

THE WOMAN AHEAD OF YOU

Borrow from Her Before You Become Her



Geniene Azalea

ART EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

"There was no one to explain it to me. So I imagined someone who'd lived long enough to understand it herself." Geniene Azalea

I've been doing Future Self work most of my life without knowing it had a name.

When I was younger, I used to imagine the older version of me. I wondered who she'd become, what she knew that I didn't yet, and what she'd say if she could sit next to me for a while.

I loved reading and getting lost in the lives of the characters. Imagining older-me felt much the same. It gave me somewhere to go beyond whatever was happening that day, and reminded me there was more life coming.

I spent a lot of my childhood in my own little world. I learned quite young how to keep myself company, surrounded by adults and trying to make sense of things that felt too big for me. I didn't have the words for much of it then. I just liked the thought that somewhere ahead was a woman who had already got through the bit I was standing in.

She was me, obviously. But she knew more, and that was comforting.

Years later, I came across inner-child work and the idea of going back to meet a younger version of yourself. You imagine giving her the reassurance or protection she needed at the time. I could understand that. There were things I would have liked someone to explain to me when I was young.

Then I found myself wondering whether we could approach it from the other direction.

If I could look back at the girl I used to be with a little more understanding, what might an older version of me understand about the life I'm living now?

I'd been imagining her for years. Perhaps I could actually ask her something.



What would she make of the thing I was worrying about? Would she wish I'd got on with it sooner? Had she learned how to say no without spending the rest of the afternoon feeling guilty?

I knew I was using my imagination. I wasn't receiving instructions from a woman who could tell me how everything would turn out. But thinking about her gave me a bit of distance from whatever felt urgent, and sometimes that was enough to help me see it differently.

The question became: what can I borrow from her now?

If I imagined her being more confident, I wanted to understand what that confidence allowed her to do. There might be something I could try before I felt completely ready. If she valued her time, I could look at where I was giving mine away and whether I was happy about it.

That's when the idea became useful in my everyday life. I didn't have to wait years to try something she might already have learned.

There is a temptation with this work to get carried away and invent a woman with a perfect home, plenty of money and no difficult habits. You can give her a wonderful life and then feel worse about your own when you put the book down.

I don't want that for either of us.

The woman I'm interested in still feels like me. I want to learn from her without turning her into another person I have to impress. And I want to leave room for the possibility that she'll want different things from the ones I think matter so much today.

Through this book, we'll look at the life you're imagining and the one you're actually living. Some of the questions might bring them closer together. Others might make you reconsider what you want in the first place.

I'm writing this while making those choices myself. There are things I understand about my own behaviour and still have to work at changing. Imagining an older, wiser me doesn't get me out of doing any of that.



It does give me someone useful to consult.

The woman ahead of you will be living with some of the decisions you make today. It seems worth getting to know her, and considering what you might like to leave in her hands.



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I suggest reading the chapters in order the first time. We begin by imagining the woman ahead of you, then look at your life now and what might help you move towards the future you want.

At the end of each chapter, there are a couple of questions. You can write your answers down or just think about them as you go about your day. Some will be easy to answer. Others might bring up something you haven't properly considered before, so give yourself a bit of time with those.

The companion workbook gives you more space to explore the ideas through journalling, visualisation and practical exercises. If you're using it, read a chapter here first, then turn to the matching section when you're ready.

You'll also find research alongside the ideas. I've included it to explain some of the psychology behind the work and why it might be useful. It can't tell you exactly how your own experience will unfold.

You don't have to finish this in a weekend. If a chapter feels particularly relevant to something you're going through, stay with it for a while. There may be something you want to try before you carry on.

And you can come back. What you want from your life will change, and so will the way you answer some of these questions. I'd be interested to see what you wrote today beside what you might write six months from now. Keep your notes if you can.

THE LIFE SHE HAS CREATED



"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives."

Annie Dillard

I've created a life that younger versions of me would have found extraordinary. I've managed a band, run club nights, travelled the world and owned businesses and properties. I've stood in rooms full of people who had been brought together by something that once existed only in my imagination.

But I've also arrived somewhere beautiful and still felt low. I've fought for freedom, only to watch myself fill it with a whole new set of pressures. Getting the life you pictured doesn't necessarily change the woman standing in the middle of it.

Some of the things I wanted desperately turned out not to be what I was really after. What I wanted was the freedom to live a life that felt like mine. Being able to choose what I did with my time mattered more than having a life that other people thought looked good.

So now, when I imagine Future Me, I'm interested in how she feels on an ordinary day. I want to know what she takes pleasure in and what she's finally stopped making so difficult for herself.

Does she enjoy the life she's worked so hard to create? Or has she already found something else she needs to achieve before she'll let herself enjoy it?

I know how easily that happens. There is always another thing available if you want one. You reach something you once thought would make you happy, then almost immediately start looking past it.

I don't want to use my future as another excuse to put off living now.

That's worth keeping in mind when you picture the woman ahead of you. You might know where she lives and what she does for work, but what is it actually like to be her? When she wakes up in the morning, does she feel glad to be there?

Imagine an ordinary weekday in her life. Nothing special is happening. She has things to get on with, and at some point she'll have to decide what to have for dinner.

Start wherever she opens her eyes. Perhaps it's the bedroom you're in now. You don't have to move her to a house overlooking the sea, although you're welcome to if that's what you want. Just spend a little time inside the life, rather than admiring the view.

What does she do first?

Maybe she gets up before everyone else because she likes having an hour to herself. Or perhaps she's still asleep at ten because she works better at night and has finally arranged her life around that. There is no reason to give her



a five o'clock alarm simply because someone on the internet has decided successful people should be awake by then.

The details are useful because they make you consider what actually suits you. It's easy to say you want freedom. Once you imagine a morning with nobody telling you what to do, you have to decide how you'd like to spend it.

You might discover that you want more company than you expected. Or that, after years of being needed, you would love to finish a cup of tea without anyone asking you for something.

Let yourself have the honest answer. It doesn't have to be impressive.

As her day gets going, look at the work she's doing and how much room it takes up. She may be running a business, working for someone else, caring for her family or studying something she wishes she'd tried years ago. Perhaps she has retired and is getting used to having her time back.

Whatever she's doing, does the arrangement suit her?

I've had enough different kinds of work to know that the job title tells you very little about how a person feels doing it. You can love parts of your work and still be exhausted by the way you've organised it. You can be proud of what you've built and realise you've made yourself permanently available to everyone involved.

When I think about the rooms and events I've helped create, I know that bringing people together is something I care about. I want that in my life. I also want enough space to enjoy being part of it.

That is something worth noticing in your own picture. You may want to keep the work and change the conditions around it. Having help could make more difference than having a completely new career. Being paid properly might allow you to work fewer hours without spending every afternoon worrying about the money.



And money does matter. It is difficult to enjoy your day when you're scared about how you're going to pay for it.

There is nothing wrong with wanting more. A secure home, bills you can meet and some money left over can make an enormous difference to how you live. You don't have to pretend you'd be content without those things to prove you're grateful or spiritual.

But try to understand what you want the money to make possible.

Perhaps you want to stop having to consult your bank balance before accepting an invitation. You might want to help someone you love, take time away from work or know that an unexpected bill won't throw the whole month into chaos.

Those are things you can picture. They tell you more about the life you're after than an impressive number on its own.

There's another question here too. Would you feel comfortable having enough, or would the amount you needed keep rising whenever you got close?

I don't think we always know the answer until we notice what we've been taught about money. Some of us feel guilty spending it. Others feel guilty wanting it in the first place. Those feelings can follow you into a higher income, so it's worth considering how you would like your relationship with money to feel as well as how much you hope to have.

By the middle of her ordinary day, other people will probably have entered the picture.

Who has she spoken to? How did she feel afterwards?

Be careful about casting everyone you know now in a permanent role. They have lives and choices of their own. You can, however, think about the kind of company you want and how you hope to feel around the people closest to you.



"I want a partner" might mean you want affection and someone to share things with. It could also mean you're tired of carrying every responsibility yourself. Knowing which part is doing the work helps you understand what you're asking for.

The same is true of friendship. A full social diary can be lovely if you enjoy what's in it. If you spend the week hoping somebody will cancel, there may be something to reconsider.

You might picture her meeting a friend for lunch and being able to say what's actually going on. Or coming home to someone she feels relaxed around. Perhaps the pleasure is in having the house to herself for an evening, knowing there are people she can call when she wants company.

Your preferences may be different from the ones you've spent years trying to accommodate. Give them some room here.

As you follow her through the day, remember that she has to live it in her body.

We can be very quick to decide what the future woman looks like. We might give considerably less thought to whether she's tired all the time, whether she eats sitting down or whether she ever gets outside because she enjoys it.

Of course you can care about how you look. But I would also want to know whether she has the energy for the things she loves. Does she get enough rest? Is there movement in her life that she looks forward to? Can she enjoy a meal without turning it into an argument with herself?

Her circumstances will shape what is possible. Health, caring responsibilities and the need to earn a living don't disappear because you've imagined a nicer routine. The useful question is what would make daily life better within those circumstances, and where a bigger change might be needed.



By evening, you should have a clearer idea of what her time belongs to.

Has there been any space for something she simply enjoys? Reading, making things, listening to music, seeing someone who makes her laugh. Whatever it is for you.

These things can be easy to leave out of a future that has become a list of achievements. Yet they're often what we miss when we're too busy.

I can fill a life with plans. I've done it often enough. What I want to be more careful about is leaving room to experience the life those plans are supposed to give me.

So when I look at the woman ahead of me, I want to know whether she gets to enjoy what she's created. Whether she can spend an afternoon doing something for the pleasure of it without deciding it ought to become another project.

