

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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