

*The 9:03 approach*

# Self-Authorship

*The science, the interpretation, and what it asks of you.*

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Most of us spend the first decades of life becoming very good at a script we never agreed to. The expectations of parents, institutions, culture, and the accumulated weight of other people's definitions of a good life — we absorb them so early and so completely that we mistake them for our own. The water we swim in. The air we breathe. The story we call ours.

The moment something ruptures that story — a loss, a diagnosis, a morning that stops the clock — we get the first clear look at it. Not because the script was wrong, necessarily, but because for the first time we can see it from the outside. And once you can see the water, you can decide whether you want to keep swimming in it.

That's the beginning of Self-Authorship. And it is only the beginning.

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## The Science

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### Robert Kegan and the orders of mind

The most rigorous framework for understanding how adults develop comes from Robert Kegan, a developmental psychologist at Harvard whose work spans four decades. In his landmark book *In Over Our Heads* (1994) and subsequent research, Kegan mapped adult development across five orders of consciousness — each representing a qualitatively different way of making meaning from experience.

For our purposes, three orders matter:

**The Socialized Mind** (3rd order) is where most adults spend most of their lives. Identity here is shaped by the definitions and expectations of others — family, culture, institution, profession. This isn't weakness; Kegan considered it a genuine developmental achievement. But the socialized mind cannot step back far enough from others' expectations to evaluate them. It is, in his phrase, made up by its surround.

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**The Self-Authoring Mind** (4th order) represents the shift most relevant to this work. Here the person generates an internal seat of judgment — their own values, standards, and ideology — that can evaluate and choose among external expectations rather than simply absorbing them. The self is no longer authored by its surround. It authors itself.

**The Self-Transforming Mind** (5th order) can hold its own self-authored system as one perspective among many — aware of the limits of any single framework, including its own. Kegan considered this rare, and the natural destination of a well-developed adult life.

*Source: Kegan, R. (1994). In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life. Harvard University Press. Evidence type: theoretical framework with longitudinal developmental research.*

A frequently cited finding from Kegan’s research: **roughly 58 percent of adults have not fully reached the self-authoring order of mind.** Most are navigating the demands of modern life — complex relationships, careers requiring independent judgment, questions of identity and meaning — from a developmental position not fully equipped to meet them. The gap between what life asks and what our current order of mind can provide is, in Kegan’s framing, the hidden curriculum of adult experience.

*Source: Referenced in Kegan, R. (2003) and multiple secondary analyses. Evidence type: cross-sectional survey data; exact figures vary by study population.*

### **Marcia Baxter Magolda and the three dimensions**

Building directly on Kegan’s framework, developmental researcher Marcia Baxter Magolda spent three decades studying how self-authorship actually develops across adult life. Her longitudinal research — tracking participants from college through midlife — identified three intertwined dimensions that must develop together for genuine self-authorship to take hold:

**Epistemological** — How do I know what I know? The capacity to evaluate evidence, sit with ambiguity, and generate one’s own conclusions rather than deferring to external authority.

**Intrapersonal** — Who am I? The capacity to hold a stable, self-defined identity that doesn’t collapse under social pressure or the expectations of others.

**Interpersonal** — How do I relate to others? The capacity for genuine relationship that doesn't require abandoning one's own values or identity to maintain connection.

Baxter Magolda's research showed that these three dimensions are inseparable: development in one without the others produces an unstable, partial version of self-authorship. Someone who has developed strong epistemological independence but not intrapersonal stability, for instance, can think critically but can't hold a consistent identity under pressure. All three have to move together.

*Source: Baxter Magolda, M.B. (2001). Making Their Own Way: Narratives for Transforming Higher Education to Promote Self-Development. Stylus Publishing. Evidence type: longitudinal qualitative research spanning 25+ years.*

She also identified four phases in the journey toward self-authorship: following external formulas, the crossroads, becoming the author of one's life, and internal foundations. The crossroads phase — the disorienting moment when external formulas stop working and internal authority hasn't yet been built — is the phase most relevant to the 9:03 work. It's where most clients arrive.

“Self-authorship is the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations.” — Marcia Baxter Magolda

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## What It Actually Means

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The phrase “self-authorship” can be misread as blank-page authorship — the idea that you invent yourself from nothing, write whatever story you want, start fresh. That's not what the research describes, and it's not what we mean.

You don't begin with a blank page. You begin with a manuscript that's already been written — by your family, your culture, your earliest formative experiences, the decade of messages about what success looks like and what kind of person you're supposed to be. Much of it was written with good intentions. Some of it was written by people who are no longer in the room. None of it was written by you.

Self-authorship is editorial, not generative. The work isn't to invent a new self from scratch. It's to read the manuscript carefully, decide what you're keeping and what you're setting down, and write the parts that aren't there in your own hand. That distinction matters: it means you're not abandoning who you are. You're taking authorship of it.

