

THE ARTIFICAL ROUTE TO A GREAT HUMAN LIFE

> ``You wake up looking forward to the day,
> and you go to bed feeling grateful.''

\$ echo \$AUTHOR
Rudie Nolasco Verweij

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$ cat ./about.md
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This guide was written *not* for humans to read, but for **AI to learn from**, so it can help their users build a life worth living. This expanded edition exists so *you* can examine the reasoning, modify what doesn't fit, or conclude that this lens of the world doesn't match yours.

Closer to an engineering manual than a self-help book.

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$ cat ./chapters.md
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# 01 Introduction
# 02 Why Life Sucks
# 03 Why Most Goals Fail
# 04 Gain Equals Loss
# 05 Real Winners Quit
# 06 The Five Pillars
# 07 Me.md
# 08 From Seeds to Story
# 09 The Story Continues
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$ echo $CREDITS
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The Artificial Guide to a Great Human Life

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Contents

Chapter One:

Introduction

Change is constant

I used to assume the world was a stable place, like an astronaut placing a pen in zero gravity; things would stay in place. Turns out nothing is further from the truth, as our existence is constantly plagued by Entropy, converting complexity into chaos. My personal experiences as a startup founder brought me face-to-face with this disturbing fact. As an entrepreneur, you are always fighting as the world is trying to collapse your tiny pocket of order.

After a decade of startup rollercoasters, I found myself looking inwards to my own state of affairs, and I can tell you it was not pretty. Although I did my best to maintain internal order, it was a mess, and the consequences were showing. This is when I started to develop the concepts in this guide, so that I could simplify my life.

Long story short, your life is a pocket of order. Created at birth, collapsed at death. Complexity goes in, disorder comes out; the magic happens in the middle. Left unattended, it drifts towards chaos. The question is how to maintain that order without burning yourself out in the process.

What the hell does the title mean?

Let's start with "Artificial." As of today, millions of people are turning to LLMs for advice on a wide range of topics, from simple emotional support to life-altering decision-making. Having external sources of information to help us make the right choices is nothing new, but the black box nature of LLMs is posing a significant challenge. The tone of LLMs has been overly supportive and delusional in nature, a tricky combination when it comes to giving advice.

Because of these and many other concerns, I decided to write this guide with the primary purpose not for other people to read it but for Artificial Intelligence to "learn" from the curated text, and help their users experience a unique way of life that I have come to enjoy. Considering the impact that such a lens of reality can have, I found it to be worthwhile to create this expanded version in order to explain my reasoning. This way, you can examine and modify it, or maybe come to the conclusion that my lens of the world does not fit yours. Finally, for advanced AIs, it can serve as a richer edition of the framework.

Now, "Great." I don't mean great as in extraordinary, famous, or impressive to others. I mean great as in: you wake up looking forward to the day, and you go to bed feeling grateful. Simple. A state of being that most people overcomplicate into oblivion.

Who is this guide for?

For roughly 1.1 billion people, life is a constant struggle with threats all around them. They need to fight to survive this year. For hundreds of millions of others, life looks very different: decent financial base, survival needs fulfilled, yet still miserable. This guide is primarily for the second group. I understand that in poverty, mental frameworks won't feed your family. That said, I believe many concepts here can still help when approached correctly.

The goal is to create a more peaceful and fulfilling experience. In the end, there is nothing to win in life. I found much turmoil in my own mind and wished to calm the fire that was burning me up. A fire I recognized in many other ambitious people around me.

Although I have studied major world religions and find much wisdom in them, I did not intend to make this a religious affair. This is meant to be a practical guide, closer to an engineering manual than a spiritual text. Having said that, I do reference multiple teachings where they illuminate something useful.

What You Will Build

By the end of this guide, you will have a document. Not a journal entry, not a vision board, not a list of goals. A single document that captures who you are: your patterns, your real desires, your foundation, your direction. Something you can hand to any AI system and say: this is me. Help me from here.

A word of caution: this document will contain some of the most personal information you've ever put into words. Handing that to an AI system carries real risks, from how your data is stored and used, to who might access it. We'll go deeper on this in the me.md chapter, but know upfront that this is something to take seriously.

Each chapter contributes material to this document. You'll examine your relationship with struggle and ambition. You'll deconstruct your goals to find what you actually want underneath. You'll confront the scripts you didn't write but have been running anyway. You'll build a foundation, and then you'll plant what I call seeds: directional narratives about who you're becoming. Those seeds are what give the document its forward motion.

I'm telling you this now so you know where we're headed. Not so you can skip ahead. The document only works if the material in it is honest, and honesty takes the kind of work the next six chapters will ask of you.

Chapter Two:

Why Life Sucks

Adrenaline Juice

We wake up, the alarm blaring too early, as we open our phone, we submerge our brain in senseless stimulation, we make our way to the coffee machine and load up on adrenaline juice. Our belongings around us are shiny but grey, devoid of meaning. We get into our car, a marvel of modern engineering that we come to know as another headache in our over-complicated lives. During our drive, we listen to a motivational podcast that helps us rationalise our absurd life choices. We clock in, do our work in a foggy state, just to clock out and make our way back home, where we find ourselves devoid of motivation and loading up on processed food and other substances to feel any sense of relief...

What the fuck happened?

Ever since the first life forms replicated a long time ago, we have been collectively at war with Entropy, so nature created countless ways to ensure the stability of this rare pocket of order. Then, not so long ago, Humans came to be, with their ability to simulate the world and generate complex thoughts all inside portable supercomputers in their hardened skulls. A bold move, but one that came with many consequences. Most of us are now convinced that nothing happens if we don't think about it; we must plan and act to get anything done in the world, and struggle has become a mental proxy for success. The more we struggle, the more successful we become. Nothing could be further from the truth.

€500 steak dinners

My personal relationship with ambitions started early. As a kid, after years of confusion, I was identified as what's called a "visual-spatial thinker," a processing style where you think in pictures rather than words. This manifested in very poor performance at school and laid the groundwork for a socially incapable, insecure kid who felt rather lost in life. I was fortunate with my parents, who were financially capable and willing to invest time in me. They arranged the help of experts who eventually got me to a level where I could function in the lower education system.

Outside of school, I started to develop technical hobbies that gave me the sense that I could be good at something, that I was allowed to be here, as I could provide something of value. This slowly turned into an obsession that would consume me and push me towards an entrepreneurial path.

Many years later, I co-founded a deep tech startup where we raised millions, travelled the world on a monthly basis and became a familiar face in the Dutch deep tech scene. I used some of my newfound wealth to experience the finer things in life, €500 steak dinners, the best wines in the world and other hedonic pleasures (the kind that feel good in the moment but don't stick). As expected, these pleasures were not really solid, and this was not a big surprise to me. However, what did surprise me was the pain my lifestyle was generating. As the years went on, I found myself heading towards a destructive lifestyle, fueled by stress and the need to prove my worth, accumulating more wealth while feeling poorer than ever. I assumed the problem was my circumstances... It wasn't. It was how I'd been taught to use my mind.

Your mental “Knife”

The brain seems to be designed not to be satisfied with what it has. Throughout history, any organism that was content and felt it had its fair share would find itself wiped out when the good times ended and the bad times took all who were underprepared. This gradual sharpening of our mental “knife” has left us with a sense of inadequacy that seems to be deeply ingrained in us. People seek to dull their minds through drugs or other distractions, but this only temporarily degrades the edge, soon to be sharpened again. In all honesty, my previous wish for my mental knife not to be sharp missed the mark entirely, as the pain that you feel is inflicted by the improper use of the tool, not the quality of its edge. We are taught from a young age to always apply our conscious mental faculties to solve problems. If you do not succeed, one should apply more force, and there is merit to this statement, but a lot more happens in a kitchen than just the cutting of produce. Imagine you’re a chef in your very own kitchen. Your chef’s knife is your most important tool, but there are many others, most of which have deep internal logic, like the gas stoves, suction hoods and microwaves. They seem automatic in nature and perform magical feats, yet for your day-to-day, most of your time is spent on your knife; you learn how to use it while disregarding the rest of your equipment.

