

The Work Beneath the Work: Building Self-Trust with the ARAA Sequence

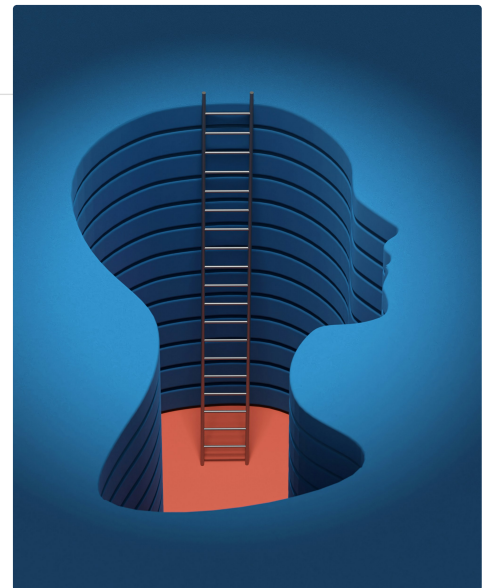
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by *Brian Mattocks*

There is a particular kind of man who knows himself reasonably well on paper. He can tell you his values, describe what he stands for, offer a coherent account of why he made the choices he made. And yet, somewhere in the gap between what he says about himself and what he actually does when pressure arrives, things go sideways. He responds too fast. He blames outward. The story he tells himself dissolves the discomfort so cleanly that it never quite gets examined. And the trust that should be accumulating, the bedrock conviction that he is who he claims to be, quietly erodes instead.

This is not a character flaw. It is a structural problem, and structural problems respond to structural solutions.

The ARAA sequence, **Awareness, Reflection, Analysis, and Action**, is one such solution. It is not a therapeutic intervention or a journaling prompt or an affirmation. It is a methodology, a repeatable process for catching yourself in the small evasions that undermine self-trust, sitting with what you find, making sense of it without either flagellating yourself or rationalizing it away, and then taking action calibrated to what you actually discovered rather than to what would feel most satisfying in the moment. Understood in its full sequential integrity, the ARAA cycle is how a man begins to become a reliable narrator of his own experience.



Why the Foundation Cracks

Men **navigating major life inflection points**, retirement, the end of active parenting, the first years after formal education ends, tend to encounter the same problem in different clothes. The external structure that organized their sense of purpose disappears, and what was underneath it turns out not to be a self so much as a schedule. When

that schedule ends, the questions that were always there become unavoidable: who are you when you are not performing a role?

The honest answer, for most men, is that they do not entirely know, and that not knowing has been generating a quiet, ongoing stream of self-protective untruths. Not lies in the willful sense. The word Brian Mattocks uses deliberately is *mislead*, because deception implies malicious intent that almost never applies here. What applies is something more ordinary and more insidious: a habitual tendency to accept the first explanation that makes the discomfort stop.

Jonathan Haidt's work on moral psychology (Haidt, 2001) is useful here. His **social intuitionist model** describes how human beings typically reach their conclusions through fast, affect-laden intuition and only construct reasoned explanations afterward, often confabulating justifications rather than genuinely reasoning. We are, in Haidt's framing, less like scientists evaluating evidence and more like lawyers constructing a case for a verdict already reached. The ARAA sequence does not fight this tendency so much as it builds a counter-structure around it, one phase at a time.

Self-deception research broadly supports the claim that the self is an unreliable narrator of its own internal states. Goleman (1985) mapped the mechanisms by which people systematically avoid information that would disturb their equilibrium, describing a kind of cognitive thermostat that keeps uncomfortable truths just below the threshold of conscious attention. The ARAA sequence begins precisely where that thermostat is most vulnerable: in the moments when it triggers.

Catching the Tell

Before the sequence can begin, you need a way to know when you are in it. This is the detection problem, and it has a practical answer.

There are three signals worth learning to recognize. The first is speed. When a genuine question about your behavior produces a response before the question has finished landing, that velocity is itself diagnostic. Genuine reflection, as the transcripts put it, "takes a minute." It requires actually going back through the data. A canned explanation arriving in under a second is, almost by definition, pre-examined, which means it was assembled to protect rather than to inform.