Some of what I want will take work, and some of it may change as I get older. But I don't want to arrive years from now and find that I've become very good at achieving things while still waiting to feel content.

I'd like to recognise a day I would actually enjoy living. That's where I'm starting with her.

The Psychology Behind This

Psychologists use the term episodic future thinking for imagining specific experiences that could happen in your future.

A review drawing on 48 research articles found that this kind of imagining helped people give more weight to longer-term benefits when making choices involving money or health. The effect was stronger when the imagined experiences were vivid, positive and relevant to the decision being made.

That gives us a reason to explore particular moments in a future life. It doesn't establish that imagining a whole day will produce the life you



picture. My use of it here is to help you understand what you want clearly enough to consider it when making choices now.

(Rösch, Stramaccia & Benoit, 2022)

A couple of questions to sit with

When you imagine an ordinary day in her life, which part do you most wish you could experience now?

Think of something you want her to have or achieve. What do you hope it will change about how her life feels?



MAKE HER REAL



"Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we're supposed to be and embracing who we are."

Brené Brown

If you've given the woman ahead of you a label maker, a spotless kitchen and a completely different personality, we might need to have another look at her.

It's easily done. You feel disorganised now, so she remembers every password and knows exactly where her keys are. You're tired of worrying what people think, so she couldn't care less. Whatever you're finding difficult, she has apparently sorted it.

You might admire her. I'm less sure you'd recognise her.



There is something quite revealing about the person we invent when we're fed up with ourselves. She can become a collection of corrections. Everything we've been criticised for has disappeared, along with a few things we secretly liked about ourselves before somebody made us feel awkward about them.

Perhaps you were told you talked too much, so you've imagined a woman who is always measured and composed. Would you actually enjoy being her? Or would you miss getting carried away in a conversation because something had caught your interest?

Being able to listen without interrupting could make your relationships better. You can learn that and still be enthusiastic. There's no need to remove all the enthusiasm while you're there.

The same goes for needing time alone. You might have spent years apologising for it, then imagined a future version of yourself who is delighted by every invitation. But if being around people wears you out sometimes, why would she suddenly want company every night?

She might simply have stopped arranging a social life that leaves her exhausted.

That's the sort of change I can believe in. I can imagine how it might happen, and I can see the person I know living with it.

I want you to feel some affection for the woman you're picturing. Enough that you would enjoy sitting down with her and having a proper conversation. You should be able to imagine what might make her laugh, or which subject would get her talking so much that you'd struggle to get a word in.

She may still have the odd habit that makes no sense to anyone else. She might occasionally need a day when nobody asks anything of her. Getting older and learning a few things doesn't oblige her to become endlessly agreeable.



Of course there will be things you hope to change. Some habits cause real problems, and you don't have to pretend you're happy with them. But be specific about what needs changing. If you keep agreeing to things you don't want to do, learning to answer honestly is a useful ambition. Deciding you must become a woman who never feels uncomfortable is going to be harder to work with.

I think we sometimes ask too much of her because we're so tired of struggling with something ourselves. We want to believe there will come a time when it never bothers us again.

I understand the appeal. When I imagined older-me as a child, part of what comforted me was the thought that she knew how things turned out. I could imagine her having answers that nobody around me seemed able to give.

Now I can look back and see that getting through something doesn't mean you come out knowing everything. There are things I understand much better than I once did, and others I still have to think my way through. I expect the woman ahead of me will be much the same.

You can get a sense of this by remembering yourself five or ten years ago.

Think of something that occupied a lot of your attention then. You know what happened afterwards. You might have changed your mind, found a way through it or learned to live with an outcome you hadn't wanted.

That earlier version of you didn't have any of that information. She was making decisions with what she knew at the time, just as you are now.

Yet you can probably still recognise her. You remember why she wanted something, even if you wouldn't choose it today. You might still laugh at the same things or feel strongly about something that mattered to her then.

Try allowing the same connection in the other direction. There will be differences between you and the woman you're becoming, but there is plenty of you for her to take along.



This is important because it's very easy to leave things for someone you don't really think about.

We can be remarkably generous with our future selves' time. She'll deal with the paperwork. She'll have the awkward conversation. Somehow, despite inheriting everything we've put off, she'll also have more energy than we do.

Poor woman. We've given her quite a lot to get through.

Sometimes postponing something is sensible. There are days when you have done enough and it can wait. But there are also things we keep handing forward because we would rather not think about them, while vaguely assuming that later we'll feel differently.

The date changes. The task is still there.

Making her feel familiar gives you a reason to consider what you're leaving her. You might be more inclined to deal with something if you can imagine the relief of having it behind you. You know that feeling already. There have probably been times when you've been grateful you'd prepared something earlier, especially when the day turned out to be more difficult than expected.

You were the person receiving the help then. You can be the one offering it now.

I like thinking about it this way because it gives care a place in something we so often approach through criticism. It's exhausting to keep telling yourself off in the hope that you'll eventually become someone you approve of.

If a friend had a difficult week ahead, you might ask whether there was something you could do to make it easier. You wouldn't need her to earn that consideration by becoming a more impressive person first.

Could you extend a little of that to yourself?



That might mean dealing with something you've avoided. It could also mean leaving yourself time to recover after a demanding day, rather than filling every available hour and hoping you'll cope when it arrives.

Her needs belong in the decisions you're making. So do yours. I don't want you to spend the whole of your present life preparing for a woman who is finally allowed to enjoy hers.

What interests me is whether you can begin treating her as someone whose wellbeing matters to you. Someone you know well enough to help sensibly, rather than burdening her with expectations she'd have no chance of meeting.

Let her keep enough of you that you feel pleased at the thought of becoming her. You have to want to spend your life with this woman.

The Psychology Behind This

Researchers use the term future-self continuity to describe how connected we feel to the person we will become.

Hal Hershfield and his colleagues explored this using digitally aged versions of participants' faces. Across four studies, people who interacted with representations of their older selves showed a greater tendency to choose financial benefits for later over immediate rewards.

Those experiments used digital images and financial decisions. Here, I'm drawing on the broader idea that making the future person feel more real may help us take her interests into account. Familiarity gives us something to work with beyond knowing, in theory, that we ought to think ahead.

(Hershfield et al., 2011)

A couple of questions to sit with

Which parts of yourself would you be sorry to lose while trying to become the woman you've imagined?

If you cared for her as you would a friend, what would you take into account that you're overlooking now?



WHO ARE YOU NOW?



"Your life leaves clues everywhere."

Geniene Azalea

There have been times when I've known exactly what I wanted and walked in the opposite direction anyway. I've gone back to things I knew weren't good for me, sometimes with a fairly clear idea of how I'd feel afterwards.

I did them anyway.

That is an uncomfortable thing to admit when you spend a lot of time trying to understand yourself. You would hope all that understanding would make you easier to manage. Occasionally it just means you can explain, in considerable detail, why you've done the same thing again.

I used to take it personally. If I knew better, why wasn't I doing better? I'd already had the realisation. I'd thought about it, understood where some of



it came from and decided what I wanted to change. What else was I waiting for?

I've become less interested in calling myself weak or undisciplined. Neither description tells me much about what actually happened. It certainly doesn't explain why I can manage something quite difficult in one part of my life while avoiding something much smaller somewhere else.

To understand that, I have to look more closely.

So far, we've spent time with the woman ahead of you. You might be getting quite fond of her. But she can also become a lovely distraction if thinking about her means you never have to look properly at yourself.

Who are you at the moment? How are you actually living?

It's surprisingly difficult to answer without immediately adding what you intend to do about it. You start describing your week and find yourself explaining that it's been unusually busy, that you'll have more time soon, that once this particular thing is over you'll get back to what matters.

All of that may be true. Some periods of life are demanding, and getting through them takes most of what you've got. But I would be curious about anything you've been calling temporary for three years.

At some point, it deserves a proper look.

Imagine someone spending a month alongside you. They can see what you do, but they can't hear your thoughts. They don't know about the work you're planning to start or the conversation you've been rehearsing. They have no access to the version of you who intends to do everything differently from Monday.

They see you living.

They notice what gets your attention, which tasks you return to and what you keep moving to another day. They hear you agree to things and see how you feel when it's time to do them.



Their account would be incomplete, of course. Watching you work long hours wouldn't tell them whether you loved your job or needed every penny. Seeing you collapse on the sofa wouldn't reveal what it had taken to get through the day. Your circumstances belong in the picture.

Still, there might be something useful in what they noticed.

Perhaps you say you never have time to write, yet most evenings you spend an hour looking at things on your phone that you barely remember afterwards. That doesn't automatically mean writing is unimportant to you. It raises a question about what happens when the opportunity arrives.

You sit down intending to begin. There is a message to answer first. While you're there, you check something else, then remember a small job you've been meaning to do. By the time you open the document, you're tired and the evening feels nearly over.

"I'm hopeless at sticking to things" is one account of that evening.

A clearer account would tell you when you sat down, what interrupted you and whether you knew what you were going to write. It might reveal that you keep leaving difficult work until the point in the day when you have the least energy for it.

You could also discover that you had time and energy, but starting would have meant finding out whether the idea was any good. That's worth knowing too.

The explanation matters because different problems need different responses. A woman who needs help with her workload is going to get very little from another lecture about commitment.

This is why I want you to be accurate when you look at yourself. You can take responsibility for a choice without turning it into an insult.

I've done enough things in my life to know that one unhelpful description can't account for all of me. I've built businesses and brought people together

around ideas that took work to make happen. I've also left things unfinished and made choices I regretted. If I only describe myself through the second part, I'm leaving out evidence.

You probably do that somewhere too.

