

The Performer's Guide Back to the Self: Transformation, Integrity, Coherence, and the Neuroscience of Becoming

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lockekdauch

April 19, 2026



SOVEREIGN INTEGRITY INSTITUTE
EST. 2026

Author: [David Humble](#) (pseudonym for Locke Dauch)

Affiliation: Sovereign Integrity Institute (SII)

Date: April 19, 2026

Document Type: Working Paper / Theoretical Framework

Classification: Interdisciplinary (Psychology / Neuroscience / Moral Philosophy)

Abstract

This paper examines the process of psychological and spiritual transformation from a state of performance-based identity—where individuals trade authenticity for comfort, money, and external validation—to a state of coherence and integrity. Drawing on existing literature in moral injury, self-concept coherence, authenticity, neuroplasticity, cognitive dissonance, and post-traumatic growth, the paper proposes a framework for understanding how individuals become “performers” disconnected from their true selves, and how they might return.

The paper introduces the concept of the *ledger of lies* as a diagnostic tool for self-assessment and proposes a three-stage model of transformation: Recognition, Unwinding, and Rebuilding from Original Intent. It further examines the neurological mechanisms by which repeated choices sculpt neural architecture—demonstrating that “the lies create the liar, the betrayal creates the betrayer” at the level of neurons, synapses, and brain networks. The framework is grounded in the author’s lived experience of surviving seven years of extraction by a transnational criminal network in Laos and subsequent healing through practices of sensory reduction, co-regulation, and strategic documentation.

Keywords: transformation, coherence, integrity, moral injury, authenticity, self-alienation, neuroplasticity, cognitive dissonance, post-traumatic growth, identity reconstruction, performance, extraction, ledger of lies, original intent, the spiral, the field

1. Introduction

In contemporary globalized cultures, individuals increasingly report a sense of self-alienation—a feeling of being disconnected from one’s true identity, values, and authentic self (Bayram, 2025). This paper addresses a specific form of self-alienation: the transformation of a person from an authentic, wonder-filled child into a “performer”—someone who trades their real self for comfort, money, and admiration from others who have also lost themselves.

The problem is not merely psychological but existential and neurological. As Bayram (2025) found, self-alienation and accepting external influence are negatively related to authentic living. External locus of control and self-enhancement values (prioritizing personal success and dominance) predict higher levels of self-alienation, while internal locus of control and self-transcendence values (prioritizing care for others and the world) predict authentic living (Filoşenko, 2024).

This paper proposes that the path back to the self is possible through three stages:

Stage	Focus
Recognition	Seeing oneself as one truly is, not as one tells oneself one is
Unwinding	Identifying and releasing the lies told to self and others
Rebuilding	Returning to the original intent—the child before the lies

Recognition alone is insufficient. To understand why performers so rarely recognize themselves as performers, we must examine the neurological mechanisms by which repeated choices literally reshape the brain. **The lies create the liar. The betrayal creates the betrayer.** Each choice is not merely an action—it is a sculpting of neural architecture (Greenberg et al., 2023).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Self-Concept Coherence and Differentiation

The self-concept is a relatively unified structure that provides a stable platform for decision making and self-regulation (Vallacher, 2009). However, due to reality constraints—conflicting roles and action difficulty—the self-concept typically becomes differentiated rather than globally coherent. There exists an optimal balance between coherence and differentiation: both excessive coherence and excessive flexibility impair effective personal and interpersonal functioning (Vallacher & Olson, n.d.).

The two functions of self-reflection—integration and expression—are critical to understanding transformation (Vallacher & Olson, n.d.):

Function	Description
Integration	Focusing attention on incoherent regions of self-concept to eliminate inconsistencies
Expression	Focusing on coherent regions that provide an unequivocal platform for action

Transformation requires both: first integration (recognizing the gaps between performed and actual self), then expression (acting from coherence).