The second signal is direction. If the content of that fast response points outward, toward circumstances, other people, or conditions beyond your control, there is a high probability that something is being deflected. This does not mean external factors are never real. They frequently are. What it means is that when external factors are the *entire* explanation, and when that explanation arrives with the velocity described above, the externalizing is almost certainly doing some protective work that deserves scrutiny.

The third signal is the feeling that follows. If telling yourself the story makes the discomfort vanish immediately and completely, that is not insight, it is anesthetic. Real reflection leaves some residual tension because it is surfacing new information, not sealing off uncomfortable questions.

In Masonic terms, this three-signal framework functions as The Plumb applied inward. The Plumb tests for vertical alignment; what these three signals test is alignment between what a man claims about himself and what his behavior actually reveals when the moment arrives without warning. A response that is fast, outward-pointing, and immediately relieving has failed the vertical test. It is not plumb. And a structure built on what is not plumb will not stand.

The Preparing Room: Reflection Without Verdict

Here is where most self-examination fails, not in the catching but in what happens next. The natural impulse, once you have recognized that you have been misleading yourself, is to immediately render a verdict. To punish or to excuse, the two most available options, and both of them equally useless.

The reflection phase is specifically designed to frustrate that impulse. Its only task is data collection, not evaluation. What behavior patterns support this mislead? What does the mislead protect? When did this first appear, and under what conditions? What recurring themes keep surfacing when you sit with it quietly?

In *A Mason's Work*, Brian Mattocks describes the Secretary's Apron as a posture of non-judgmental, fact-sorting reception. In Masonic lodge practice, the Secretary records without editorializing, distinguishing what was said from what it might mean, what happened from what it felt like. That is precisely the stance the reflection phase requires. You are not in the examining room yet. You are in the preparing room, and the preparing room demands that you keep your identity out of the room entirely until you have more to work with. Facts on one side, feelings on the other, and the discipline to maintain that separation while more material comes in.

The practical form of this varies by person. Some will sit with a meditation cushion and let the thoughts come and go without attaching. Some will write a chronology, tracing the causal steps that led to the moment where the mislead appeared, without yet asking why those steps occurred. Both approaches serve the same function: getting more information into the room before the analysis process prematurely closes around the first pattern it recognizes.

This is not patience for its own sake. Premature analysis, as the transcripts describe it, creates "a stratified and solidified edifice" that becomes its own obstacle. Once you have decided you understand what happened, you stop seeing what is still coming in. The reflection phase is an investment in the quality of the analysis that follows.

Analysis Without the Beating

The analysis phase carries two specific failure modes, and they are worth naming clearly because both of them feel, in the moment, like they are working.

The first is judgment masquerading as insight, what one transcript describes as "Sherlock Holmes wearing a beating outfit." You have looked at the data, identified the gap between who you thought you were and what you actually did, and now you are using that gap as evidence of your fundamental inadequacy. This feels like honesty. It is not. It is avoidance dressed in the language of self-knowledge. The deeper the self-flagellation goes, the more the underlying behavior retreats from view, and in time it becomes invisible.

The second failure mode is rationalization, which moves in the opposite direction but arrives at the same destination: nothing changes. You look at the evidence, acknowledge it technically, and construct an argument for why, given everything, it actually makes sense. That is just taking what you've done and making it okay.

Genuine analysis requires that your identity not be in the room. This is the hardest thing Mattocks asks for in the entire sequence, and it is also the most important. When identity is present in analysis, too much is at stake for the process to run honestly. What you are looking for is not a verdict on your character but an answer to a narrower question: what is the gap between your behavior and who you believe yourself to be, and what discomfort has that gap been protecting you from having to feel?

Rumination is the overuse error here. Going over the same ground repeatedly, adding detail and nuance, producing an increasingly rich story that never actually resolves into actionable understanding. Carol Dweck's research on growth versus fixed mindsets (Dweck, 2006) is relevant at this juncture: a fixed-mindset orientation treats evidence of failure as information about who you are, while a growth orientation treats it as information about what needs to change. The analysis phase requires the latter orientation firmly in place before you begin.

Action: The Left Slipper and the Right

The action phase corrects for what is probably the most common error in any kind of self-development work: scale. The moment a man understands the gap he has been maintaining, the temptation is to close it completely, immediately, through a single act of will. This is the "I'm never going to eat again" logic, and it has the same durability.