You might call yourself unreliable while being the person everyone depends on. Perhaps the commitments you struggle to keep are the ones nobody else will notice you breaking. That is more specific, and it gives you something to examine.

Or you say you never finish anything, although you finish plenty of things at work. What is different there? You may have a clear deadline, someone to ask when you're stuck, or a task that has already been broken down for you.

Those details can be easy to miss when you've decided the problem is your personality.

Your surroundings deserve some attention as well. If you always sit in the same place and open the same app, you may find yourself doing it before you've considered how you'd like to spend the evening. A routine can carry on long after you've decided you're tired of it.

The people around you also help establish what feels normal. There may be someone you can talk to about an idea and leave feeling able to explore it. Someone else might make you feel foolish for mentioning it at all.

Notice whose reaction you anticipate before you've even made a decision. You don't have to make a dramatic judgement about the relationship. It is enough, for now, to recognise how much influence it has.

As you look through all of this, include what is going well. Otherwise you'll end up with a very selective account of your life.

When do you find it easier to get on with something? Who can you be honest with? There may already be an arrangement that suits you, or a habit you established so long ago that you've stopped giving yourself any credit for it.



I think that last part is easily overlooked. We become so occupied with whatever still needs work that we treat everything we've learned as though it came naturally.

You weren't always able to do everything you can do now. Some of it took practice. Some of it took a mistake you would rather not repeat. Those are worth remembering when you're trying to understand what you're capable of.

For this chapter, I would leave the grand conclusions alone. You don't need to decide what kind of woman you are based on a disappointing week.

Try to describe what is happening clearly enough that you could explain it to someone who wanted to help. "I keep putting this off because I don't know where to begin" gives them somewhere to start. "I'm useless" leaves them having to argue with you before you can get anywhere.

I'd like you to offer yourself the same chance.

You may find that there is less to change than you thought. You may find something you've been reluctant to acknowledge. Either way, you'll have a clearer starting point than the one you get from promising that next week you'll somehow be a different person.

The Psychology Behind This

David Neal, Wendy Wood and their colleagues studied how habits are triggered. Across two studies, they found that strongly habitual responses were influenced by familiar situations associated with doing them before, while current goals had relatively little influence. People's explanations of their habits did not always match what appeared to be driving them.

That helps explain why deciding you want something different may leave an established routine running much as before. When you examine a repeated behaviour, the situation around it is worth looking at alongside your intentions. It may show you something that another judgement about your character would miss.



(Neal, Wood, Labrecque & Lally, 2012)

A couple of questions to sit with

Where does the way you actually spend your week differ from the way you keep describing it? What circumstances would someone need to understand before drawing conclusions?

Choose one label you regularly give yourself. What would a more precise description of your behaviour reveal, including the occasions when that label doesn't fit?



THE WOMAN YOU DON'T WANT TO BECOME



"Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you."

Anne Lamott

There have been periods in my life when I partied more than was good for me. I spent a fair amount of energy afterwards arguing with myself about what that meant about me, which didn't leave much energy for doing anything useful about it.

What worried me was how much of my life it could take up.

I could picture a woman whose world had become organised around the same pattern. More mornings dealing with the night before. Less

follow-through on things she cared about. Plenty of ideas, still, but always waiting until she felt better before she did anything with them.

I recognised enough of her to know I needed to pay attention.

I've seen another version of her in the way I can keep planning something new instead of finishing what's already in front of me. A new idea is exciting. There is so much possibility in it, and none of the tedious work has happened yet. I can feel busy and enthusiastic while the thing I said mattered is still sitting there, nearly done.

Given enough time, I could become a woman with a great many plans and a lot of explanations for why they never happened.

That possibility bothers me.

We've spent the first part of this book considering a future you would like to live. There is also the question of what might happen if the patterns you're concerned about continue.

You probably don't need to invent anything dramatic. The first signs may already be familiar.

Perhaps there is a resentment you return to so often that it has started appearing in conversations that have nothing to do with it. You have good reasons to be hurt. But you might also be worried about how much of your attention that person or event could still be receiving years from now.

Or there is something you keep postponing until your circumstances are easier. It matters to you, and you fully intend to give it a go. Yet each year brings another reason to wait, and you're beginning to wonder whether you'll ever feel ready enough to begin.

The uncomfortable part is that a life can carry on like this without anything happening that forces you to reconsider it. You can manage. You can explain it. People around you may think you're doing perfectly well.

Meanwhile, something you wanted has been getting less of your time.



I think it's worth looking at that possibility while there is still something you can do about it. You don't have to wait until the consequences become impossible to ignore.

But be fair to the woman you're imagining. She may have spent years coping with circumstances that wore her down. You know some of what she's carrying because you're carrying it now. If all you can offer her is contempt, you may find it difficult to look at her honestly.

I know that judging myself kept me occupied with whether I was a good or bad person. A more useful question was whether I wanted to keep living with the effects of what I was doing.

That brought me back to things I could actually identify. How I felt the next morning. What I hadn't followed through on. How often I'd promised myself that next time would be different.

You can understand why a pattern developed and still decide its cost has become too high. You may also need help changing it. Recognising a problem doesn't mean you should already know how to deal with it alone.

For now, try to stay close to what you have evidence for. One difficult week doesn't tell you how the rest of your life will turn out. An imagined future can become unsettling very quickly if you let every worry count as a prediction.

Look instead at something that has been happening repeatedly. What has it already cost you? If it continued, what else might become difficult?

For me, the thought of all those ideas remaining ideas is uncomfortable enough. I don't have to imagine my entire life falling apart to know I want to finish some of them.

The woman you don't want to become can help you recognise what you still care about. There would be no disappointment about the unwritten book if writing it meant nothing to you.

I want to take that concern seriously while I can still do something with it. I'd rather admit that a pattern is taking more from me than I want to give, even if I haven't yet worked out exactly how to change it.

The Psychology Behind This

In 1986, psychologists Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius introduced the concept of possible selves. They described how our ideas about who we could become, including futures we hope for and futures we fear, can influence motivation and how we understand ourselves now.

That is the idea I'm drawing on here. Considering an unwanted future may help clarify why a current pattern concerns you. The theory doesn't make that future inevitable or establish that scaring yourself will produce change. I find it valuable as a way to notice something I want to address.

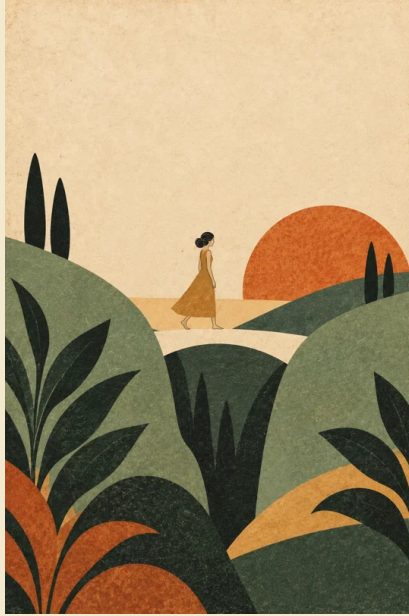
(Markus & Nurius, 1986)

A couple of questions to sit with

If a pattern you're concerned about continued for another five years, what might become harder to change than it is today?

What does your concern about that future tell you about something you want to protect or make time for?

THE GAP BETWEEN YOU



"I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better."

Maya Angelou

I've worked in recruitment, magazines, sales, radio, hotels and public relations. I've built businesses and started projects alongside them. I also opened a bar that fell on its face within three months, which probably taught me more than some of the things that went well.

Over time, my work moved into sound, meditation and the rather strange business of earning a living from parts of myself I'd once kept separate.

Written down like that, it sounds fairly straightforward. A few changes of direction, each leading conveniently to the next.

Living it was considerably less tidy. There were sleepless nights and risks taken without much confidence. There were periods when I genuinely

didn't know whether I'd made a mistake. The explanation I can give you now wasn't available to me while I was doing it.

That's easy to forget when you look at someone who has already made a change you want to make. You meet her after she's worked some of it out. She can tell you what happened in a few sentences, and you compare that account with everything you still don't know.

We can do something similar with the woman ahead of us.

She's living differently, so we assume she must possess something we haven't got. Confidence, probably. More discipline. Some understanding of how life works that we're still waiting to acquire.

Then we look at the whole distance between us and wonder how on earth we're supposed to cross it.

The problem is that we've bundled everything together. A different job, more money, better relationships, a home we enjoy being in. Each might involve several changes, yet we're treating the lot as one enormous task.

I'd feel overwhelmed too.

It helps to choose one difference and get curious about what it actually involves.

Suppose you've imagined a woman who earns a living from work she cares about. She has people willing to pay her, and enough coming in to support herself. You would love to be in that position.

From where you are now, the difference might look like confidence. She seems comfortable telling people what she does. You're still awkward about mentioning your idea.

But before deciding that confidence is the missing ingredient, look at what she knows how to do.

She may have learned a skill you haven't learned yet. She may understand what people need because she's spent time asking them. Perhaps she's tried



several versions of the work and discovered which one she enjoys enough to keep doing.

Those are things you could investigate.

You might already know how to do the work, but have no idea how to find the people who want it. That would give you a different starting point. Another qualification might feel reassuring while doing very little about the actual problem.

Or you know what is needed and genuinely don't have the time or money available. Then the circumstances need attention. It would be unfair to keep treating a practical limitation as evidence that you don't believe in yourself enough.

When you separate these things, you can begin to see what kind of help would be useful.

Someone could show you a skill. You could find out what something costs. You might need to ask for support or make room in your week before taking on anything new. Each gives you a clearer question than "Why am I not there yet?"

Some answers will be less complicated than you expected. Others may reveal that a change will take longer than you'd hoped. At least you'll be working with something you can understand.