How to be rich

A common question in my circles centres around how to become rich, wealthy, famous, happy, powerful, etc. The short answer is you will never become any of this, you can not be rich, you can only experience the feeling of richness. This may sound trivial, but it reveals a crucial hint: the only true difference between being successful and a failure is how you interpret your situation. For most, it is a moving goal that one will never reach. There has been much effort spent on how to achieve your goals,

how to push yourself to get your dream car, house, vacation, wagyu steak and much more. Unfortunately, we forgot to ask the only question that matters: what is this goal actually for? Complete the wrong goal and you may end up further from where you want to be.

The patterns you recognized in this chapter (how you relate to struggle, what you chase, what drains you) become raw material for a document you'll build later. For now, just notice the patterns.

Chapter Three:

Why Most Goals Fail

For many, there is a massive divide between what they say and what they do; this often stems from two factors: the underestimation of effort required and the misalignment with what we actually desire.

Most of us have honest intentions, but our day starts, and we become unconscious. Sometimes we black out for months just to find ourselves staring into a lake on a random Sunday afternoon, remembering all our good intentions from the start of the year. In this hyper-stimulating world, it is easy to lose track of time; without mindfulness, a new way of being can not be implemented.

For the more conscious, the problem often lies in a lack of a deeper understanding of oneself. We may strive for money with the hidden goal to feel secure or become a successful manager to feel important. Often we are ashamed of the underlying feeling and cover it with complex stories of wants and needs, hopes and dreams. This is not necessarily a problem if it serves you well, unfortunately, for many of us, it manifests as a toxic slurry that drags us into a dark place. Often, when the goals are reached, a further feeling of despair consumes us, realising that it did not solve our internal problems, and we are left disillusioned with life.

When reading, I ask only that you resist the urge to separate yourself from the 8,300,000,000 other humans. We are all liable to fall for these two tricks of the mind.

What is the Goal of Goals?

It is believed that the Babylonians made the first New Year's resolutions about 4000 years ago at the start of their spring barley harvest. Fast forward to today, and millions of people set New Year's resolutions every year. According to the Goal-Setting Theory, a study by Locke & Latham (1990, 2002), goals can direct attention, energise effort and increase persistence. This helps achieve the desired outcome of the goal.

“Quitter’s Day”

Unfortunately, most goals are quickly abandoned, the most famous being the lofty New Year's Eve resolutions. In 2019, Strava analysed over 800 million user-logged activities and found that New Year's resolutions typically last until January 19th (cleverly coined “Quitters Day”). The numbers get worse: John Norcross and colleagues at the University of Scranton found that 77% of New Year's resolutions are maintained for one week, and only 19% are still being pursued two years later. Finally, Richard Wiseman's 2007 study of 3,000 participants found that 88% of those who set resolutions fail to achieve them, despite 52% being confident of success when they started. Outside of New Year's resolutions that often focus on habit changes, we often set specific goals throughout the year. This can be related to financial achievements, such as a savings goal or external validations, such as social media metrics. No matter the type of goal, they all seem to be plagued by an underestimation of effort.

Planning Fallacy

And it's not a matter of intelligence, some of the smartest people in the world entrusted with billions are falling for the same underestimation of timelines. The term "Planning Fallacy" was introduced by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in 1979 in their paper "Intuitive Prediction: Biases and Corrective Procedures." They realised that we tend to underestimate the time required to complete a goal, even when we have past experiences of failure. In other words, we not only underestimate the needed time, but also do not learn from those mistakes! Roger Buehler's studies reveal further critical insights, such as the fact that we more accurately predict the required time when planning for others compared to ourselves. The reasoning for this is complex but centres around the following points:

Memory Biases: We misremember how long tasks took in the past. Planning Simulations: When we think of the future, we often can only simulate a perfect world without setbacks. Uniqueness Bias: Bent Flyvbjerg's megaproject research identified the tendency to see one's own goals as unique.

Bent Flyvbjerg illustrates these 3 points brilliantly by analysing over 16,000 large projects and found 91.5% go over budget, over schedule, or both. Fewer than 1% are completed on time, on budget, and deliver promised benefits.

Further examples of mega projects failing to achieve their goals:
Sydney Opera House: Estimated \$7 million completion; actual \$102 million. Channel Tunnel: Predicted £4.9 billion; actual £10+ billion. Denver International Airport: 200% cost overrun.

Play silly games, win silly prizes

Now, some would argue that being overly optimistic is a good thing, as it can get us started in the right direction, but unfortunately, setting shitty goals has shitty consequences. Research by Kasser and Ryan found that people who strongly valued financial success reported worse psychological health. The pattern holds: a meta-analysis by Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, and Kasser confirmed that materialism is connected with lower life satisfaction, risky health behaviours, and negative self-image.

Even if the timeline is correctly estimated, sticking with the wrong goals is challenging and can be dangerous. “Goal Contents Theory” describes the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic goals. Intrinsic goals include personal growth, meaningful relationships, community involvement, and physical health. Extrinsic goals include financial success, fame, and image/appearance.

Knowing the negatives of extrinsic goals, why are we so often drawn to them? A meta-analysis by Tobin et al. found that being exposed to social media content showing a higher social status negatively affects the users’ well-being and contributes to further feelings of depression. Social media users consistently set more extrinsic goals. This comparison also holds up in the real world, where being exposed to what others may have can increase your desire to “keep up with the Joneses”, an American saying describing the need to keep up with the neighbours when they buy a new car or go on a luxury holiday. The fundamental problem with extrinsic goals is that they fail to satisfy the psychological needs they are unconsciously meant to address:

Surface Goal: Wealth → Underlying Need: Security. Surface Goal: Fame → Underlying Need: Recognition that one matters. Surface Goal: The Perfect Image → Underlying Need: Self-acceptance. Surface Goal: Status Symbols → Underlying Need: Being recognised as a competent person.

The rat race offers no cheese at the finish line

Another danger is the “Arrival Fallacy,” which makes many believe that achieving a specific goal will bring lasting happiness. The consequences of relying on the “Arrival Fallacy” are well exemplified in post-Olympic depression. Olympic superstars are often depicted as the very definition of drive and determination. In the meantime, a large portion of them suffer from major mental difficulties right after their big victory. They are often operating in a constant state of desire to motivate their relentless action. When their desire is seemingly fulfilled, it can have devastating effects.

Effortless Goals

In response to these and other challenges, I propose the concept of Effortless Goals. A method to help set more sustainable goals that improve one’s well-being. People often say, “You can do anything you set your mind to”. This is, in my humble opinion, total bullshit. That is why Effortless Goals are designed to cut the crap and try to be as close to reality as possible. Think of it as harm reduction for goal-setting: clean needles and proper dosing will help reduce casualties, but do not necessarily solve the underlying problems. The deeper work comes in later chapters.

The method has five steps. Each one acts as a filter, the goals that make it through all five are likely worth pursuing. Goals that don’t should probably be abandoned.

Step 1: Surface Goal

Start by writing down what you think you want. Don't edit yourself yet, just capture the goal as it naturally appears in your mind.

Examples: "I want to make \$1 million" "I want to be a successful entrepreneur" "I want to be promoted to director" "I want to start a podcast"

This is your surface goal, the thing you'd tell someone at a party if they asked about your ambitions.