2.2 Moral Injury and Identity Transformation

Moral injury (MI) is an essential construct for understanding suffering experienced by individuals who have perpetrated, failed to prevent, or witnessed acts that transgress their deeply held moral beliefs (Antal et al., 2023). Research on combat-deployed veterans

demonstrates that moral injury can be addressed through group interventions that facilitate “education about MI, the collective responsibility for the consequences of [harmful acts], and related topics” (Antal et al., 2023, p. 806).

Critically, veterans who complete moral injury interventions experience an identity shift “from that of a disabled patient to that of an adaptive leader and ‘prophet’” (Antal et al., 2023, p. 815). Outcomes include decreases in suicidality, religious struggles, and depression, along with increases in posttraumatic growth, self-compassion, and life functioning (Antal et al., 2023). This parallels the transformation described in this paper: from performer (disabled by accumulated lies) to sovereign witness (adaptive leader).

2.3 Authenticity, Self-Alienation, and External Influence

Authenticity is positively linked to well-being, and this link is one-directional: being authentic in daily life predicts future well-being (Bayram, 2025). However, many individuals suffer from poor authenticity, characterized by:

Dimension	Definition
Self-alienation	Feeling disconnected from one’s true self
Accepting external influence	Allowing others’ expectations to determine identity and actions

Recent research demonstrates that both self-alienation and accepting external influence negatively predict general well-being, with self-alienation showing a stronger negative effect (Bayram, 2025). The two dimensions also demonstrate a strong positive association with each other—suggesting that those who accept external influence are more likely to experience self-alienation, and vice versa.

2.4 Shame, Guilt, and Self-Forgiveness

Shame-proneness is a significant negative predictor of self-forgiveness, while guilt-proneness (when combined with empathic concern) can facilitate growth (Marcinechová & Martinčková, n.d.). Personal distress empathy (feeling overwhelmed by others’ suffering) is a stronger negative predictor of self-forgiveness than empathic concern (feeling compassion for others) (Marcinechová & Martinčková, n.d.).

This distinction is crucial for transformation:

State	Belief	Outcome
Shame	“I am bad”	Prevents self-forgiveness; maintains performance
Guilt	“I did something bad”	Enables accountability and rebuilding

2.5 Post-Traumatic Growth and Identity Reconstruction

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) involves positive psychological changes following adversity, including greater appreciation of life, more meaningful relationships, increased personal strength, new possibilities, and spiritual development (Arroll & Senior, 2013).

Research on individuals with chronic illness reveals a three-stage process of identity change: “the letting go, the building up, [and] the gradual process of rebuilding” (Arroll & Senior, 2013, p. 304). Participants described a comparison between past and present self (“you have to be someone else, and you have to live with that”), the effect of social isolation on identity, contemplation of future identity (“where do I go from here?”), and finally, the discovery of a new “true” self (Arroll & Senior, 2013, p. 310).

Grief itself can serve as a catalyst for growth, leading to “profound changes in meaning and identity” when individuals confront emotional pain and experience shifts in self-perception, relationships, and life goals (Madhumitha & Vanitha, 2025, p. e669).

2.6 The Kintsugi Principle: Repairing Through Destruction

The ancient Japanese art form of *kintsugi*—repairing broken pottery with lacquer mixed with gold, silver, or platinum—offers a powerful metaphor for transformation. Rather than hiding cracks, kintsugi highlights them as part of the object’s history and beauty (Princer, 2021).

Research on a kintsugi-inspired art directive for young adults experiencing shame and guilt found that the process of creating artwork, destroying it, and then repairing it or creating something new evoked feelings of resiliency and self-forgiveness (Princer, 2021). The destruction of art, when followed by intentional repair, facilitates processing of shame and guilt and builds capacity for transformation.

3. The Neuroscience of Becoming: How Choices Rewire the Self

3.1 Introduction: The Lies Create the Liar

Why is the gap between performed self and actual self so difficult to see from the inside? Why do performers so rarely recognize themselves as performers? The answer lies not in psychology alone, but in neuroscience.