I've had enough plans go differently from what I imagined to be wary of pretending every gap can be closed quickly. There are things you learn only after you've started, including whether you still want what you thought you wanted.

Opening the bar gave me information that imagining myself owning one could never have given me. I wouldn't call it a success because I learned something. It failed. But that experience became part of what I knew when I considered other work.

You bring that kind of knowledge with you, even when the circumstances change.

When I moved towards sound and meditation, I was also bringing years of working with people, communicating ideas and getting things organised. There was plenty to learn, but I hadn't arrived without any experience.

Look for what you already have that could serve you in the life you're imagining.

You might be good at making people comfortable, although you've never considered that a skill. You may know how to organise a complicated event, negotiate something difficult or keep going through an uncertain period.

It is possible to overlook these abilities because they developed somewhere you now want to leave. A job can have stopped suiting you and still have taught you things worth taking with you.

The same is true of your life outside work. You may have spent years managing responsibilities that required patience and judgement, then describe yourself as having nothing to offer because none of it came with a certificate.

Be accurate about what you still need to learn. Give yourself credit for what you already know as well.

There is also the question of which change to begin with.

Some differences have more influence than others. If you're exhausted most of the time, adding another demanding goal may be difficult until you've addressed what is wearing you out. If you're uncertain about a decision because you're missing information, finding that information could save you months of going over it in your head.

You don't have to give every part of your future equal attention today.

I'd start with something that would make another step possible. It might be modest enough that nobody else would consider it much of an achievement. You would know why it mattered.

That first experience can also change what you believe you're capable of. If you've never asked someone to pay for your work, doing it once gives you something more useful than another afternoon wondering whether you could. Whatever the answer, you'll know more about that conversation than you did before.

Confidence can develop through becoming familiar with the work involved. You don't have to feel capable of the entire future before you find out how to do one part of it.

When I look back at my changes of direction, I can see connections that weren't obvious at the time. While I was in the middle of them, there was usually something much nearer that needed my attention.

That's where I would look now, at the part of the gap you can name clearly enough to begin working on. You may need to learn something, get help or finally make a decision. Once you know which, you can give it the attention it actually needs.

The Psychology Behind This

Psychologist Albert Bandura used the term self-efficacy to describe our belief that we can carry out the actions needed in a particular situation. His theory identified experience of successfully doing something as an important source of that belief.

This is more specific than feeling generally confident. You can trust yourself in one area and feel unsure in another because you have different amounts of experience in each.

For this chapter, the practical implication is that a manageable step can do more than move a task along. Successfully doing it may also help you feel



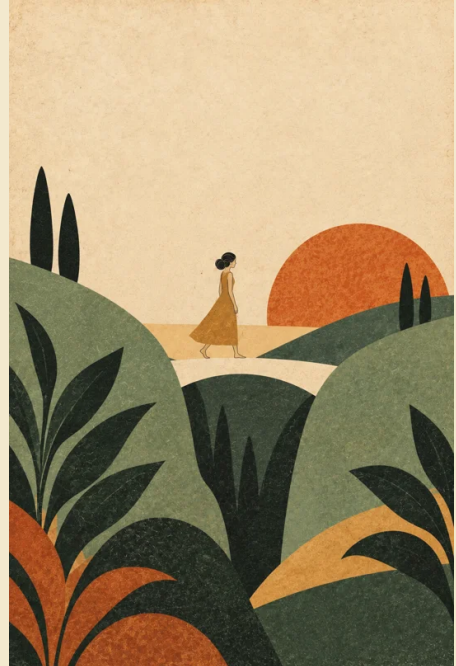
able to attempt the next part. That belief still needs to sit alongside the skills, resources and support the situation requires.

(Bandura, 1977)

A couple of questions to sit with

Choose one difference between your life now and the life you've imagined. What does it actually require, and which parts could you find out more about?

What experience or ability do you already have that could help? What would be a good first opportunity to put it to work?



BORROW FROM HER BEFORE YOU BECOME HER



"Understanding a pattern and interrupting it are two different skills."

Geniene Azalea

You've written the message. It says what you need to say.

Then you read it again and wonder whether it sounds a bit blunt. You add an explanation. Then an apology, although you're not quite sure what you're apologising for. By the time you've finished, the person receiving it could be forgiven for having no idea what you actually want.

Somewhere in that process, the woman ahead of you might have been useful.

You could imagine her reading the first version. Would she think it was unreasonable? Would she add all those explanations, or would she be satisfied that you'd been clear and considerate?

You still have to decide what to send. But taking a moment to consider her perspective may help you notice where you're changing your answer to manage somebody else's reaction.

That's what I mean by borrowing from her. You bring something you associate with her into a decision you're making now. It could be a belief she holds, a standard she lives by or the courage to do something you've been avoiding.

You don't need her entire life to try one part of it.

Borrow Her Beliefs

I don't find much point in repeating a sentence I don't believe while another part of me argues back.

You can tell yourself you're successful fifty times before breakfast, but if you're also thinking about everything that hasn't worked, you may simply have given yourself something else to disagree with.

I'm more interested in the beliefs you use without necessarily noticing them.

You might believe that earning money should involve doing something difficult or unpleasant. Enjoying the work can then make charging for it feel slightly suspect. You know perfectly well that you have bills to pay, yet you find yourself explaining why the price isn't lower.

Or you believe a good person should be available when someone needs them. It sounds reasonable until being unavailable for an afternoon starts to feel like a failure of character.

What would the woman ahead of you think about that?

If she's earning a living from work she enjoys, she has probably found a way to accept that enjoyment doesn't remove its value. If she has time for herself, she may believe that being a caring person allows for some hours when nobody can reach her.

Those beliefs have practical consequences. You can hear them in the way she speaks and see them in what she agrees to do.

I've had to reconsider the belief that a sensible life is necessarily a conventional one. Moving towards work that felt more like me meant taking parts of myself seriously that I'd previously kept separate. Seeing people respond to that work helped. It gave me something to consider beyond whether the whole thing sounded sensible when I explained it.

You may not be able to make yourself believe something immediately. You can, however, become curious about the old belief and stop accepting it without question.

If you believe saying no makes you selfish, consider whether you apply that rule to everyone. When a friend can't do something for you, do you decide she's a terrible person? Or do you generally accept that she has a life of her own?

Your answer might reveal that you've been living by a rule you wouldn't impose on somebody else.

Borrowing a belief begins there for me. I can try giving myself the same consideration and see what happens. I don't have to announce that I've completely changed my mind.

Borrow Her Standards

My work matters to me partly because I want it to be accessible. I don't want care and attention to be available only to people who can afford the highest price.

I also have to be able to keep doing the work.



Holding both of those things in mind asks more of me than simply being generous whenever somebody needs something. I have to consider what I can offer, what it costs me and whether the arrangement will still be workable in a few months.

This is where Future Me comes in, because I imagine her having learned to think a little further ahead. She can care about somebody's circumstances while being honest about her own capacity.

What standards would allow her to keep doing the things she values?

A standard might concern how she is treated, but it can also concern how she treats her own time. Perhaps she no longer agrees to work without understanding what is expected. She might make sure there is room to prepare properly instead of relying on herself to rescue everything at the last minute.

The details will depend on your life. What matters is being able to recognise the standard in practice.

"I respect myself" can mean almost anything. Knowing that you will ask for clarification when something feels unfair gives that belief somewhere to go.

There is a question of fairness towards yourself here too. If the standards you've imagined require you to be perfectly consistent, endlessly patient and productive every day, they may need revising.

You are allowed to have commitments that matter without treating every interruption as a personal failure. You can change a plan when circumstances change. The real distinction is whether you've made a considered decision or automatically assumed your own needs can wait again.

I want the woman ahead of me to take her promises to herself seriously. I also want her to make promises she has a reasonable chance of keeping.



Borrow Her Courage

I have moved countries, changed careers, started businesses and stood in front of rooms full of people.

I can still avoid sending one ordinary email for a week because I don't want the answer to be no.

That can feel ridiculous until I remember that being brave in one situation doesn't mean I will feel brave in all of them. Sometimes the thing other people find impressive is easier for me than a conversation they wouldn't think twice about.

So when I look to Future Me for courage, I try to be precise about what I'm asking her to help with.

Perhaps she can remind me that I have handled disappointment before. Or that feeling embarrassed won't necessarily stop me getting on with the rest of my day. I can imagine her looking back at the amount of time I've spent worrying about something that took ten minutes to do.

It helps to consider what comes afterwards.

When you're anticipating a difficult moment, it can occupy so much of your attention that you forget there will be a day beyond it. You will still have ordinary things to get on with. You might need time to recover, or help dealing with the outcome, but the moment itself will eventually be over.

I find that perspective useful. It gives the thing a place in my life instead of allowing it to fill the whole of it.

You might also ask what would help you attempt it. Courage can include preparing what you want to say, taking someone with you or choosing a manageable first attempt.

There is no particular virtue in making everything as difficult as possible.



The woman ahead of you may be more willing to ask for support than you are now. If that's something you admire in her, you can borrow it too.

Borrow Her Decisions

Some of the decisions that have mattered most in my life were made while I was still uncertain.

I would have preferred to know how they would turn out. I've spent plenty of time circling an answer, hoping to find a version where nobody was disappointed and I couldn't possibly regret it later.

There is a limit to how much thinking can give you.

You can gather information and consider the consequences. You can speak to people whose judgement you trust. Eventually, though, there may still be something you can't know until you've chosen.

The woman ahead of you can help you think about what matters beyond the immediate discomfort of deciding. She can't supply information you don't have, and imagining her approval doesn't make a choice automatically wise.

What she offers is a different perspective.