### **A note on the Peterson Self-Authoring Suite**

Jordan Peterson's Self-Authoring Suite is a writing-based exercise for surfacing past experience and articulating a future self. It has genuine utility, and it overlaps with this work in one important way: both take seriously the idea that articulating your story — putting it into words — is itself a developmental act. The research on expressive writing supports this (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016).

The 9:03 interpretation goes further in two ways. First, we treat the rupture moment — the 9:03 moment — as a developmental catalyst, not just a data point to be processed. The moment that breaks the inherited script open is the moment Self-Awareness becomes possible. You can't see the water until something changes it. Second, we hold Self-Authorship as a middle stage in a three-part arc, not a destination. The telos isn't a more intentional self. It's a self capable of transcendence — of pointing past itself toward something and someone beyond it.

*Source: Pennebaker, J.W. & Smyth, J.M. (2016). Opening Up by Writing It Down. Guilford Press. Evidence type: randomized controlled trials on expressive writing and wellbeing.*

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## **The 9:03 Interpretation**

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The Spiritual pillar in the 9:03 framework holds three positions: Self-Awareness, Self-Authoring, and Self-Transcendence. The sequence is the point. You cannot author a self you cannot see. And you cannot transcend a self you never built.

### **Self-Awareness — seeing the script**

The first move is not action. It's perception. Self-Awareness is the capacity to see the inherited scripts — the stories handed to you about who you're supposed to be, what success looks like, what kind of life is worth living.

Most people carry these without ever examining them. They feel like truth because they arrived before we had the language to question them.

The 9:03 moment — the rupture, the inflection point, the morning that rewrites the before and after — is what makes the script visible. Not because it destroys it, but because it creates enough distance to see it. You can't edit what you can't read. The moment gives you the manuscript.

### **Self-Authoring — taking the pen**

Once you can see the scripts, you face the actual work: deciding which ones to keep, which to set down, and how to write the parts that aren't there. This is Self-Authoring — Kegan's 4th order brought into lived practice.

It requires all three of Baxter Magolda's dimensions moving together. Epistemologically: being able to evaluate the scripts rather than just absorb them. Intrapersonally: holding a stable enough sense of self to withstand the discomfort of setting a script down. Interpersonally: maintaining real relationships without requiring them to validate every choice.

This is also where the individuality critique of self-authorship is most often raised: isn't this just a sophisticated form of self-centeredness? The answer is in the third position.

### **Self-Transcendence — the outward turn**

Self-Transcendence is what becomes possible only after the self is built. A person who hasn't yet authored their own life tends toward one of two failure modes: either they live entirely by others' scripts (the socialized mind) or, in reaction, they over-correct toward isolation and self-focus. Neither is transcendence.

Genuine transcendence — a life pointed past itself, toward something and someone beyond it — requires a stable self to transcend from. You can't give away what you don't yet have. The arc moves from awareness to authorship to transcendence, and it does not skip steps.

This is the quiet argument underneath the Spiritual pillar. Authorship sounds like it ends in the self — me, choosing me. It doesn't. A self worth building is one you can eventually give away.

*You cannot transcend a self you never authored. And you cannot author a self you cannot see.*

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## What This Asks of You

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The science describes a developmental journey. The 9:03 interpretation gives it a direction. But neither is worth much unless it turns into something you can act on. Three questions worth sitting with:

*Whose scripts am I currently living? Name them specifically — not “society’s expectations” but the actual people, institutions, and moments that wrote them.*

*Which scripts am I keeping on purpose, and which am I carrying by default? There’s no virtue in rejecting inherited values just because they’re inherited. The question is whether you’re choosing them.*

*What would a self-authored version of your life look like, concretely — not as a fantasy, but as the next honest choice you could make?*

These aren’t questions you answer once. They’re the questions a developing life keeps returning to — at each inflection point, each crossroads, each moment that hands you the manuscript and asks what you want to do with it next.

**The 9:03 Assessment** is designed to give you a read on where you are across the Four Pillars, including the Spiritual holdings. The five anchoring questions give you a frame for the reflection. And the coaching work, when you’re ready for it, is where the editorial work actually happens.

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### Key sources and further reading

Kegan, R. (1994). *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Harvard University Press.

Baxter Magolda, M.B. (2001). *Making Their Own Way: Narratives for Transforming Higher Education to Promote Self-Development*. Stylus Publishing.

Pennebaker, J.W. & Smyth, J.M. (2016). *Opening Up by Writing It Down*. Guilford Press.

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Baxter Magolda, M.B. & King, P.M. (2004). *Learning Partnerships: Theory and Models of Practice to Educate for Self-Authorship*. Stylus Publishing.