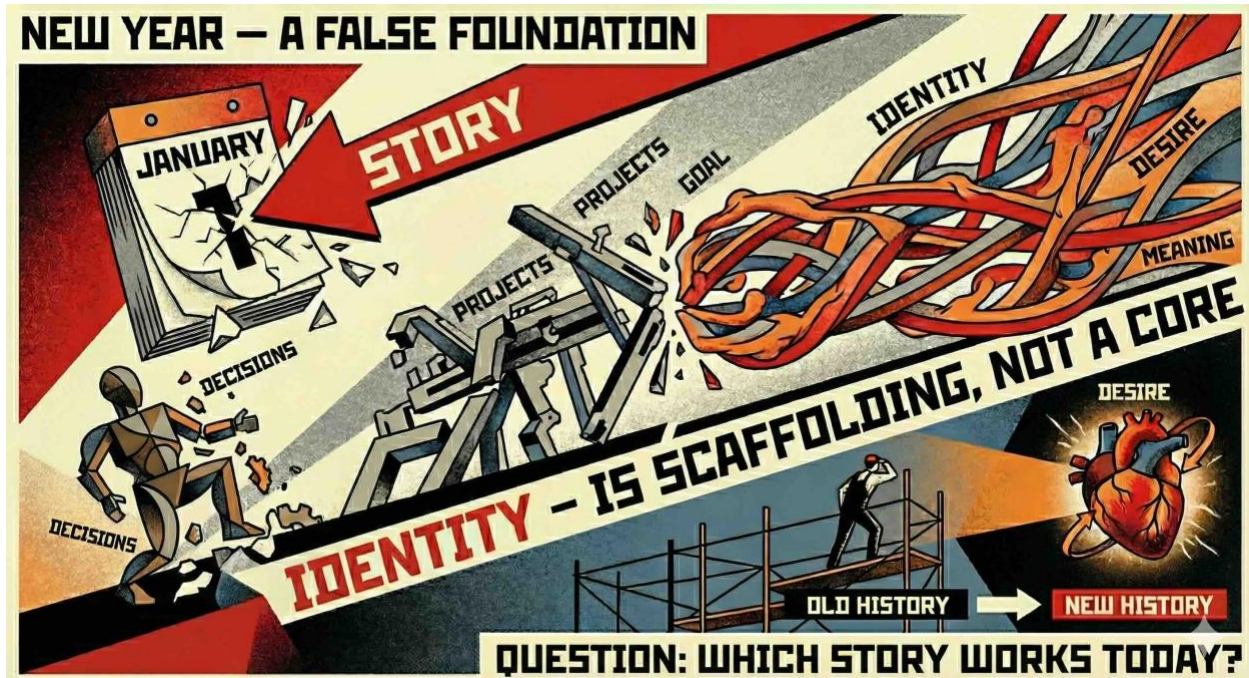


The January Illusion

On Stories, Desire, and the Architecture of Change

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Horses have a refreshing indifference to the calendar's psychological carnival. They do not care about end-of-year closure or setting the right goals for the year ahead. What they care about is whether our signals are coherent or confused. They tell us, in their own way, that it's the interaction, rather than our inner landscape, that determines whether the world feels stable.

Just before midnight on New Year's Eve, as the fireworks began, their attention sharpened, and they started moving nervously, trying to make sense of an event that arrived without context. I moved from pasture to pasture, standing beside them, scratching their necks, feeling their thicker winter hair through my fingers, trying to reassure them that it will pass. As the clamor faltered and the sky cleared, they became quiet and went back to eating, with that distinct, soft sound of a herd mulching hay.

We behave rather differently around fixed calendar milestones.

1. The Myth of the Right Decision

In the last few weeks many of us made the inventory of the projects we completed and the ones we did not quite finish, but somehow consider done anyway. We stored away a few great memories, sanitized to avoid controversy. Then, we considered the targets missed, the constant commuting, the personal sacrifices, the family events we skipped.

We also reflected on more consequential questions: What exactly have I been doing with my time? Does this year resemble the one I intended to live? And then, after a quick review of the various justifications we always concoct for ourselves, a familiar promise followed: *"In 2026, I won't make the same mistakes again."* We have new intentions, new protocols. *"This is who I am now. This year I'll make the right decisions."*

People treat this idea of the right decision as if it carried universal legitimacy, but once we move beyond the clichés, the category quickly dissolves under examination. What counts as a "right" decision? According to whom? In what context? At what stage of life? The rightness of the choice depends less on abstract virtue and more on the narrative architecture of the person deciding. This is the piece people forget: decisions are never independent events. They occur inside stories - stories we inherited, stories we improvised, stories that once served us and now may not, stories that belong to us and stories that belong to others.

2. The Stories We Tell

When we look at the year that just expired through this lens, we start to realize that the pressing question is not whether our decisions were right, but whether they made sense inside the story we believed we were living. And the harder inquiry - the one people resist, because it is often painful - is whether that story is still serves us.