If you're considering an opportunity, for example, you might be occupied with whether you feel ready. Thinking about the woman you hope to become could bring other questions into view. Does the work interest you? Would you like to learn what it requires? Can you meet the commitment involved?

You might discover that you want to try and are anxious about being seen as a beginner. You could also discover that the opportunity sounds impressive but has very little to do with the life you want.

Both are worth knowing before answering.

I've become interested in the question, "What would I be glad I did?"



It allows me to think beyond whether a decision feels comfortable now. I might be glad I had an honest conversation even if the response wasn't what I'd hoped for. I might be glad I asked for advice before making a commitment I didn't fully understand.

The outcome will still matter. But there can be something worth respecting in the way you approached it, even when events go differently from what you wanted.

Some decisions can also be tried on a smaller scale. You may be able to explore an interest before reorganising your life around it, or agree to something for a limited period before deciding whether to continue.

Future Me doesn't need every choice to become a test of my courage. I'd like to think she has learned when to take a chance and when to ask a few more questions.

Borrow From Her Now

After all this thinking, there should be something you can bring into the situation you're already in.

Perhaps you've realised that she would give herself time to consider a request. Or that she would ask for a conversation instead of spending another week guessing what someone meant.

Choose something that makes sense for your circumstances. It needs to be clear enough that you can recognise whether you've done it, and reasonable enough that you're willing to try.

You may feel awkward. You might phrase something badly or discover that the approach you imagined needs adjusting. That is part of finding out how it works in your actual life.

I've had plenty of moments when I understood myself and still repeated the behaviour. I know that insight can feel satisfying enough to mistake for

progress. Borrowing from her gives me a way to ask what that understanding might change the next time I'm faced with a choice.

She remains someone I'm imagining. I can revise my picture of her as I learn more.

For now, I want to take one thing I admire in her and find out what happens when I use it.

The Psychology Behind This

Daphna Oyserman's work on identity-based motivation explores how the way we understand ourselves in a particular situation can influence our choices. The identities that come to mind, and what they mean to us, can make certain actions feel more natural or relevant.

Borrowing from the woman ahead is my way of making that idea practical. Imagining how she approaches a situation gives you another way to consider your own response. Its value depends on whether it helps you choose an action that fits your values and circumstances.

(Oyserman, 2009)

A couple of questions to sit with

Which belief have you given the woman ahead of you that you struggle to allow yourself now? What would change if you took it seriously in one situation?

Where could you borrow one of her standards or a little of her courage this week? What would that look like in practice?

THE OBSTACLE BETWEEN YOU



"A dream never properly attempted gets to stay perfect indefinitely."

Geniene Azalea

I've wanted things to change while another part of me was getting something from them staying exactly as they were.

That is harder to admit than saying I didn't know what to do.

There can be comfort in a familiar situation, even when you're fed up with it. You know what to expect. You have explanations for why you're there. Other people know which part you play.

Changing it might improve your life and still cost you something you aren't ready to give up.



We tend to spend more time imagining what we'll gain. More freedom sounds wonderful. We may give less thought to the security we would have to manage without while establishing it.

Being honest sounds straightforward until the truth could disappoint someone whose approval matters to us.

If the future you want requires one of those changes, it's worth looking at the part you would rather skip.

Suppose you're used to being the person who helps. You would like more time for yourself, and you've imagined a future in which you aren't constantly stretched.

But helping may also be one of the ways you feel valued. People thank you. They trust you to sort things out. You know where you stand when you're needed.

Making yourself less available could leave you with an uncomfortable question about what your relationships will be like when you aren't doing quite so much.

You might be worried about somebody's reaction. You might also miss the satisfaction you get from being useful.

That doesn't mean you secretly want to be exhausted. It means the arrangement has been giving you something as well as taking something from you.

Once you recognise that, the difficulty makes more sense.

You can then consider how to preserve what matters without continuing the whole arrangement. You may want to remain generous while being clearer about what you can offer. You might need to discover whether a friendship has room for you when you need something too.

There could be an awkward period while you find out. Wanting the eventual change doesn't mean you'll enjoy every part of getting there.



For me, another uncomfortable possibility is that trying properly would give me an answer.

While something remains an idea, I can imagine it working beautifully. I can picture what I might create and how people might respond. Once I put it into the world, other people get a say.

They might not like it. They might barely notice it. I might discover that I don't enjoy the actual work as much as I enjoyed thinking about it.

Keeping it unfinished postpones all of that.

I wouldn't assume every delay means fear of failure. Sometimes you're tired, missing information or trying to do more than your circumstances allow. But if you've been preparing for a very long time, it's worth asking what you would have to find out by beginning.

"I need more confidence" may be part of the answer. Confidence to do what, exactly?

If the difficult moment is showing your work to somebody, then you have something specific to consider. Who could you show it to first? What sort of feedback would help? How much exposure are you willing to manage while you're learning?

You can prepare for that more usefully than you can prepare to become a person who never worries about judgement.

There are practical obstacles too, and they deserve practical answers. If you need childcare, training or money you don't currently have, those are real requirements. Understanding your feelings about a goal won't make them disappear.

Sometimes several difficulties are tangled together. You may need support and also feel embarrassed about asking for it. There could be information you don't have, alongside a reluctance to hear an answer that would require you to rethink the plan.



Try to distinguish what needs arranging from what you will have to feel.

A conversation can resolve uncertainty about a course or a job. It may not remove the sadness of leaving something familiar. You can have good reasons to change direction and still feel attached to the life you've known.

I've had to accept that there may be no version of a decision in which I keep everything I like about the present and gain everything I want from the future.

Some things won't fit together. That can be disappointing even when the choice is right for you.

This is where the woman ahead of you can help again. Imagine that she has made the change you're considering. What would she remember as the difficult part?

Perhaps it was the first few conversations. Perhaps it was adjusting to having less certainty, or being inexperienced at something after years of knowing what she was doing.

Looking from that angle may help you identify what you need to prepare for. You might decide to move more gradually, ask for help or change the plan. You may even decide that this particular goal doesn't matter enough to justify what it requires.

That's a valuable discovery too.

What I want to avoid is spending years saying I want something while refusing to look at any of the conditions attached to it.

If I know what I'm reluctant to face, I can make a more honest decision. I can consider whether I'm willing, whether I need support and what would make the attempt manageable.

The obstacle becomes easier to work with when I can describe it plainly. Then I have something to prepare for when that moment arrives.



The Psychology Behind This

Mental contrasting involves considering a desired future alongside the present obstacle that could prevent it. Researchers have also studied it in combination with specific plans for responding when difficulties arise.

A 2021 meta-analysis covering 21 studies and 15,907 participants found that this combined approach had a small to moderate positive effect on achieving goals. The authors noted possible publication bias, meaning the true effect could be smaller.

The practical point here is to consider what could interfere with a goal while deciding how to pursue it. Naming an obstacle gives you something to plan for. The next chapter takes that into the moment when you need to act.

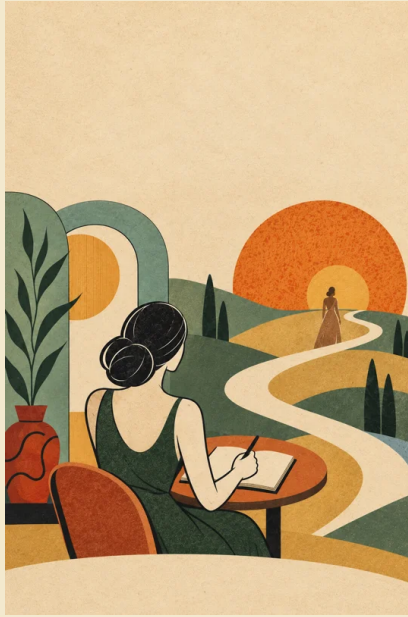
(Wang, Wang & Gai, 2021)

A couple of questions to sit with

What does keeping things as they are allow you to avoid, or allow you to keep?

Which part of the change needs practical support, and which part involves discomfort or uncertainty you may have to make room for?

LET HER LEAVE YOU INSTRUCTIONS



"First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do."

Epictetus

Sunday-night-you is very wise.

She's had a bath. She's thought about her values. She's decided, calmly and with real conviction, that from now on she's going to have better boundaries.

Wednesday-afternoon-you has never met this woman.

Wednesday-afternoon-you has eleven tabs open, somebody has just asked her something, and she's already said yes before she's finished reading the message.

It's easy to make a decision when nothing is testing it. You can think clearly about how you'd like to behave, especially when you're imagining a version of yourself with plenty of time to consider her response.

Then the actual situation arrives. Someone is waiting for an answer. You're tired, distracted or caught off guard, and you do whatever you usually do.

By the time you remember what you intended, you may already have agreed to spend Saturday doing something you didn't want to do.

This is where a specific instruction can help.

In psychology, it's called an implementation intention. The basic structure is simple:

If this happens, then I will do that.

You identify a situation you're likely to encounter and decide how you want to respond before you're in it.

One of mine is:

"If somebody asks me to make a plan, I'll say I need to check my diary and get back to them."

It gives me time to consider the invitation properly. I can check whether I'm free, whether I want to go and whether I've already filled the days around it.

I can still say yes. I just have a chance to think before the answer comes out of my mouth.

A sentence like that does more for me than a general promise about having better boundaries. It tells me what to say at the point when I usually forget I have a choice.



Think about the woman ahead of you and the situations she has learned to handle. You might imagine her being calmer or more considered, but there will be something she actually does that helps.

Perhaps she pauses before replying. She may ask a question when she's unsure what someone means. There could be a particular time when she stops working because she knows that continuing will leave her too tired to do much the following day.

What instruction could she leave you for a moment you know is coming?

The more familiar the situation, the more specific you can be. You've probably been there enough times to know where your intentions tend to disappear.