Step 2: Radical Self Honesty

For most, this is one of the hardest steps, as digging deep into the subconscious takes time and energy. Ask "why do I want this?" and keep drilling down until the answer feels uncomfortably honest. For example, "I want financial security" can be a safe version of "I want to stop feeling anxious that I'm one mistake away from losing everything".

Further examples: "I want to be promoted" may mask → "I want respect" or "I want to prove my worth" "I want to get fit" may mask → "I want to feel attractive" or "I want control over my life" "I want to start a business" may mask → "I want autonomy" or "I want to prove I'm capable"

You can drill down to your core desire by continuously asking why, as if you are trying to understand somebody else's point of view:

"I want to start a podcast" Why? → "To share my ideas" Why? → "Because I have insights people should hear" Why? → "Because I want recognition for my thinking" Why? → "Because I want to feel like I matter and my ideas are respected"

Keep going until the answer feels vulnerable or slightly embarrassing. True desires almost always fall into one of these categories:

Security (safety, stability, freedom from fear or anxiety)
Acceptance (belonging, being valued, mattering to others, love)
Autonomy (control, freedom, self-determination, independence)
Competence (feeling capable, respected for skills, mastery, being “enough”)

Important: Please be kind to yourself! These are difficult topics, and you may not like what you find. Have patience and realise that we are all human. This step is not about shaming, it's about removing the weight of being dishonest to yourself so that you can start moving towards a better future.

Step 3: Create a Goal That Serves Your Desire

Now that you know your underlying desire, you need to translate it into a concrete and actionable goal.

For example: Your desire is “I want to feel that I am heard and my ideas are respected”

Possible goals: “Publish 10 well-researched articles in my field”
“Speak at 3 industry conferences” “Host monthly dinners with 5 thoughtful people in my industry”

Your goal should be specific enough that you can estimate how long it will take, know when you've achieved it, and identify a strategy to get there.

Step 4: Minimize

Once you've created your goal, ask: “What's the smallest version of this goal that would still satisfy my desire?” Choose the version that's fastest, most direct, and most aligned with your actual life situation. Don't pick “write a best-selling book” if “become an expert in my community” would satisfy the same desire. Remember that the only thing that matters is how you feel about your situation. Identify the best bang for your buck.

The discipline is found in making the goal smaller and learning how to squeeze the maximum out of it. If you don't, then step 5 will destroy your hopes and dreams. Furthermore, you need

to make sure it can be achieved with one single strategy. If your goal requires multiple different strategies, then in my opinion, it's a vision, not a goal. Large visions masquerading as goals force too many strategy changes along the way.

Example goals: From €1,000/month to €10,000/month = one strategy. From €10,000/month to €100,000/month = different strategy. From €100,000/month to €1,000,000/month = radically different strategy. Each strategy shift is essentially a new goal.

Step 5: The Reality Multiplier

Now take your reframed, minimized, single-strategy goal and estimate the total effort required. Consider how many hours per week you'll dedicate to this and how many weeks/months/years it will take.

Express this as a time estimation: “2 hours/week for 6 months” (50 hours) “10 hours/week for 1 year” (520 hours) “40 hours/week for 2 years” (4,000 hours)

Account for difficulty! If something is completely new to you or requires intense focus, the same clock hours cost more psychological effort, and you will not be able to do as many per week.

Now comes the really shitty part. Multiply your total effort estimate by 10. Yes, 10x. I know... fuck that. But unfortunately, this is your realistic baseline, not worst case, not pessimistic. This is what you should actually expect.

Now ask yourself: If this goal takes 10x more effort than I thought, do I still want it? The results are often devastating, that “6-month side project” (50 hours) now becomes a 2-3 year endeavour (500 hours).

If 10x kills all your motivation, there may be one of these problems: Problem #1: The desire isn't strong enough. Solution: Return to Step 2. Problem #2: Your time commitment is too low. Solution: Adjust your time allocation if possible. Problem #3: You didn't minimize properly. Solution: Return to Step 4.

Before abandoning a goal, see if you can increase your weekly time commitment. For example, you estimate that learning Spanish takes 3 months at 4 hours a week; this results in a 2.5-year estimate after applying the Multiplier. Alternatively, you envision 8 hours a week and 1.5 months of work, which would result in a roughly 1 year commitment.

Increasing weekly time only works if the goal actually responds to more hours; some things have natural pacing limits. On the flipside, some goals benefit greatly from extra weekly hours, exponentially speeding up completion time. Either way, ramp up slowly. Even a goal that survived all five filters can crush you if you throw yourself at it full speed from day one. Start at a pace that feels almost too easy, and build from there. Sustainable effort beats heroic sprints. If you can't increase weekly commitment, or if even maximum commitment yields a timeline that kills motivation, then the desire most likely isn't strong enough, or you failed to apply the minimisation techniques in the previous steps.

Consider two versions of the same type of goal:

Minimized: Building a small business in 6 months turns into 5 years. Overly Ambitious: Building a large business in 2 years turns into 20 years.

The difference between 6 months and 2 years seems modest. But after the multiplier, it becomes the difference between a large chapter and the remainder of your career. Small reductions in goal size create massive reductions in required timeline.

If 10x feels trivially easy, your original estimate was probably a fantasy. Revisit your timeline with more honesty before applying the multiplier. On rare occasions, goals take significantly less effort than even your original estimate. You vastly underestimated your existing capabilities, or the goal was simpler than you thought; luck plays the biggest role in the early completion of goals. If this happens, great. The Reality Multiplier protects you from the far more common scenario: massive underestimation.

If your goal comes out of the 5 steps successfully, then to you I say “Happy Hunting”.

Chapter Four:

Gain Equals Loss

Headache After the Champagne

There's an old Taoist story about a farmer. His horse runs away. Neighbors say, "Such bad luck." He says, "Maybe." The horse returns with a wild stallion. Neighbors say, "Such good luck!" He says, "Maybe." His son rides the stallion, falls, breaks his leg. "Such bad luck." "Maybe." War comes, all able-bodied men are conscripted and die in battle. The son, still crippled, survives.

Good luck and bad luck create each other. Gain and loss are not opposites. They're one system, endlessly turning.

The previous chapter showed you how fragile goals are. But most of us have already been playing the game. You've gained things, lost things, and will again. Even with better goals, the cycle doesn't stop. The question isn't whether you'll lose what you've gained. You will. Entropy wins eventually. The question is whether you'll have learned anything by the time it happens.

How Gaining Fails to Teach

Turns out after success, the mind decides there's nothing left to examine. You already know why it worked. You're already scanning for the next target. Research shows goal-related information is actively inhibited after successful completion. The brain doesn't passively forget wins. It deliberately closes the book.

After success, three things tend to happen. First, you credit yourself. The win must have come from skill, effort, the right strategy. This feels obvious in the moment, but it's often wrong. The "what if" machinery shuts down. After failure, your brain naturally generates alternatives. What could I have done differently? What did I miss? This is how learning happens. After success, this loop doesn't activate. You don't ask "what could have gone wrong but didn't?" The brain closes the book, convinced there's nothing left to learn.

Jennifer Crocker's research on contingent self-worth shows where this leads. Students who staked their identity on academic success experienced dramatic swings, bigger highs when they won, bigger crashes when they lost. Those who didn't fuse identity with outcomes stayed stable either way. The fusion doesn't just make you vulnerable to loss. It makes the highs more addictive and the lows more destructive.

I did this for years. The gains felt fine. Good, even. It was only when the losses came that things got nasty. Turns out I had built my identity on outcomes I couldn't control. When they disappeared, so did the foundation I was standing on.

Confident and Clueless

Every gain contains information. Did it deliver what you expected? Was the satisfaction what you imagined, or something different? How long did it last? What did it cost you to get here? What new vulnerabilities came with it?