Stories govern most of our behavior and our actions. They determine what we consider possible, what we consider forbidden, what we consider too late, too early, too ambitious, or too selfish. The calendar framework leads people to focus on whether these stories are accurate, rather than on what they do. But truth is rarely the useful measure. Stories are tools. The real question is whether they still guide, or whether they now confine. Whether they broaden our field of action, our capacity for growth, or narrow it. Whether they help us move forward or keep us repeating a version of life that might have already expired.

Consider a senior professional in their late forties who tells a story that sounds reasonable, even responsible: *"I've already taken my risks. Now it's time to be*

prudent." The story is not false. They did take risks earlier. They do have responsibilities now. By any factual standard, the narrative holds. But the question is not whether it is accurate. The question is what it does. In practice, the story redraws the map of possibility. Opportunities that would once have been evaluated on their merits are dismissed as too late. Learning curves are reclassified as too steep. Ambition is reframed as imprudence. Age becomes a verdict. Nothing in the story is false. Yet almost everything it produces is confining.

3. The Archaeology of Self

Faced with this kind of narrative impasse, where the inherited story has lost its usefulness but not its authority, many people reach for a different explanatory move: the ritual search for their "authentic self." As the new year begins, they dust off their fictional archaeologist's fedora and set out to locate some hidden, original identity buried beneath the layers of professional and personal roles, obligations, disappointments, and ambitions. This idea is appealing because it promises a revelatory truth that bypasses the complexity we just illustrated. Our brain, oriented toward survival, is only too glad not to waste energy.

Except identity doesn't work that way. There is no original, essential "me" waiting to be excavated on January 1st. What appears to us as identity is not a core but a construction, a scaffolding assembled from genetics, environment, social circumstances, events, unconscious fears and the negotiations we make every day. Yes, there are constant elements that make us unique and boundaries that limit what we can achieve. But this is not a concrete bunker. It's a flexible bamboo scaffolding that evolves because life evolves.

The insistence on recovering some pristine version of ourselves is one of the reasons this time of year feels burdensome: people interpret the fluidity of their own identity as evidence of failure instead of what it is - evidence of life. And the modern culture of purpose amplifies this confusion. Everywhere you look you encounter the same formula: find your why, clarify your purpose, rediscover your authentic self. These ideas have become so normalized that people forget to question the premise.

4. A New Purpose Won't Save You. Desire Might.

Purpose, properly understood, is not a discovery. It is a decision, a forward-oriented project defined by desire, context and constraints. Meaning operates in a different direction - it is retrospective, the narrative attempt to make sense of what has already occurred. What often happens in January is that people try to use purpose to fix meaning. They expect a new project to repair

an old story. But a forward action cannot achieve that. When people feel lost at these junctures it is often because they are trying to fix a meaning problem with a purpose tool. When purpose is asked to do this kind of work, it inevitably fails. And it is precisely in that failure, not in clarity, that something else begins to surface.

Which brings us to desire, the most disregarded element of this reflection. Contemporary advice tends to ignore desire. At most, it treats it as unreliable: too emotional, too impulsive, too subjective. Better, we are told, to rely on values, strengths, discipline, or motivation. Yet in my work, I have witnessed how it is almost always desire - especially around midlife - that reveals where action can take place.

Desire is neither craving nor a sanitized “follow your passion” platitude. Desire can be understood as the unconscious internal pressure that disrupts equilibrium when life becomes too narrow for its own well-being. Desire matters because the very act of pursuing it gives our life meaning. When we take it seriously, the world becomes larger. Time acquires density and experience becomes more textured and consequential. Whether the desire is achievable is secondary. The pursuit itself expands life. This is what we call meaning.

This insight often surprises people who approach January with a performance mentality. They promise themselves to work harder, optimize, refine, perfect, reach excellence - usually through a combination of new apps, elaborate spreadsheets, and strategic affirmations. But they often forget the most important question: in which direction? A life that feels stuck is rarely lacking in goals. Meaning does not arise from optimization, but rather from steering life in a moral direction, whatever that direction is for any of us. People wait for certainty before revising their lives. But certainty is the last thing that arrives. Desire shows up first. Movement comes next. Meaning assembles itself in hindsight. And the story adjusts in real time.

5. The Useful January Question

January offers an annual permission structure for something that should need no permission: the recognition that a life can be revised. The calendar is arbitrary. The impulse is not. When desire surfaces the option is always negotiation or suppression. Most people suppress. They wait for clarity, for the right time, for certainty. But clarity is retrospective. Desire shows up first, unannounced and inconvenient.

The useful January question is not *“What should I do?”* but *“What story am I operating inside, and does it still serve?”* The audit is narrative before it is

operational. Which desires have I been refusing to acknowledge? What confining explanations have I been defending? What opportunities am I dismissing because they don't fit a script I inherited years ago?

The revision begins there, in recognizing that the story that justified last year's choices may have expired before the calendar did. Whether we consciously participate in that revision or resist it is the only real decision January offers. We cannot think our way into a new life. But we can begin by questioning the story that's been thinking for us.