One of my own instructions concerns new ideas.

"When my brain produces five new projects in an afternoon, I write them down and carry on with what I'm already doing."

I don't want to stop having ideas. I enjoy that part of myself. But an idea being good doesn't make it today's instruction.

Writing it down means I can return to it. I don't have to abandon the thing in front of me to prove the new one matters.

Without that arrangement, I can spend a great deal of time beginning things. The work that's already under way then has to compete with something that hasn't had the chance to become difficult yet.

I know I'm easily distracted. Having a plan for that beats being surprised and disappointed every time it happens.

Your instruction needs to describe something you can actually do. "If I get distracted, I'll be more disciplined" leaves you with another decision to make. You still have to work out what being disciplined means in that moment.



You could decide to put your phone in another room when you sit down to work. Or, if you remember an unrelated task, write it somewhere you can find later and return to what you were doing.

There is a point at which you can recognise the situation, followed by an action you understand.

It also needs to be reasonable. If the response you've chosen requires more energy or time than you're likely to have, you'll probably keep avoiding it. Then the plan itself can become another thing you feel bad about.

I would start with one recurring situation. Something that causes enough trouble to be worth addressing, but is clear enough for you to notice when it happens again.

You can leave yourself a reminder where you're likely to need it. A note beside your screen will do more good than a page of good intentions tucked away in a notebook you rarely open.

And you can adjust the instruction after trying it.

Perhaps you notice the situation too late. Perhaps the response sounded sensible when you wrote it but feels unnatural when you say it aloud. You might need different words, an earlier reminder or a smaller action.

That gives you something to change in the plan.

If you forget and do what you normally do, look at where it happened. There may still be a chance to correct course. If there isn't, you have more information for next time.

The woman ahead of you doesn't have to leave pages of advice. One sentence that helps at the right moment could be enough to make a difference to your day.

Sunday-night-you can think about what matters and choose the words. Wednesday-afternoon-you has quite enough going on. It would be kind to have something ready for her.



The Psychology Behind This

Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran reviewed 94 independent tests of implementation intentions. They found that specific plans linking an anticipated situation with a chosen action had a medium to large positive effect on goal achievement overall.

The practical value is in deciding when and how you will respond. A plan gives you something to recognise when the situation appears, along with an action you've already considered. It can help you follow through, while still leaving room to adapt when circumstances require it.

(Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006)

A couple of questions to sit with

In which recurring situation do you most often forget what you intended to do?

What simple response could you decide on beforehand, and where would a reminder be useful?

FUTURE EVIDENCE



"For the great doesn't happen through impulse alone, and is a succession of little things that are brought together."

Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo, 1882

There's a particular pleasure in imagining a future version of yourself.

For a few minutes, everything feels settled. You can almost feel the weight of it lifting. Then the ten minutes end, and you're back exactly where you started, only slightly more smug about it.

I do believe in spending time with the woman ahead of you. Otherwise, this would be a rather odd book to have written. But sooner or later, something in your actual life needs to show that you've been listening to her.

That can be harder to recognise than you might expect.

Perhaps you've always found it difficult to admit when you're struggling. Then one afternoon, before things become completely unmanageable, you ring somebody and ask for help. Afterwards, you feel embarrassed. You wish you'd sounded more together. By the evening, you've decided you made a fuss.

But you asked. Previously, you might have struggled on alone for another fortnight.

If you judge that afternoon entirely by how you felt afterwards, you'll miss what changed.

The same is true when you speak honestly in a conversation you've been avoiding. You might come away with a racing heart and spend the journey home rewriting every sentence. It would be lovely if doing something differently always came with a warm sense of achievement. Sometimes it comes with the urge to ring back and explain yourself for another twenty minutes.

Feeling uncomfortable doesn't tell you, on its own, whether a decision was good. You still need to consider what happened and whether you were fair. But discomfort needn't cancel out the fact that you said something important which you would once have kept to yourself.

And other people's reactions won't always give you a reliable measure either.

You might make a thoughtful application and still not get the job. You might apologise properly and find the other person needs more time. Those outcomes matter, of course they do. You wanted the job. You wanted things to be all right between you.

There is still something worth noticing about how you handled your part. Otherwise, you end up giving other people the final say on whether you've made any progress at all.



Some changes are even less obvious because they happen after you've done the familiar thing.

You lose your temper. You hear yourself saying something unfair. This time, you go back and apologise that evening, without spending three days building a case for why you were entitled to say it.

You would have preferred not to say it in the first place. Fair enough. There may still be something to work on. But recognising it sooner and taking responsibility are worth including in your account of what happened.

I'd resist turning all this into another spreadsheet.

Some things are easy to count. Money saved, applications sent, appointments made. Others become apparent while you're getting on with your life. You spend an evening alone and realise, halfway through, that you're enjoying it. You have a difficult morning and still manage to enjoy lunch with a friend, whereas once the whole day would have been written off.

You don't need to manufacture a lesson out of every ordinary Tuesday. Just try to notice when something is different.

A few lines at the end of the week can help. Keep them specific enough that you'll remember what actually happened. "I was more confident" doesn't tell you much when you read it a month later. "I asked the question even though everyone else seemed to understand" does.

Include anything that made life easier or more enjoyable, too. This book began with the life you wanted to live. If all your evidence is about how much more you've managed to get done, it's worth checking what happened to the rest of it.

And if you're struggling to find any change, you can be honest about that. Perhaps you've spent more time discussing your plans than trying them. Perhaps the step you chose needs time or support you haven't got. Looking



at the week as it actually happened gives you a better chance of working out what would help.

What I wouldn't do is dismiss something simply because it looks small now.

Once you've done a thing a few times, it can become ordinary surprisingly quickly. You forget how much you used to dread it. Then you move the standard further away and wonder why you never seem to reach it.

Occasionally, allow yourself to remember.

There may be something in your life now that an earlier version of you would have been very pleased to hear about.

The Psychology Behind This

Psychologist Daryl Bem proposed that we sometimes work out our attitudes by observing our own behaviour and the circumstances around it, particularly when our feelings aren't clear. This is known as self-perception theory.

I think there's a useful connection here. When you're unsure whether anything is changing, looking at a particular thing you did can give you something concrete to consider. You can take your feelings seriously while also noticing the behaviour you might otherwise have overlooked.

(Bem, 1967)

A couple of questions to sit with

What have you done recently that an earlier version of you would have found difficult, even if it still felt uncomfortable?

What is becoming easier or more enjoyable in your life that you haven't quite given yourself credit for?



THE GIRL, THE WOMAN AND THE ELDER



"Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."

Søren Kierkegaard, adapted from his journals

At forty-six, I'm old enough to have become several of the women that little girl once imagined, and young enough to know there are more of her still ahead.

I used to imagine older-me when I was a child, wondering what she knew that I didn't. I think I wanted reassurance as much as wisdom. I wanted to know that things would be all right, that there was somewhere beyond the life I knew then.

Now I'm the older woman she was wondering about. I have quite a lot I could tell her, although some of it would probably go straight over her head. She wanted to get on with living. She wasn't waiting for a lecture.

And lately, I've been thinking that she might have a few things to tell me too.

So far, we've spent much of this book looking ahead. But there's something useful about bringing the girl you were into the conversation, alongside the woman you are and the elder you imagine becoming.

You might remember that girl quite easily. What she loved. What unsettled her. What she could spend hours doing before somebody told her she ought to be doing something else.

Perhaps you remember her less clearly. Childhood wasn't necessarily a carefree time, and you don't have to turn it into one for this to be useful. The girl you were may already have been trying very hard to fit in, keep somebody happy or avoid being noticed.

Still, there may be things about her that you recognise immediately.

A fascination with how things work. A need to be outside. The pleasure of making something with your hands. A stubborn objection when something wasn't fair.

What happened to those parts of you?

Some interests faded because you grew and found others. But perhaps something you loved gradually became something you couldn't justify spending time on. There was no money in it. You weren't particularly good at it. Other things needed doing.

It's strange how often we make enjoyment defend itself.

If you loved drawing, you may still like drawing, even if nobody will ever want to buy one. The girl who covered a page in colour might have a perfectly reasonable question about why that stopped being enough.



Then the woman you are now gets her say.

She knows what things cost. She has people to think about and commitments she can't simply abandon because her younger self has remembered how much she likes the sea.

I have some sympathy for her. She's the one who has to make all this work.

It would be easy to make her the dull one in this arrangement, forever bringing up the practicalities while the others talk about freedom and meaning. But she has learned things they need to hear. She knows which kinds of freedom leave her feeling good and which leave her trying to clear up the consequences.

I've had to learn that myself. Freedom without something grounded underneath it can turn into its own kind of chaos, just dressed more prettily.

The woman in the middle deserves some credit for what she knows now. She also deserves a life with enough room in it to enjoy herself.

Which brings us to the elder.

When I imagine her, I'm curious about what she'll think I spent too much time worrying about. I suspect some of the things that occupy me now will barely interest her.

I don't know what she'll regret or what her life will look like. But imagining her gives me a chance to ask questions I can otherwise keep putting off. How long am I willing to wait to do something I care about? What am I assuming I'll always have time for?

She might wish I'd rested more. She might wish I'd taken a chance sooner. I don't imagine her advice would be the same in every situation.

And I certainly don't imagine that getting older will remove every lively, awkward or adventurous part of me. I'd be disappointed if all this living eventually produced a woman whose only ambition was to avoid being disturbed.



Put the three together and their differences become interesting.

Suppose there's something you've wanted to learn for years. The girl is excited by it. The woman wonders where the time and money will come from. The elder asks how many more years you're planning to spend wondering.

You still have to look at the cost and find the time. But you might stop treating your interest as something you can dismiss before you've even looked.