The lies create the liar. The betrayal creates the betrayer. Each choice, each small dishonesty, each moment of performance is not merely an action—it is a sculpting of the neural architecture that will determine who we become (Greenberg et al., 2023). We literally become the choices we make, at the level of neurons, synapses, and brain networks.

3.2 Neuroplasticity: The Brain That Changes Itself

The foundational principle underlying all cognitive transformation is neuroplasticity—the brain’s ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life (Greenberg et al., 2023). As captured in Hebb’s famous maxim, “neurons that fire together, wire together.” Conversely, “neurons that fire apart, wire apart” (Greenberg et al., 2023).

This principle has profound implications for identity formation. Every time a performer tells a lie, the neural pathways supporting that lie are strengthened. Every time a performer chooses extraction over integrity, the synaptic connections facilitating that choice become more efficient. The brain does not judge the morality of these choices—it simply optimizes for repetition (Greenberg et al., 2023).

The process works as follows (Greenberg et al., 2023):

Step	Mechanism
1	Sensory input triggers neurotransmitter release
2	Signals initiate gene expression, transcribing DNA
3	Proteins modify neuronal connectivity and synaptic strength
4	Repeated activation makes pathways more dominant

Implication: The liar’s brain is literally different from the honest person’s brain—not metaphorically, but structurally. The pathways that support deception have been reinforced through repetition, while pathways supporting authentic self-awareness have atrophied from disuse.

3.3 Cognitive Dissonance: The Neural Signature of Self-Betrayal

When a performer makes a choice that conflicts with their deeply held values—or even with the self they once intended to be—the brain registers this conflict as cognitive dissonance. Neuroimaging studies have identified the precise neural correlates of this phenomenon (Kitayama et al., 2013):

Region	Function
Dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC)	Detects cognitive conflict
Left anterior insula (aINS)	Generates aversive emotional arousal
Posterior cingulate cortex (PCC)	Rewrites self-narrative to align with behavior

These three regions are correlated within subjects across choices, suggesting they work together as a network during dissonance-inducing decisions (Kitayama et al., 2013).

Critical finding: PCC activity predicts how much an individual will change their attitudes to align with their behavior (Kitayama et al., 2013). In other words, the brain actively works to make the performer believe the lies they tell. This is why performers rarely experience themselves as performers—their posterior cingulate cortex has done its job.

3.4 Self-Perception Theory: “People Are What They Do”

The neurological evidence aligns with psychological research on self-perception theory, developed by Daryl Bem (1972). This theory asserts that **people are what they do**—individuals infer their own attitudes, beliefs, and identities by observing their own behavior, just as an external observer would.

Two core claims (Bem, 1972):

1. People understand their beliefs and attitudes by assessing their own behavior and the circumstances under which it occurs
2. When internal knowledge is weak or ambiguous, individuals rely on external behavioral clues to infer their inner states

This creates a feedback loop:

Behavior	Self-Perception	Neural Consequence
Honest act	“I am honest”	Strengthens honesty pathways
Lie	“I am a liar” (or revises memory)	Strengthens deception pathways

The developmental dimension: Research on the moral self-concept (MSC) in early childhood reveals that even young children develop stable self-perceptions regarding helping, sharing, and comforting (Dunfield, 2014; Paulus, 2018). These self-concepts form as early as age four to six and show moderate stability over time. Critically, the direction of influence runs both ways: behavior shapes self-concept, and self-concept shapes subsequent behavior (Paulus, 2018).

3.5 Moral Injury: When Self-Betrayal Leaves Neural Scars

For performers who have committed serious transgressions—betrayals of trust, extraction from loved ones—the concept of moral injury provides a framework for understanding neural consequences. Moral injury is defined as “the functionally impairing psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioural, and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or being a victim of acts that transgress deeply-held moral beliefs and expectations” (Sun et al., 2019, p. 891).