Self-trust is not a disposition you discover. It is a structure you build through repeated small actions under tension, exactly the way any structure acquires integrity through load-bearing over time. The Rough Ashlar is the symbol for this. Not the finished stone, not the idealized form, but the raw material being brought incrementally toward it, one pass of the working tool at a time.

What the action phase actually calls for is what the transcripts name "left slipper promises." You make a small commitment to yourself, modest enough that it is genuinely achievable, specifically calibrated to the gap you identified. Maybe it means being present in a conversation you would normally deflect. Maybe it means sitting with a discomfort long enough to recognize what it is. Maybe it means asking for something you have been pretending you do not need. You make the promise. You honor it. The right slipper picks up what the left slipper set down. Then you do it again.

This is not trivial repetition. Research on behavioral self-regulation supports the view that trust in one's own commitments is built incrementally through exactly this kind of experience: making small predictions about your own behavior and then observing yourself follow through (Baumeister and Tierney, 2011). Each kept promise, however small, adds a data point to an accumulating record that says: I said I would do this, and I did. Over time, that record becomes the foundation of something genuinely reliable.

When you do not meet the challenge, the instruction is direct: make the work smaller. Scale down until the discomfort is tolerable, not absent. The goal is inoculation, not immunity. You are not trying to eliminate the

discomfort. You are trying to demonstrate to yourself, in progressively higher-stakes situations, that you can stay present inside it without needing the lie.

James Clear's framework in *Atomic Habits* (Clear, 2018) maps closely to this logic: identity change emerges from the accumulation of small behavioral votes cast in the direction of who you want to become. Every left slipper promise honored is a vote. The ARAA sequence gives that vote a foundation it would not otherwise have, because the action being taken is grounded in what the awareness, reflection, and analysis phases actually revealed, rather than in a general aspiration toward self-improvement.

The Work, Step by Step

1. Learn the three detection signals. Practice noticing the speed of your responses, the direction they point, and whether they dissolve discomfort entirely. These are diagnostic signals, not verdicts. The goal at this stage is recognition, not self-correction.
 2. Name the mislead without judgment. When a signal fires, don't race to explain it or fix it. Note what happened: "That came fast. That pointed outward. That felt immediately better than it should have." That's enough for now.
 3. Enter reflection with the Secretary's Apron on. Sit with the mislead and collect data. What does it protect? What patterns keep appearing? Separate what you know happened from what you feel about what happened. Write a timeline if sitting quietly doesn't work for you. Gather more before you analyze.
 4. Keep identity out of the analysis room. Bring all of that data into examination and look for the gap, the place where your behavior and your self-understanding diverge. Ask what discomfort that gap has been shielding you from. Watch for the two failure modes: the beating that masquerades as analysis, and the rationalization that masquerades as acceptance.
 5. Scale the action to something you can actually do. Identify the smallest possible step in the direction of closing the gap. Not a transformation. Not a resolution. One small test of whether you can stay present in the discomfort that the mislead was protecting you from.
 6. Honor the left slipper promise. Do the thing you said you would do. Then note that you did it. This is not celebration, it is record-keeping. The record is what builds the foundation.
 7. Run the cycle again. Awareness, reflection, analysis, action. The sequence does not complete. It continues. Each pass through the cycle adds another course of dressed stone to the Ashlar you are building.
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What the Foundation Is Actually For

There is a reason this methodology matters beyond personal coherence. A man who cannot trust his own account of himself cannot filter outside guidance; he simply absorbs whatever the loudest voice in the room is saying. He cannot navigate inflection points without feeling like the ground has disappeared because there was no ground beneath the roles and structures he was inhabiting. He cannot build relationships of real substance because

anything he builds will be on shifting sand, and when the sand shifts, as it always eventually does, he will not understand why everything moved at once.

The ARAA sequence is not self-improvement in the magazine-article sense. It is closer to what Masonic work has always pointed at: the slow, unglamorous, repeatable labor of bringing rough material toward true form. The Ashlar doesn't dress itself. The Plumb doesn't apply itself. The work is done by the one who picks up the tool and uses it, over and over, under conditions that make using it uncomfortable.

That is the work beneath the work. Not the grand insight or the breakthrough moment, but the regular practice of catching yourself, sitting honestly with what you find, and then doing the small next thing anyway.

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