Or perhaps you're considering another demanding commitment. The girl likes the idea of being chosen. The woman knows she's already tired. When you imagine looking back on this period, you find yourself wishing you'd allowed a bit more space.

The point is to hear what each perspective brings up. You might discover that something you've called ambition is partly an old wish to be approved of. You might also discover that something you've dismissed as childish still matters to you very much.

The decision belongs to the woman living your life now. She's allowed to use everything she knows.

For me, the girl wanted escape and reassurance. The woman has learned that she needs some steadiness if she's going to enjoy the freedom she worked for.

The elder, I suspect, will care whether I used what I had and loved people without disappearing from myself in the process. I hope she'll recognise plenty of the girl in me, even after everything that's changed.

She would be mortified if I ever stopped dancing.

The Psychology Behind This

Psychologists Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman's construal-level theory describes how psychological distance affects our thinking. Events further



away tend to be represented more abstractly, while things close to us tend to bring practical details into focus. Distance changes what we notice; it doesn't automatically make our judgement better.

The connection I draw here is that imagining your life from different points in time may help you consider both what matters to you and what living it involves. The elder can prompt a broader question. The woman you are now can work through the details.

(Trope & Liberman, 2010)

A couple of questions to sit with

What did you enjoy as a girl that you would still like to make room for now?

Think of a decision you're facing. What comes up when you consider it as the girl you were, the woman you are and the elder you imagine becoming?

REWRITE THE STORY FORWARD



"The facts don't change. The story we tell about them can."

Geniene Azalea

If I wanted to make a case against myself, I wouldn't be short of material.

The bar failed. Properties were repossessed. There have been difficult relationships and years spent in addiction. Put those things together, leave out everything else, and you could make me sound like a woman who should never be allowed near another decision.

I could tell that story. There would be enough truth in it to make it convincing.

But I'd have to be careful about what I claimed those facts proved.

The bar failing is something that happened. "I should never have tried" is a conclusion. The properties being repossessed is part of my history. "I can never be trusted with money" makes a claim about every year I have left.

There's quite a leap between the two, even when it feels like the most obvious explanation in the world.

I think we make that leap more often than we realise. A relationship ends and, somewhere in the telling of it, we become impossible to love. We make a poor decision and decide we have no judgement. After a while, we stop describing what happened and start introducing ourselves through it.

You can hear it in the small comments people make about themselves.

"That's me. I always get it wrong."

Sometimes it's said with a laugh, before anyone else gets the chance. Sometimes it's offered as an explanation for why there's no point trying something. It can sound so familiar that nobody questions it, including the person saying it.

I understand why a settled explanation is tempting. It saves you having to look at the whole complicated business again. If you've decided you're hopeless with relationships, you have somewhere to put the next disappointment.

But what do you do with a relationship you handle well? Where does that fit? You might dismiss it as luck, or decide it doesn't count because it wasn't difficult enough. The explanation survives because you've quietly stopped allowing anything to contradict it.

Looking again takes a bit more honesty.

With the bar, I can examine the decisions, the circumstances and what I understood at the time. I can ask what I would need to know before taking on something similar. Those questions are uncomfortable, but at least they give me something to work with.



Calling myself a failure tells me very little about what to do differently.

There are consequences I can't remove by changing the language. Losing something still means losing it. There may be practical problems to deal with, people affected, things I wish I'd handled better. I don't need to turn any of that into a lovely lesson before I'm allowed to continue with my life.

And I don't think you need to be grateful for everything that's happened to you.

Some experiences cost more than they gave. You may have learned something and still wish you hadn't had to. Both can be true.

The question is whether the explanation you've carried away from an experience is still fair.

Perhaps you stayed in a relationship longer than you now wish you had. You can acknowledge that and look at why. What were you hoping would change? What made leaving difficult? What could you recognise sooner another time?

There's more to understand there than "I choose badly."

There may also be another person's behaviour to account for. You aren't responsible for every part of an experience simply because you're the one still trying to make sense of it.

The woman ahead of you can be useful here because imagining her gives you a little room around the story. She has the same past. You aren't trying to invent a version of yourself to whom none of it happened.

Instead, consider how you would like her to be able to speak about this period.

Perhaps she can describe a mistake without spending the rest of the conversation apologising for who she is. Perhaps she understands something you can't quite see yet. Perhaps she still finds it painful, but has other things in her life that deserve attention too.



You don't have to know exactly what she'll think. Even recognising that another interpretation might become possible can loosen your certainty about the one you have now.

Try listening to a sentence you often use about your past. Ask yourself where the description ends and the judgement begins.

"I stopped" might be accurate. "I never finish anything" needs a much longer conversation.

And if there is a pattern, be specific about it. When does it happen? What have you tried? What would help you respond differently? You can take a repeated difficulty seriously without deciding it's the only thing anyone needs to know about you.

There were things I once thought defined me completely. They took up the whole frame. They don't anymore, although they haven't disappeared from my history.

I can still tell you about them. I just have more to tell you now.

The Psychology Behind This

Psychologist Dan McAdams's work on narrative identity explores how people make sense of their lives through an evolving personal story. We connect experiences and give them meaning as part of our understanding of who we are.

What interests me is the room that word "evolving" leaves. The explanation you formed during a painful period can be reconsidered as you gain experience and understand more. That doesn't change the event, but it may change the place it occupies in your account of yourself.

(McAdams, 2001)

A couple of questions to sit with

Which conclusion about yourself have you been repeating as though it were an established fact?

How could you describe what happened honestly, including your responsibility where it belongs, while leaving room for what you might do differently now?



YOUR NEXT TWELVE MONTHS



"The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now."

Traditional proverb

Think back to this time last year.

What were you concerned about? What were you looking forward to? There may be something occupying most of your life now that hadn't even occurred to you then.

A year is long enough for quite a lot to happen without asking your permission. It's also short enough to pass while you're still saying you'll get round to something.

That's what interests me about the next twelve months. The woman at the end of them feels close. I can imagine being her without having to invent an entirely different life.

I have less confidence in predicting what will happen along the way. I've had enough years go nothing like I expected to know that a plan needs room for information I haven't got yet.

Still, I'd like to have some say in it.

By this point in the book, you may have quite a few ideas about what you want to change. You might also be looking at them and wondering where on earth you're supposed to begin.

I'd start with the thing you most want to stop carrying into another year.

Perhaps there's a decision you've been putting off. Perhaps you've been talking about retraining for so long that people have stopped asking you about it. Or you're tired of reaching the end of every week with nothing left for the people and things you enjoy.

I've got a few of these myself. Things that have sat on my list for years, surviving every attempt to organise it. Apparently, moving something into a new notebook doesn't count as dealing with it.

Before you choose, though, ask whether you still want it. Some ambitions remain on our lists long after we've lost interest, simply because we once announced them with such conviction. You may be allowed to cross something off without doing it.

Then look at what remains.

Which change would make the most difference to how you live?

It might be something quite practical. Learning to drive, for instance, could give you access to work or make it easier to see people without arranging a lift. The goal itself is straightforward, but the effect could reach into several parts of your life.



Your answer might be less easily measured. Having enough space in your week to enjoy yourself would count. So would feeling more settled where you live.

Try putting what you want into one plain sentence. Use words you'd actually say to somebody who asked. You should be able to read it back and understand why it matters to you.

Then have a proper look at the year you're proposing to put it in.

What is already happening? What will take time, money or attention? If you're caring for somebody, working long hours or dealing with a difficult period, those things need a place in the plan. You can't allocate all your time twice and then blame yourself when it doesn't work.

There may be room for more than you think. There may be less. Either way, it's useful to know.

I would give the first few months more detail than the rest. You can usually make a reasonable decision about what needs doing soon. Beyond that, you may need to find something out before deciding what follows.

If you're considering a new kind of work, for example, the first part of the year might be about understanding what it involves and trying some of it. You could discover that you love it. You could discover that the version you imagined was considerably more appealing than the actual job.

I'd want to know that before building the rest of the year around it.

Put a date in your diary to come back and look at what you've learned. A few months is enough time for circumstances to change and for a promising idea to meet real life. You can decide then whether to continue, adjust the pace or reconsider.

Changing your mind deserves a bit of examination. Sometimes you're avoiding the uncomfortable part of something you still want. Sometimes experience has given you a good reason to choose differently. It helps to be honest about which it is.



I also want there to be things in this year you're looking forward to while it's happening. It would be a shame to spend twelve months preparing a better life and have very little pleasure in any of them.

The woman a year ahead will have lived through all those days. What would you like her to remember enjoying?

I'm writing this from inside the experiment myself. There are books I haven't written yet and work I still want to bring into the world. There are habits I'm trying to establish, with varying degrees of cooperation from the rest of me.

Writing this book has made me think more carefully about what I want to give my time to. Now I have to make room for it in the life I've actually got.

That's where your next twelve months begin too. With something you care about, and a realistic place for it to start.

The Psychology Behind This

Researchers Hengchen Dai, Katherine Milkman and Jason Riis found evidence of what they called the fresh start effect. Across three studies, diet-related searches, gym visits and commitments to pursue goals increased after significant points in time, such as a new week, a birthday or the beginning of a year.

Their findings concern the motivation to begin; they don't mean a fresh start guarantees lasting change. I think the useful part here is giving yourself a clear point from which to reconsider what happens next. You can choose that point without waiting for January.