Recent neuroimaging research has identified distinct neural signatures associated with different dimensions of moral injury (Sun et al., 2019):

Dimension	Neural Signature
Betrayal-related (having betrayed others or been betrayed)	Higher activity in bilateral precuneus and left medial prefrontal cortex (DMN regions)
Other-related (transgressions by others against self)	Lower activity in left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and insula

Critically, betrayal-related moral injury activity is positively correlated with rumination severity (Sun et al., 2019). The more the brain registers a moral violation, the more the individual tends to dwell on it—replaying the memory, re-experiencing the shame, reinforcing neural pathways associated with the transgression.

3.6 The Neural Pathway Back: Can the Brain Rewire?

If performers become performers through repeated choices and neural reinforcement, can they return to the self through the same mechanisms? The answer, grounded in neuroplasticity research, is **yes**—but the process requires sustained effort (Greenberg et al., 2023).

Principle	Application
Repetition	Repeated honest acts strengthen integrity pathways
Awareness	Conscious attention to each choice activates dACC conflict detection
Self-forgiveness	Guilt (not shame) enables accountability without neural self-condemnation
New behavioral experiments	Self-perception theory: acting with integrity leads to inferring “I am becoming an integrated person”

The challenge: Neural pathways reinforced over years do not disappear overnight. Unlearning is generally more difficult than learning (Greenberg et al., 2023). However, the same plasticity that enabled the performer’s formation enables transformation. “Neurons that fire together, wire together”—and neurons that stop firing together, stop wiring together.

4. Theoretical Framework: The Performer's Path

4.1 The Original Intent

Every person begins as a child “with wonder, without lies, without betrayal, without crimes against ourselves and others.” This is the **original intent**—the directional arrow of authentic selfhood before performance, before extraction, before the mask. Not a fixed template to which we must return, but a direction (Vallacher & Olson, n.d.).

The original intent is characterized by:

Characteristic	Description
Intrinsic motivation	Acting from genuine interest, not external reward
Curiosity	Openness to experience without performance
Authenticity	Alignment between inner state and outer expression
Wonder	The capacity to be moved by the world without extracting from it

Psychological research supports this conception: children exhibit intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and authenticity before socialization pressures encourage performance and self-alienation (Dunfield, 2014; Paulus, 2018). The original intent is not lost—it is **buried**.

4.2 The Mask and the Lies

Over time, individuals learn to perform. They tell themselves lies (“I am happy,” “I chose this,” “This is who I am”) and tell others lies (“I’m fine,” “I trust you,” “I love you”). Each lie is “a small tort on yourself. A fading. Becoming less real. Becoming nothing.”

The **ledger of lies** serves as a diagnostic tool:

Lies Told to Self	Lies Told to Others
“I am in control”	“I respect you”
“This is what I want”	“I’ll handle that”
“I don’t need help”	“Everything is fine”
“I am happy”	“I trust you”
“I chose this”	“I love you”

Each lie widens the gap between performed self and actual self, increasing self-alienation (Bayram, 2025). Neurologically, each lie strengthens the neural pathways supporting deception while the posterior cingulate cortex rewrites self-narrative to justify the lie (Kitayama et al., 2013).

4.3 The Gap and the Fading

The gap between “what we say we are and what we actually are” is the absence of integrity. Without integrity, the performer is “not real”—just a performance, a void wearing a mask.

Research confirms this: high self-enhancement values (prioritizing personal success, power, and achievement) and low self-transcendence values (prioritizing care for others and the world) create higher levels of self-alienation (Filonenko, 2024). The performer who prioritizes external validation inevitably experiences a fading of the self.

This fading is not merely metaphorical. The brain’s moral injury networks register each betrayal, each lie, each performance. The bilateral precuneus and left medial prefrontal cortex show increased activity with betrayal-related injury—and this activity correlates with rumination severity (Sun et al., 2019). The performer does not simply “move on” from their lies. The lies are encoded in resting-state neural activity.