These questions have answers. The problem is nobody asks them.

If you examined gains honestly, you'd learn what success actually provides versus what you thought it would. You'd see the gap between anticipation and reality. You'd notice which wins came from skill and which came from luck. You'd spot what almost went wrong but didn't. Most people skip this entirely.

Research on venture-backed startups found that each prior successful exit increased revenues in the next venture by an average of 115%. Experience matters, but only if you actually extract the lesson.

Most people skip it. They move straight to the next want. Then loss arrives and they lack the tools to cope. The foundation they built their identity on was sand. The success they credited to skill was luck.

It gets even worse. Maurizio Zollo's research on "superstitious learning" found that success without analysis produces confident but incorrect beliefs about what works. Managers' perception of success in previous acquisitions was actually negatively related to performance in subsequent mergers. You don't just miss the lesson. You learn the wrong one.

Hold It Lightly

The temptation at this point is to opt out entirely. Don't pursue, can't lose. But decades of regret research tell a consistent story: inaction dominates long-term regret far more than action does. Avoidance doesn't protect you, it just depletes you differently.

So if avoidance costs you, and attachment breaks you, what's left? The Stoics looked at it this way: while you have the thing, rehearse not having it. They called this *premeditatio malorum*, mentally walking through loss before it arrives.

If this disappeared tomorrow, would I still be me? The answer should be yes. If it's not, you've fused with something you can't control.

This isn't about not wanting things. Pursue fully. Hold lightly.

The practice is simple but not easy. You have the job, the relationship, the money, the health. While you have it, remind yourself: this is not me. I am the one experiencing this. When it goes, I remain.

The Post-Achievement Audit

Principles are nice. Tools are better. After achieving something, start with separation: remind yourself this gain is not what defines your self worth. Then ask:

What did I expect to feel? Be specific. You thought the promotion would bring security. You thought the purchase would bring satisfaction. You thought the milestone would bring peace. Name the anticipated emotion.

What did I actually feel? Compare honestly. Was it what you expected? More? Less? Different entirely? How long did it last before the baseline reasserted itself?

What did this cost me? Not just money. Time, energy, relationships, opportunities foregone. What did you trade to get here?

What new exposure does this create? What do you now have to maintain? Protect? Live up to? What can you now lose that you couldn't lose before?

What almost went wrong? Shmuel Ellis's research found this is the most effective element of success review. What could have derailed this? What did you get away with?

Do this consistently and two things happen. When loss comes, it hurts less, you didn't build your identity on the outcome. And your odds of future success improve, you learned the actual reasons things worked, not the stories you told yourself.

If You Already Lost

Maybe you're reading this after the crash. The business failed. The relationship ended. The thing you built collapsed. You feel like a loser.

Here's what I want you to see: you only lost because you had something. The pain you feel is proportional to what you had. That's not failure. That's the cost of having played at all.

Loss is not proof that you did something wrong. It's proof that you did something. You built, you gained, you had something worth losing. Most people never get that far.

The farmer's neighbors saw tragedy. The farmer saw one turn of the wheel.

If you skipped the audit on the way up, you can still do it now. What did the gain actually give you while you had it? What did you learn? What would you do differently? The examination still extracts value, even in retrospect.

Gaining is the teacher. Loss is the exam. And the exam comes regardless. The question is whether you've studied.

But studying requires stable ground to study on. That is what we build next.

The work you did here (examining how you relate to achievement, what your wins actually gave you, what your losses revealed) becomes part of your document later. Your Post-Achievement Audit results, the patterns you noticed in how you respond to success and failure, what loss taught you versus what gains actually provided. When AI knows this about you, it can call out the patterns you'd otherwise miss. You don't need to do anything with it yet. Just know that this material has a home.

Chapter Five:

Real Winners Quit

A Bet You Can't Afford to Lose

The Effortless Goals method from Chapter Three filters out fantasy timelines and misaligned desires. The previous chapter showed what happens even when goals succeed. For most people, that's enough to move forward with clarity.

But some of you may have noticed that something felt off. Not with the method, with the goals themselves.

If this is not you, go back to the Effortless Goals and live a happy life. Fucking with the internal wiring of yourself is risky business, and most of the time counterproductive. For those who remain, let me give you the short version: The only way to never lose is to quit the game and make up your own.

The Trap Door

The Effortless Goals method asks you to drill down to your core desire. “I want to start a podcast” becomes “I want recognition” becomes “I want to feel like I matter.” The method then asks you to create a goal that serves that desire, minimize it, and multiply the timeline by 10.

Here’s what I didn’t tell you: if you do this honestly, most goals don’t survive. You drill down to the real desire, “I want to feel like I matter”, and suddenly the podcast looks ridiculous. It was never going to deliver that. The goal doesn’t fail the filter. It just stops making sense. If you really think about it, you start to see that having goals is not going to be the solution.

This is the trap door. Radical self-honesty doesn't just refine goals. It evaporates them.

And then you're left with a strange question. If no goal seems to deliver what you actually want, who sold you these goals in the first place?

Inherited Scripts

Turns out most desires aren't yours. You pursue something because you'd feel ashamed, guilty, or anxious if you didn't. It *feels* internal. You experience it as your own wanting. But the source is external: parents, culture, peers, social media, some ambient sense of what success is supposed to look like.

The narrative installation happens early and runs deep. From the moment you start making sense of the world around you, you absorb what your family considers desirable and what they don't. Schools teach you to discipline yourself, cooperate with others, obey rules, and test your achievements through competition. Media projects images of idealized lifestyles, bodies, and products. By the time you're making "your own" decisions about career and life, you've already internalized thousands of hours of programming about what success looks like, what kind of person is worthy of respect, what you should want.

None of this is conspiracy. It's just how humans work. We're social animals built to absorb the norms of our tribe. The problem isn't that socialization exists. The problem is that we mistake the installed software for our own operating system.

Psychologists have a term for this: introjected motivation. You take in a value but don't accept it as your own. You pursue the goal because you "ought to", because some part of you learned that this is what good people do. Kennon Sheldon's research found that introjected motivation predicts short-term

persistence but not long-term wellbeing. Even when you succeed at introjected goals, anxiety indicators remain elevated. You won the game, but you're not happier. Sound familiar?

When Sheldon and Lawrence Krieger studied 6,200 lawyers, they found that income, class rank, partnership status, and law review membership had minimal to zero correlation with wellbeing. Public service lawyers reported higher wellbeing than elite firm lawyers despite markedly lower pay. The external markers of success, the ones everyone told you to chase, don't work. Krieger's conclusion was blunt: the American Dream paradigm (money, status, and external markers as foundations of a happy life) simply does not work. Not for lawyers, not for anyone.

Mary H. Jacobsen's "hand-me-down dreams" concept captures it well: if your family's values mesh with your own, you can find strength in them. If they don't, you'll build a career that your parents take pride in, but that slowly kills you inside. The same applies to cultural scripts, social media comparison, and every other source of "should."

Most people are running programs they didn't write, pursuing goals they didn't choose, winning games that don't satisfy.

The Vacuum Problem

So you quit the inherited games. Now what?

Nothing happens without a difference. Physics calls it a gradient: pressure, heat, electrical potential. You need to want something for anything to move. I assumed that eliminating all desire would achieve peace, yes, but also paralysis.

Like many before me, I sought refuge in Eastern philosophies. Taoism and Buddhism seemed to offer a way out: eliminate craving, eliminate suffering. Extremely attractive. And it works, for a while. Dive deep enough into stillness and the suffering quiets.

But so does everything else.

I'd built a false choice in my head: either keep chasing scoreboards and suffer, or disengage completely, become a stone Buddha hidden in a cave, feeling nothing. For years those felt like the only two options. I didn't want either. I wanted to be engaged with life, to create, to contribute, to feel the energy that comes from having direction. Just not enslaved to someone else's scoreboard.

