Want to Make a Change? Conjure Your ‘Possible Selves.’

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Years ago, as a young business reporter, I interviewed an advertising executive who ran a fast-food chain account. I was there to ask about the latest campaign. But when I sat down, he wanted to talk about writing fiction. He spent hours meeting with clients and crafting slogans, but he dreamed of being a novelist instead.

I remember thinking: Sure, you and everybody else.

A decade or so later, however, I was surprised to see the adman on TV, holding up his new book. James Patterson had morphed from advertising executive into best-selling author. He has since published more than 100 New York Times best sellers and co-authored books with the likes of Bill Clinton and Dolly Parton.

“Maybe I was delusional, but I never thought of myself as an advertising person,” he told me when I asked how he’d done it. “I always planned to be a writer. I hoped to be a writer. It was always in my head.”

Mr. Patterson’s ability to see himself as a writer illustrates a concept known as “possible selves.” It describes how people envision their futures: what they may become, or want to become, or even fear becoming.

The term, coined in 1986 by the social psychologists Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius, grew out of research on self-concept and self-perception. While self-concepts — “I am a kind person” or “I am a good parent” — are rooted in the present, the researchers found that people are also informed by ideas about what they might become and how they might change.

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