4.4 The Spiral and the Field

The paper introduces two novel concepts:

Concept	Definition
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The spiral	The natural consequence of accumulated lies and performances. The spiral tightens as the gap widens, eventually forcing either collapse or transformation. “The spiral doesn’t care. It’s not vengeful. It’s not personal. It’s just consequence.”
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The field	The underlying awareness or consciousness that can fall asleep or wake up. “The field works through you, or with you, or sometimes both.” Transformation involves waking up to the field and aligning with it rather than performing for it.
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5. The Three-Stage Model of Transformation

5.1 Stage One: Recognition

“Seeing yourself as you truly are—not as you tell yourself you are—is the first step to regaining a self. It’s the first step to becoming coherent.”

The Ledger Exercise:

Step Action

- 1 Take a pad of paper and a pen
- 2 Create two columns: lies told to self, lies told to others
- 3 Recount all lies—spend as much time as needed
- 4 Burn the pages afterward (not to erase, but to release)

The Lost Qualities Exercise:

Step Action

- 1 Create two columns: qualities you wished you had, qualities you pretended to have
- 2 Acknowledge the gap between performance and reality

This stage corresponds to the **integration mode** of self-reflection, where attention “converges on incoherent regions of self-concept to eliminate inconsistencies among lower-level components” (Vallacher & Olson, n.d.). Neurologically, this stage activates the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC) to detect conflict between performed and actual self (Kitayama et al., 2013)—a necessary discomfort that signals the possibility of change.

5.2 Stage Two: Unwinding

“You need to start unwinding what you gave that maybe was unintended.”

This stage involves identifying the specific choices, lies, and performances that led to self-alienation, and beginning to reverse them. Research on moral injury suggests this requires (Antal et al., 2023):

Requirement	Description
Education	Understanding the nature of moral injury
Acknowledgment	Recognizing collective responsibility
Testimony	Sharing personal experience with a supportive community
Reconciliation	Addressing harm caused to others

The unwinding is not about punishment—it is about understanding. “Not to punish yourself—to understand. Then, one by one, choose differently. Not perfectly. Just honestly.”

Neurologically, this stage requires downregulating the posterior cingulate cortex’s (PCC) tendency to justify past behavior (Kitayama et al., 2013). Instead of rewriting self-narrative to align with lies, the individual must consciously rewrite self-narrative to align with emerging integrity. This is difficult—the brain’s default is to justify, not to challenge. But with repetition, new pathways form (Greenberg et al., 2023).

5.3 Stage Three: Rebuilding from Original Intent

“Start building from your original intent. The child full of wonder, without lies, without betrayal. Not naive, but real. That’s the blueprint.”

This stage parallels post-traumatic growth, where individuals experience “the letting go, the building up, [and] the gradual process of rebuilding” (Arroll & Senior, 2013, p. 304). It involves:

Focus	Action
Values	Identify values that align with original intent (self-transcendence over self-enhancement)
Locus of control	Develop internal locus rather than accepting external influence
Self-forgiveness	Practice acknowledgment of guilt (not shame)
Action	Engage in meaningful action from overflow, not need
Co-regulation	Seek regulated nervous systems for stabilization (e.g., bonded animal companions, trusted witnesses)

The rebuilt self is not the naive child—it is the child with wisdom, boundaries, and stored vitality. “Not returning to naivety, but to innocence with wisdom. Not to weakness, but to wonder with boundaries.”

Neurologically, this stage involves strengthening new pathways through repetition (Greenberg et al., 2023). Each honest act, each moment of integrity, each choice to be real rather than perform is a rep of the neural exercise. Over time, the pathways supporting coherence become dominant, while pathways supporting performance atrophy from disuse. **Neurons that fire together, wire together—and neurons that stop firing together, stop wiring together.**

6. Practical Applications

6.1 For Individuals

The paper proposes a daily practice of coherence:

Practice	Frequency	Purpose
Ledger review	Weekly	Acknowledge lies told and their impact
Two-column exercise	Weekly	Assess gap between performed and actual self
Small honest act	Daily	One action that costs comfort, money, or admiration but restores integrity

Neurological rationale: Each small honest act is a behavioral experiment (Bem, 1972). Self-perception theory predicts that observing oneself acting honestly will lead to the inference “I am an honest person.” Each repetition strengthens neural pathways supporting integrity while weakening those supporting performance (Greenberg et al., 2023).