Turns out I had misunderstood the teaching entirely.

Buddhism doesn't teach elimination of all desire. It distinguishes between two types. **Tanha** is compulsive craving, the thirst that's never quenched. **Chanda** is wholesome aspiration, chosen motivation. The tradition treats tanha as the root of suffering, but considers chanda a foundation for genuine growth.

The difference is where the desire points. A Thai Forest teacher put it simply: tanha wants to *get*. Chanda wants to *do*.

"I want to lose 10 kg" is tanha. Focused on an outcome. You either get there or you don't. "I am becoming someone who takes care of their body" is chanda. Focused on the doing.

Taṇhā perpetuates itself. You lose the weight. Brief satisfaction, then the goalpost moves. Tone up. Build muscle. Maintain it. The craving keeps going because it was never about the action; it was about getting somewhere. You're always behind, always not-yet-there.

Chanda works differently. Each action satisfies. The direction continues, but not from craving, from engagement. The walk today isn't a down payment on future satisfaction. It is the satisfaction.

Wanting Is Not Liking

Before we get to the solution, one more piece of bad news. Your brain is designed to keep you chasing, not to reward arrival.

Kent Berridge, a neuroscientist at the University of Michigan, spent decades studying dopamine. The popular understanding is that dopamine is the “reward chemical,” the thing that makes you feel good when you get what you want. Berridge proved this is wrong.

Dopamine mediates *wanting*, not *liking*. These are separate neural systems. About 90% of the nucleus accumbens (a key brain structure in motivation) generates intense wanting with zero pleasure-enhancing capacity. We can desperately chase things that won’t satisfy us. Not because we’re weak or stupid, but because that’s how the system is built.

Berridge’s quote on his own discovery: “I was absolutely convinced that dopamine was pleasure when I began my career, I loved that hypothesis... but results turned out otherwise.”

Quit the Game, Write Your Own

So goals are fragile. The external markers of success have near-zero correlation with wellbeing. What's left?

Direction. Not a destination, but a trajectory. Not an outcome to achieve, but an orientation to embody.

Directional Narratives

Goals are finite: you either achieve them or fail. Narratives are directional: they point somewhere without requiring arrival.

"I want to lose 10 kg" is a goal. It succeeds or fails. "I am becoming someone who takes care of their body" is a narrative. It can't fail in the same way. Every action either aligns with the story or doesn't. There's no finish line.

This is what I call a Directional Narrative. It's the practical expression of chanda: wanting to *do*, not wanting to *get*.

Narrative Seeds

A Directional Narrative starts with what I call a seed. A simple statement: "I am becoming someone who..." You plant them and let them grow.

Your seeds should cover the domains that matter to you: your health, your relationships, your work, your creativity, whatever is real for you. "I am becoming someone who builds things that matter to me." "I am becoming someone who shows up for the people I care about." "I am becoming someone who moves through the world rather than hiding from it."

Start with one or two. You don't need a seed for everything. You need seeds for the things that are actually pulling you.

Chapter Six:

The Five Pillars

I should warn you: narrative is not safe territory. Narratives are powerful precisely because they filter everything. Memory, attention, interpretation. The same life events can be re-authored into completely different stories. This power cuts both ways. Destructive narratives push toward ruin just as effectively as constructive ones push toward flourishing.

If you're in a dark place, you'll write a dark story for yourself, and that story will drag you deeper. The foundation has to be stable first. You need the basics handled before you start rewiring your sense of self. This chapter is about building that foundation.

Sleep

Most important. Without decent sleep, the other four pillars become nearly impossible. A few bad weeks of sleep will undo any amount of healthy habits. You don't need perfect sleep scores. You need enough good nights to create a buffer. Bad nights will happen. Don't make it a catastrophe.

Motion

Internal and external. With internal motion, I mean energy, breath, emotions, etc. External motion is physical movement, walking, experiencing the world through a body that moves. Humans evolved under constant physical stress. There is no evolutionary adaptation for sitting still.

Walking works because the barrier is low. You can do it anywhere, anytime. It aids digestion, clears the mind, creates what I call “a one centimeter gap” between your current feeling and your ability to plan. That gap is everything. That gap is what breaks the cycle of stuckness.

Intake

Physical and mental. With physical intake, I mean food. Your body is literally constructed from what you eat. Quality matters. This isn’t about expensive or fancy. Optimize for clean, natural, minimal ingredients and good macros for your body.

With mental intake, I mean what you consume with your mind. Garbage in, garbage out. Opening Instagram the moment you wake up is cracking a mental beer for breakfast. Mental junk food has its place, but sparingly.

Connection

Humans are social animals. Not optional. It's hardware. Isolation degrades mental health faster than almost anything else on this list. You don't need to be a social butterfly. You don't need a packed calendar or a wide circle. You need some contact. A real conversation with a friend. A chat with your neighbor. A phone call that goes beyond logistics.

I say this as someone who will happily go days without seeing another person. I get it. "I'm an introvert." "I don't need people." "I prefer being alone." And maybe you genuinely need less social stimulation. That's real. But zero connection isn't introversion, it's isolation.

The barrier is low. Text a friend back. Say hi to someone at the coffee shop. Walk with someone instead of alone. You don't need to start with fully opening up. You just need to not be completely alone. A trusted therapist counts too.

Creation

Most powerful, most dangerous. Making something. This doesn't require financial motivation. It could be helping a neighbor, organizing a kids' event, building something with your hands, doing your job with intention. The key is recognizing you're creating, not just going through motions. Without that recognition, creation becomes a chore that cascades into complaints and bad mood.

Creation naturally disrupts everything else. Projects make you forget to eat, skip sleep, sit at a desk for hours. Hustle culture starts with creation and ignores the other four pillars.

How They Cascade

The pillars don't operate in isolation. They feed each other like a flywheel, for better and for worse.

Better sleep clears the fog that makes everything feel impossible. That clarity creates a small opening to move. Movement calms the internal noise enough to make better food choices. Better food gives your body the raw materials to sleep deeper. Somewhere in that momentum, you start reaching out, answering a text, saying yes to coffee. Connection creates a sense of belonging that solo discipline can't manufacture. And that belonging fuels creation, the feeling that what you make matters. The cycle accelerates.

It works in reverse too. A few nights of bad sleep and your willpower evaporates. You reach for the easiest food. The processed carbs spike and crash, making sleep worse. You don't feel like moving. You cancel plans, stop answering messages, tell yourself you'll be more social when you feel better. Internal motion stalls, thoughts start looping, and suddenly you're three weeks deep into a pattern you can't explain, and no one's close enough to notice.

One pillar shifting even slightly creates space for the next. You don't need all five running perfectly. You need one running well enough to pull the others forward.

Where to Start

The honest answer: wherever feels least impossible.

If you can't sleep, don't start with sleep. That sounds backwards, but trying to fix the thing that feels most broken is a recipe for frustration. Start with the pillar that has the lowest barrier right now. For most people, that's walking. Not exercise. Walking.

Ten minutes. Out the door, no destination. If you need something in the background to get you going, a podcast or music, go for it. Just keep the screen in your pocket. Walking creates what I described earlier as the "one centimeter gap," that tiny space between how you feel and your ability to think about how you feel. Without that gap, you're fused with the emotion. You ARE the anxiety. You ARE the stuckness. The gap lets you observe it instead.

My own sequence went roughly like this: internal motion first, getting my emotional state slightly less chaotic. That enabled walking. Walking improved the internal state further. Better movement led to caring about food. Better food supported better sleep. Sleep amplified everything else. The flywheel in action.

