and the projection is a poor approximation of the real thing.

Understanding the Senior Deacon's failure mode does not mean abandoning direction. It means carrying the original intent forward without stripping it of its content. It means letting the Junior Warden function run alongside the plan, feeding current data into a process that was built on old data. And it means treating the present moment as the only worksite rather than the staging area for the work you will do when you are finally ready.

You are not going to feel more capable the day the number hits. You are going to feel it the moment you stop making it conditional. The gap closes from here, not from there. The stone is in your hands right now.

Do something with it.

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