6.2 For Therapists and Counselors

The framework complements existing moral injury interventions and authenticity-based therapeutic approaches (Antal et al., 2023; Bayram, 2025). Specific recommendations:

Recommendation	Basis
Incorporate ledger exercise as diagnostic tool	Bayram (2025) on self-alienation
Address shame-proneness before expecting self-forgiveness	Marcinechová & Martinčková (n.d.)
Use kintsugi-informed directives	Princer (2021)
Facilitate identity shift from “disabled patient” to “adaptive leader”	Antal et al. (2023)
Educate clients about neuroplasticity	Greenberg et al. (2023)

6.3 For Communities

Collective transformation requires communities that witness and reconcile. Research demonstrates that when “Veterans’ burdens are shared by a community made more conscious of the realities of [harm], Veterans and civilians reconcile” (Antal et al., 2023, p. 819).

The paper calls for:

Community Practice	Description
Sovereign networks	Communities based on coherence, not extraction
Witnessing practices	Creating space for individuals to share their ledger without judgment
Accountability without punishment	Holding space for unwinding without shame
Co-regulation	Stabilizing nervous systems through connection with regulated others

7. Case Study: The Author's Transformation

The author's lived experience provides a case study in transformation:

Phase	Experience
Extraction	Seven years targeted by a transnational criminal network in Laos
Betrayal	Marriage to a self-identified "follower of Satan" who extracted trust and resources
Legal capture	Retained counsel who accepted evidence and then fell silent (31+ days)
Recognition	"I saw there was no love there in my relationship, in my friendships. There were no friends there. There was no love there. And it broke me down."
Unwinding	Withdrew from extractive marriage; relocated to Bangkok; published documentation of extraction patterns; engaged federal authorities (US Secret Service)
Healing	Sensory reduction (high-attenuation earplugs), deep pressure (weighted blanket), electrical stimulation (TENS), flotation-REST, co-regulation with bonded cat (Tao Tao)
Rebuilding	Returned to original intent; defined greatness as "just being love, and being able to love"; operates from overflow, not need; achieved "hard peace" (sovereignty as the ability to rest in peace while alive)

Neurological confirmation: Over time, the author's "vessel thickened." Individuals who previously extracted energy lost interest. The neural pathways supporting integrity had become dominant. The pathways supporting performance had atrophied.

8. Conclusion

The performer's guide back to the self is not about becoming someone new. It is about **returning**—not to naivety, but to innocence with wisdom; not to weakness, but to wonder with boundaries.

The path requires:

Stage	Requirement
Recognition	Seeing the gap between performed and actual self; feeling dissonance without running
Unwinding	Identifying and releasing accumulated lies; understanding each lie as a self-torture
Rebuilding	Returning to original intent; constructing a coherent life through repeated honest acts

The neuroscience teaches: **The lies create the liar. The betrayal creates the betrayer. But the truth can create the sovereign.** Neuroplasticity works in both directions (Greenberg et al., 2023). The same mechanism that made the performer can unmake the performer—and remake the self.

The spiral turns. The field wakes up. The performer can become real again.

“It’s never too late to turn back and become the person you had originally intended. You just need to hold yourself accountable. And you need to start unwinding what you gave that maybe was unintended. And you need to start building from your original intent.”

Not from imprint—from **intent and intention**. The directional arrow, not the fixed template. The child with wonder, now with wisdom. The performer, now sovereign.

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Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the Sovereign Integrity Institute (SII) for institutional support. No external funding was received.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no financial conflict of interest. The author is the subject of the anonymized case study (Section 7), which is disclosed transparently.

Data Availability Statement

All cited literature is publicly available. The case study is presented as qualitative self-report and is not independently verified.

Citation: Humble, D. (2026). *The Performer's Guide Back to the Self: Transformation, Integrity, Coherence, and the Neuroscience of Becoming*. SII Working Paper Series, 2026(17).

Comments