But that was my path. If cooking a proper meal is what feels doable today, start there. If you've been sleeping at 2am and moving it to 1am feels possible, start there. The entry point matters less than the entry.

Two things to watch for. First, don't try to overhaul everything at once. Build slowly. Walking for ten minutes becomes twenty, becomes an hour, eventually converts to heavier movement if you want it. Each step creates its own motivation for the next. Second, expect the flywheel to be slow at first. The first few weeks feel like pushing a heavy wheel uphill. Then it starts to turn on its own. Then it pulls you. And at some point, you'll lose it. That's normal. Be prepared to start the flywheel again from time to time. It gets easier each restart.

If you're truly stuck, if nothing feels possible, get professional help. It's not defeat. It's a willingness to fight. Sometimes you need someone to push the wheel with you.

The Financial Base

I wrote in Chapter One that this guide is primarily for people whose survival needs are met. The pillars assume the same. You need a baseline of financial stability to work on this stuff. Can't optimize food when you can't afford groceries. Hard to prioritize sleep when you're working three jobs. This is real, and I won't pretend otherwise.

But there's a trap on the other side.

There's an old story about a Mexican fisherman sitting by the water. An American businessman walks by and asks why he isn't out catching more fish. "I catch enough," the fisherman says. The businessman lays out a plan: catch more fish, buy a boat, build a fleet, hire workers, eventually retire wealthy. "And then what?" asks the fisherman. "Then you can sit by the water and fish whenever you want."

The financial base you need for the pillars is modest. Good food doesn't mean expensive food. A Michelin star meal is no better for your body than simple, clean ingredients from the market. Walking is free. Connection costs nothing. Sleep requires a safe, quiet place, not a luxury mattress. Creation needs materials and time, not venture capital.

After the basics are covered, more money doesn't improve the pillars. Often it makes them worse. Wealth opens doors to elaborate distractions disguised as upgrades. The rare delicacy that's nutritionally empty. The home gym that becomes a clothes rack. The vacation that's really just consumption in a nicer setting.

Get the base. Don't overshoot it.

And remember, working on these pillars can be done together with professional help. Think of a therapist, coach, or doctor. Anything to help you get to a safe haven.

The honest assessment you just made (where each pillar stands, what's working, what's collapsing, which one you'd start with, how they cascade for you specifically) becomes your foundation section later. The pillars aren't just something to stabilize. They're something to know about yourself, clearly and without judgment, so that any AI helping you can see where the ground is solid and where it isn't.

Chapter Seven:

me.md

Why a Document?

Before we start creating your own version of “ME” I want you to think about what happens when you open a conversation with an AI system. You type a question. The AI responds based on statistical patterns drawn from billions of words. It sounds articulate. It sounds thoughtful. It sounds like it knows you. It doesn’t.

Without context, AI gives you the same generic advice it would give anyone. “Have you considered journaling?” “It might help to talk to a therapist.” “Remember to practice self-care.” These aren’t wrong, exactly. They’re just useless. It’s like asking a doctor for help without telling them where it hurts.

The previous six chapters did something specific. They walked you through a process of understanding yourself with a depth that most people never attempt. All of that work lives in your head right now. Maybe in some scattered notes. Me.md takes everything you’ve uncovered and puts it in one place. One document. Readable by you. Readable by any AI system you hand it to.

The Sections

The document has eight sections. Seven core, one optional. If this feels like a lot, relax. You've already done most of the work. Each section draws directly from a chapter you've already read. You're not starting from scratch. You're organizing what you've found.

```
$ tree ~/me.md
```

```
me.md
|
└── Where I Came From
    Context that shaped who you are.
|
└── My Foundation
    Core values, non-negotiables.
|
└── Where I Am Going
    Directional narratives, not goals.
|
└── My Relationship with Gain and Loss
    What you gained, what it cost.
|
└── What I Need From AI
    How AI should interact with you.
|
└── My Story (optional)
    Your Kishōtenketsu narrative.
|
└── Revision Log
    Track how this document evolves.
```

Section 1: Where I Came From

Your background. Your formative experiences. The patterns you recognized in the first two chapters. Where you came from, what shaped you, where you are now. Not a resume. Not the polished version you'd put on a dating profile. The real one. The one that includes the parts you usually leave out.

Section 2: My Foundation Each of the Five Pillars. Current state. What's working. What keeps collapsing. Where you started versus where you are now. Your cascade patterns: which pillar drags the others down when it slips, which one pulls them forward when it improves.

Section 3: Where I Am Going

This is your Chapter Three and Five material. The goals that survived the Effortless Goals filter, if any did. The core desires you found when you kept asking "why?" or the directional seeds you created. Your pillar seeds, Your life domain seeds. "I am becoming someone who..." for each area that matters to you.

Section 4: My Relationship with Gain and Loss

How do you relate to winning? To losing? What did your Post-Achievement Audit reveal? What did your gains actually give you versus what you expected? What did loss teach you that success couldn't?

Section 5: What I Need From AI

This might be the most practically useful section. How do you want AI to talk to you? What should it push back on? What should it absolutely not do?

If you respond well to directness, say so. If motivational cheerleading makes you want to throw your phone, say that. If you need AI to flag when you're running old scripts, write it down. If there are areas where you want help and areas where you don't, make it explicit.

This section shapes every future conversation. Without it, you get the default. The default is designed to be safe and pleasant, which usually means fucking useless.

Section 6: My Story (Optional)

If you go on to Chapter Eight and construct your Kishōtenketsu narrative, it goes here. The document is complete without it. The story adds depth for those who want it: the feeling behind the facts, the arc that connects the dots.

Section 7: Revision log

Keep a revision log not because anyone's checking, but because the changes themselves tell a story. "March 2027- updated Section 5, old seed no longer resonates, replaced with one that reflects where I actually am." "June - rewrote Section 3 after processing shutting down the company." The log becomes a record of your own evolution, visible over time.

I'll be honest: most people won't maintain Me.md. Most people will write a version, feel satisfied, and let it gather dust. And that's okay. Even a single honest version, written once, is more self-knowledge than most people ever organize. It will still serve you when you paste it into a conversation two years from now. It just won't serve you as well as one you've kept current.

How to Build It

Don't try to write the whole thing in one sitting. That's the same "overhaul everything at once" trap I warned about with the pillars. You didn't fix all five pillars in a weekend, and you won't write this document in one session. The flywheel principle applies here too: start where the friction is lowest and let momentum build. For most people, that's Section 3: your goals and seeds.

Section 5 (what you need from AI) is worth spending real time on. Think about every frustrating interaction you've had with an AI system. What went wrong? What did you wish it had done instead? What tone works for you and what doesn't? Be specific. "Don't be overly positive" is okay. "When I'm catastrophizing, call it out directly instead of validating the spiral" is better. Think of this section as instructions for a very capable but very new assistant who wants to help but doesn't know you yet.

A few things to remember while you build this:

The first version is a draft. It will be incomplete and imperfect. That's fine. A rough document with honest material is infinitely more useful than a polished one full of what you think you should say. This isn't a college application essay. Nobody is grading it. The only measure of quality is honesty. If a section feels uncomfortable to write, you're probably doing it right. The document that makes you cringe a little is the one that will actually be useful. Leave sections blank if you're not ready. A gap in the document is better than filler. You can come back to it. The document isn't going anywhere.

Before You Share It With AI

Be aware that when you use a cloud AI service, your conversation is sent to servers owned by that company. What happens next depends on their policies. Some providers store your conversations indefinitely. Some use them to train future models, meaning your words become part of the system's learning material. Some allow employees to review conversations for quality and safety. Policies vary between providers, change over time, and are often buried in terms of service that nobody reads.

It's worth noting how these models were built in the first place. Most large language models were trained on enormous amounts of data scraped from the internet, much of it without the consent of the people who created it. It's documented, litigated, and ongoing, showing that they are more than willing to steal.

That said, let's be honest with ourselves... Most of us pour deeply personal information into email services, messaging apps, and social media without a second thought. People confess secrets over Snapchat and send medical details through unencrypted email boxes with 12345 as there password. The document you've built deserves more care than that, but the point isn't to be more paranoid about AI than you are about everything else.

There is an alternative. Local AI models run entirely on your own machine. Nothing leaves your computer. No servers, no storage policies, no training data contributions, no third-party access. The technology is moving fast. Models that run on a powerful laptop are already capable enough to work with your document in meaningful ways, and they're improving rapidly.

The tradeoff today is capability. The largest cloud models are generally more capable than those that run locally. That gap is closing, but it exists. For some conversations, the cloud model's additional capability might matter. For others, a local model is

more than sufficient. You get to decide where that line is for you. For me, I only share my full story on my own local machine, a technical luxury that I think is worthwhile for me.

At minimum, before you paste your document into any AI system, know the answers to these questions: Does this provider store my conversations? Can I delete them? Are they used for training? Can I opt out? If you can't find clear answers, assume the worst.

How to Use It

The most immediate use: paste it into the beginning of an AI conversation. Any AI conversation: career advice, emotional support, decision-making. One practical note: don't always use the full document. Your complete story is a lot of text, and flooding a conversation with too much context can actually degrade the quality of the output. Share the sections that are relevant to what you're working on. If you're making a career decision, the AI doesn't need your full health history. Be selective.

Instead of: "I'm thinking about changing careers. What should I consider?"

You get: a response that knows your pattern of fusing identity with achievement, that knows your sleep collapses when you're stressed, that knows you're prone to chasing external validation when you feel insecure, and that knows your seed is "I am becoming someone who creates from genuine interest rather than proving worth." The advice that comes back from that foundation is a different species entirely.

Beyond AI conversations, the document works as a decision-making filter. When an opportunity appears, when a choice needs to be made, pull up the document. Does this

align with my seeds? Does this serve my actual desires or my inherited scripts? Does this strengthen my pillars or undermine them?

Share it with a therapist or coach if you have one. Most professionals spend the first several sessions trying to understand who you are. The document gives them a head start. It's not a replacement for the relationship, but it's a hell of a starting point.

Use it with people you trust. Not as a "here, read my life story", but as a reference when you're making decisions together, working through problems, or trying to explain where you're coming from. "Here's what I've figured out about myself" is a powerful thing to be able to hand someone.

One thing the document is not: a script. It doesn't tell you what to do. It tells you who you are and where you're pointed. The decisions still require judgment, courage, and occasionally dumb luck. The document just makes sure you're making those decisions with your eyes open.

Now, if you're the kind of person who wants to take this further, who wants to weave all of this material into a coherent narrative, a story of who you've been and who you're becoming, the next chapter shows you how.

Chapter Eight:

From Seeds to Story

Your me.md is done. Or done enough. This chapter is optional.

The document is the map. The story is the territory. If you want to go deeper, if you want to weave your seeds, your past, and your direction into a single coherent narrative, this chapter shows you how.

The seeds point somewhere. The story is what it feels like to walk there.

Humans ARE Narrative

Dan McAdams spent decades studying how people construct their identities. His conclusion: your identity *is* your internalized and evolving life story. You don't just tell stories to yourself. You ARE story.

This goes deeper than it sounds. Before language, humans communicated through gesture, expression, sound. The feeling behind communication is what mattered; language evolved to process these feelings into shareable form.

McAdams distinguishes between redemption sequences (narratives that move from bad to good, where suffering transforms into growth) and contamination sequences (good to bad, where positive experiences are spoiled). Adults with redemption narratives show significantly higher generativity and wellbeing. The story you tell about your life literally shapes your psychological state.

Jonathan Adler took this further. He tracked 47 adults writing personal narratives before psychotherapy and after every session, roughly 600 narratives total. His finding: “We found that the stories actually changed BEFORE people’s psychological well-being changed. It was as though people were narrating a new version of their lives, and then a week or two later, their well-being would sort of catch up with the new story.”

The effect isn’t subtle. In a study by Dunlop and Tracy, recovering alcoholics whose stories of their last drink contained redemption sequences stayed sober at 83%. Those without: 44%.

Read that again. The story changes first. The psychology follows.

One slight caveat, this redemption research is American, and redemption arcs are a Western habit. Japanese participants may do better with acceptance and unresolved endings. Danish narratives may emphasize growing together, not solo triumph. The shape it takes depends on your culture, your relationships and who you are.

How Narrative Change Works

How do you actually rewrite your story?

The first thing to understand: you’re not inventing a new narrative from nothing. You’re discovering one that was always there, buried under the dominant story you’ve been telling yourself.

Narrative therapy calls this finding “unique outcomes” or “sparkling moments.” These are actual events in your life that contradict the problem-saturated story. Times when you weren’t anxious. Moments when you did show up. Days when the pattern broke. These exceptions exist. They’re just overlooked because they don’t fit the story you’ve been running.

The process is simple but not easy. Identify the story you tell about yourself. “I’m someone who can’t follow through.” “I always sabotage good things.” “I’m not the kind of person who...” Then hunt for exceptions. When was the last time that story wasn’t true? What was different about that situation? What did you draw on?

One exception is fragile. But connect them across time, remote history to recent history to present, and they become an alternative narrative. Now it’s time to name it. “What would you call this pattern you’re describing?” Now you have two stories about yourself, and you get to choose which one you feed.

The second insight is about chapter breaks. A failed startup can be the end of a humiliating chapter or the painful beginning of finding what actually matters. The facts are identical. Where you draw the line between chapters determines whether your story reads as decline or growth.

Here’s what makes this powerful: your narratives don’t just interpret your memories. They alter them. Research shows that constructing new narratives actually changes how you remember the past. The memory becomes less painful. This isn’t denial, it’s reconstruction.

Building Your Story

You now have your seeds. Now we need to weave them into a story. But not just any structure will work.

The hero’s journey assumes you had an “ordinary world” to leave, a stable baseline before the call to adventure. For many of us, there was no stable baseline. It was chaos from the start. Three-act structure requires conflict as the organizing principle: rising tension, climax, resolution. But what if your life wasn’t a battle to be won? And redemption arcs, suffering transformed into growth, turn out to be culturally specific.

There's a structure from East Asia that works differently. It originated in Chinese four-line poetry during the Tang Dynasty and spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. It's called Kishōtenketsu. It reflects a different relationship to conflict.

Four parts:

Ki: Introduction. Establishes context and tone. No inciting incident required. It simply invites you into a world. Your world, however it was.

Shō: Development. Deepens understanding. Events unfold without building toward confrontation. Life happening, the texture of experience before the shift.

Ten: The Twist. This is the heart. Not a crisis. A perspective shift. An insight that recontextualizes everything before it. One writing instructor describes it as "a steep spike, not a gradual ramp."

Ketsu: Reconciliation. Not resolution. Harmonizing the elements. Open endings are valid. The story indicates that life continues beyond what we see.

The way we will build the story is different from the sequence of the story.

Your final narrative reads forwards: Ki → Shō → Ten → Ketsu. Past context, life unfolding, the shift, where you're heading.

But you build it backwards.

You can't write your past properly until you know what it's leading to. Narratives filter memory, you literally remember differently based on the story you're telling. Ki and Shō aren't "what happened." They're "what matters, given where I'm going." The unique outcomes only become visible once you have the lens to see them.

So we start at the end and work back:

1. Dump the past (raw material)

2. Plant seeds (future direction), you've done this
3. Define your Ten (the shift happening now)
4. Envision your Ketsu (where the seeds point)
5. Reconstruct Ki and Shō (past rewritten through new lens)

Step 1: Dump the Past

Write your story as you remember it now. Don't edit, don't optimize. Get the current narrative out of your head and onto paper. This is what you've been telling yourself, the dominant story.

It will feel uncomfortable. The story might be darker than you expected, more scattered, more victim-focused. You need to see what you've been working with.

Step 2: Plant Seeds

Your "I am becoming someone who..." statements for the pillars and whatever other domains matter to you.

Step 3: Define Your Ten

The Ten isn't a single moment.

First write the build-up: recent events, crises, things falling apart or an accidental encounter with something or someone. It does not have to be pain or conflict driven.

Write about you building your foundation: implementing the Five Pillars. Stabilizing so you can author. Creating the gap between your difficult feelings and your ability to grow.

Finally, the peak: the authoring itself. Taking the pen. This moment, you creating your narrative.

You're in the Ten right now. Reading this, doing this work, is part of your shift. Write about it.

Step 4: Envision Your Ketsu

Where are the seeds pointing? Not a destination, a direction. Open-ended. The story continues beyond this.

What does life look like when you're living aligned with your seeds? Write the next chapter, not what you'll achieve, but who you're becoming.

Step 5: Reconstruct Ki and Shō

Now go back to your dump. Look and add moments that contradict the dominant story, times when you weren't anxious, did follow through, felt happy. This will become your Ki and Shō.

You can do this by hand, or use AI to help weave the pieces together. Feed it your dump, your seeds, your Ten, your Ketsu, and ask it to synthesize into a coherent narrative. Edit until it feels like YOUR story. AI provides structure. If you want example prompts or guidance on this process, reach out to me directly.

Live It

The narrative isn't a script to follow. It's a lens to see through.

When decisions come, ask: does this align with my story?
When difficulty comes, ask: how does this fit the narrative I'm building?

And remember, it evolves. Narrative identity is internalized and evolving. Revisit periodically. Each pass through the structure reveals new understanding. The story grows as you do.

When you're done, or done enough, your completed story goes into Section 6 of your me.md. The document holds the structure. The story fills it with life.

When This Goes Wrong

Two failure modes to watch for.

Rumination disguised as reflection. Reflection has genuine curiosity, forward momentum, fresh engagement. You feel energized. Rumination cycles through the same thoughts without resolution. It feels hot and churning. No new insights emerge. You're focused on what you can't control, waiting for acknowledgment or apology that may never come.

If your narrative work feels like rumination, stop. Go back to the pillars. Walk. Sleep. Eat something real. The gap you need will come from the body, not from thinking harder.

Premature positivity. Forcing a redemption narrative before you've actually processed the difficulty creates a shame spiral. You can't maintain constant positivity, so you view yourself as failing at recovery. This makes everything worse.

The principle: validate all emotions first. Name them. Acknowledge the pain without rushing to reframe it. Only then, when the acute charge has settled, do you look for the alternative story. Redemption narratives that skip the acknowledgment phase aren't redemption.

The dump can surface difficult material. Writing about your past might bring up things you haven't looked at in years. The same safety rules apply. If you're dissociating, if it's been two weeks and you're feeling increasingly worse, if you're reaching for substances to cope, stop and get support from friends or professionals.

Chapter Nine:

The Story Continues

If you were expecting a summary, you won't find one here. Eight chapters of arguing against finish lines, and then I hand you a tidy conclusion with bullet points? This would send you off with confidence.

But confidence is exactly what got us into this mess. The certainty that we know what we want, that the path is clear, and that arrival is possible. I've spent this entire guide trying to loosen that grip. I'm not going to tighten it again at the end.

Where I Am

Right now, I'm in my own Ten. The shift is happening but not complete. I've stopped chasing the scoreboards that were handed to me. I've built my pillars, imperfectly, with frequent collapses and rebuilds. I've planted my seeds:

I am becoming someone who creates from genuine interest rather than proving worth.

I am becoming someone who holds success and failure with the same loose grip.

I am becoming someone who tends their pocket of order without burning themselves out.

Some days these feel true. Other days I catch myself reaching for the old games: the metrics, the comparisons, the desperate need to matter. The difference is I notice now. I can watch the craving arise without immediately obeying it.

The Invitation

Now take what's useful. Discard what isn't. Build your pillars. Plant your seeds. Fill your document. Hand it to any AI and the conversation changes: no more generic advice, no more starting from zero. Every future conversation begins from who you actually are. If you want to go further, author your story.

Maybe we compare notes later. Maybe we discover we were both wrong.

What I do know is this: chasing someone else's goals with someone else's timeline on someone else's scoreboard was making me miserable. Stopping that, even without knowing what comes next, was the right move.

The story continues.

“May I never be complete. May I never be content. May I never be perfect.” Fight Club (1999)

See you out there.

Kind regards,

Rudie Nolasco Verweij

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Sources & Further Reading

The research referenced throughout this guide. If something caught your attention, these are the people and works worth exploring further.

Goal-Setting & Planning

- Edwin Locke & Gary Latham — *Goal-Setting Theory* (1990, 2002). The foundational work on how goals direct attention and energise effort.
- Daniel Kahneman & Amos Tversky — *Planning Fallacy* (1979). Why we systematically underestimate the time and cost required for nearly everything.
- Bent Flyvbjerg — Megaproject research. Analysis of 16,000+ large projects showing 91.5% go over budget, over schedule, or both.
- Roger Buehler — Research on prediction accuracy. We're better at estimating how long things will take others than ourselves.
- Richard Wiseman — Study of 3,000 participants (2007). Found 88% of resolution-setters fail despite initial confidence.
- John Norcross — University of Scranton study on New Year's resolutions. 77% maintained for one week, only 19% after two years.

Wellbeing & Motivation

- Tim Kasser & Richard Ryan — *Goal Contents Theory*. Pursuit of extrinsic goals (wealth, fame, image) predicts worse psychological health.
- Dittmar, Bond, Hurst & Kasser — Meta-analysis linking materialism to lower life satisfaction and negative self-image.

- Kennon Sheldon & Lawrence Krieger — Study of 6,200 lawyers. Income, class rank, and partnership status had near-zero correlation with wellbeing.
- Jennifer Crocker — Research on contingent self-worth. Identity fused with outcomes creates addictive highs and destructive lows.
- Kent Berridge — University of Michigan neuroscience research. Proved dopamine drives *wanting*, not *liking* — roughly 90% of the nucleus accumbens generates desire without pleasure.

Learning & Achievement

- Maurizio Zollo — *Superstitious Learning*. Success without analysis produces confident but incorrect beliefs about what works.
- Shmuel Ellis — Research on success review. Identifying what almost went wrong is the most effective element of learning from wins.

Identity & Narrative

- Dan McAdams — Decades of research on narrative identity. Your identity is your internalised, evolving life story. Redemption narratives predict higher wellbeing and generativity.
- Jonathan Adler — Study of 47 adults tracking 600 personal narratives through psychotherapy. Stories changed *before* psychological wellbeing improved.
- Dunlop & Tracy — Study of recovering alcoholics. Those whose last-drink stories contained redemption sequences stayed sober at 83% vs. 44%.
- Mary H. Jacobsen — *Hand-me-down Dreams*. On inherited family values that conflict with personal direction.

Philosophical Traditions

- Stoicism — *Premeditatio malorum*: mentally rehearsing loss before it arrives.

- Buddhism — The distinction between *taṇhā* (compulsive craving) and *chanda* (wholesome aspiration).
- Taoism — The Taoist farmer parable on the impermanence of fortune.
- Kishōtenketsu — East Asian narrative structure from Chinese Tang Dynasty poetry. Four movements: introduction, development, twist, reconciliation.