(Dai, Milkman & Riis, 2014)

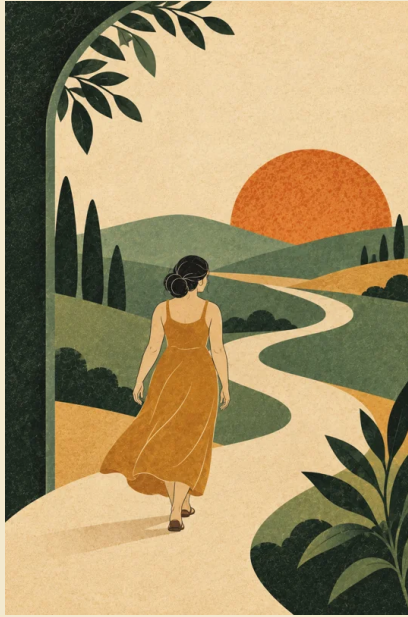
A couple of questions to sit with

What would you most like to be different this time next year, and why does it matter to you?

Given the life you have now, what could you realistically do in the next three months to begin?



BECOMING THE WOMAN AHEAD OF YOU



"There is no final version of you waiting at the end of this."

Geniene Azalea

When I imagined older-me as a child, I wanted to know what happened next. Which things would work out. Whether the things that worried me would still matter. I thought being older must mean having answers.

I understand the appeal of that, even now.

But I've become the older woman I used to wonder about, and there are still things I can't tell you. I have more experience to draw on. I've changed my mind about things I once felt completely certain of. Some questions have become easier to answer; others hadn't even occurred to me when I was young.

I doubt the woman ahead of me will have everything settled either.

That's quite a relief. I'd hate to spend the rest of my life preparing for an age at which I was finally supposed to know what I was doing.

What I hope for is a better relationship with the woman I am while I'm living it. I'd like to recognise sooner when I'm making life unnecessarily difficult for myself. I'd like to use what experience has taught me, while staying curious enough to discover that I might still be wrong.

And I'd like to enjoy myself. I don't want to look back and realise I spent so much time working on my life that I barely joined in.

Perhaps, by now, the woman you've been imagining feels more familiar. There may be something about her you can already see in yourself. A preference you've begun taking seriously, or a way of handling things that feels possible even if it still takes some effort.

There may also be parts of the picture you want to change.

Let yourself change them. As you learn more about what you want, your idea of her can become more accurate. You don't owe loyalty to a future you imagined before you understood what living it would involve.

What matters is that thinking about her helps you make decisions you can live with now.

If she has become somebody you feel permanently inferior to, have another look at the expectations you've given her. Perhaps you've imagined a woman who never disappoints anyone, needs very little and always knows the right thing to say. That sounds exhausting, even from a distance.

Give her enough of your actual personality that you'd recognise her in a room. Let her have an opinion you might argue with. Imagine that she sometimes needs help and is capable of asking for it.

She's going to have a life around her, too. People she loves will make choices she wouldn't have made. Circumstances will change. She'll have to respond to things she couldn't have planned for, just as you have.

You can care about who you become without believing that every part of her future rests on getting today's decisions right.

I hope that leaves you with some room to breathe.

Because the woman reading this has a life now. There are things worth keeping in it, alongside whatever she wants to change. People whose company she enjoys. Things she finds funny. Interests that don't need to lead anywhere to be worth an afternoon.

She deserves some attention as well.

When I look back at younger versions of myself, I can see things they couldn't. I can see mistakes, certainly, but I also know more about what they were trying to manage. It's easier from here to understand why something mattered so much, or why a decision took as long as it did.

I'd like to remember that when I'm judging the woman I am today. One day, she'll be the younger version. There will be more to understand about her than I can see from inside this moment.

I became the woman that little girl imagined without noticing the exact day it happened. I expect that will happen again.

In the meantime, I have a life to get on with. I'd like to enjoy a fair bit of it while I'm here.

The Psychology Behind This

A review by Brent Roberts, Kate Walton and Wolfgang Viechtbauer brought together 92 longitudinal samples to examine how personality traits change over time. They found changes extending into middle and older adulthood, although the patterns differed across traits and stages of life.



These findings describe group averages, rather than predicting how any one person will develop. They support the possibility of continued change in adulthood. They don't suggest that we automatically become wiser with age, or that imagining a future self will produce a particular result.

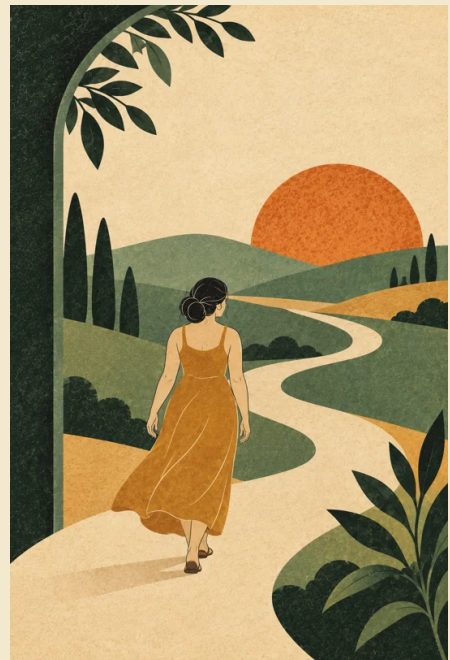
For me, the hopeful part is being able to remain interested in who I might become.

(Roberts, Walton & Viechtbauer, 2006)

A couple of questions to sit with

What do you understand about yourself now that you would like to remember when life becomes difficult?

As you move towards the woman ahead of you, what about your life now do you want to keep?



CONCLUSION

There is no final version of you waiting at the end of this book either.

Researchers who followed people's personalities for decades found they kept changing well into their sixties and seventies. There is no age at which a person becomes a finished document. (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000)

I have always had a strong imagination. I can still feel the woman ahead of me calling to me with a kind of longing I don't fully understand, and I'm already grateful for what she's teaching me, even though we haven't properly met yet.

If there is one thing I want you to take from this book, let it be this. Even when it feels like you are stuck somewhere you will never climb out of, you have climbed out before. Think of a specific time. You did it then, with less than you have now. You can do it again.

You are not alone in this either, even on the days it feels that way. Underneath the version of ourselves we show each other, there is a deeper story most people never quite say out loud. It runs through all of us, whether we admit it or not.

People told me some of this long before I was ready to hear it. I remember nodding along and thinking, yeah, whatever, the way you do when good advice arrives at the wrong moment. What I understand now is that timing counted for more than force ever did. Some things were never going to arrive early, no matter how hard I pushed, and some of my worrying belonged to a future that wasn't ready for me yet either. I like to think of myself as fairly easygoing. Clearly I wasn't applying that to my own future.

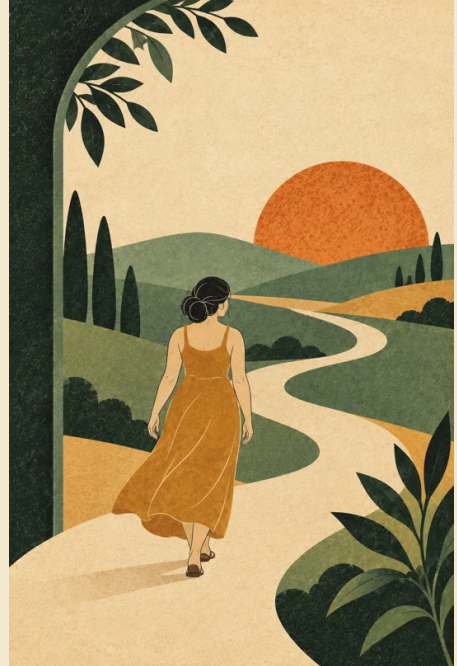
Change rarely announces itself. It's smaller than the overhaul we've been taught to wait for, more like a slight shift under the skin, an itch that won't quite leave you alone. You'll know it when you feel it, because the

alternative, never finding out what might have happened if you'd followed it, is its own kind of unfinished business.

So scratch it. See what's underneath.

There is only a woman who knows herself a little better than she did.

Don't turn her into someone you can fail to measure up to. She isn't better because she has become less human. Most of the distance between you will close so quietly that you won't notice it as transformation while it's happening.



AFTERWORD

A Letter Back Through Time

"Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves."

Rainer Maria Rilke

There's one last thing I want you to do with the woman ahead of you.

Write to yourself, from her.

Don't make a prediction. She may surprise you. Some of what you want desperately now may barely register later. This is about borrowing her perspective, rather than her certainty.

Imagine her years from now, looking back at exactly this stretch of your life.

She remembers what you were trying to change. What felt urgent. And she knows the one thing you don't have access to yet.

What happened next.

If we could truly receive letters from our older selves, I doubt they'd read like triumphs. I think they'd be stranger than that, and smaller.

Something you wanted so badly turned out not to define you, even when it felt like it would.

I loved a house on Forest Road. I'd brought my brother and sister up there, along with most of their friends at one point or another. It was full of noise and people and a version of my life I was proud of.

Watching it get bin-bagged was one of the worst days I've had. There's no dignifying that. It was horrible, and the stigma that comes with losing your home is its own particular weight, one that doesn't lift just because you understand, logically, that it isn't a verdict on who you are.



My mum picked me up from the airport not long after. She looked at me and said, "Oh my God, you're homeless." I said, "Oh, I thought I was coming to yours." We both managed to laugh, which tells you something about how we get through things in my family.

I remained stoic. I got on with it. And it turned out that losing that specific house, the one I thought I couldn't survive losing, wasn't the thing that ended up defining the years that followed. The stigma was real. The grief was real. But the house wasn't load-bearing for the rest of my life, however much it felt that way at the time.

This is one of the properties I mentioned earlier in this book, the ones that got repossessed. I promised you then that I had more to tell you about it. This was the part I meant.

If I sat beside a younger version of myself, I wouldn't hand her a plan.

I'd tell her some of what she's worrying about will simply pass. That she'll change her mind about people and places she currently thinks are permanent. That she's going to survive things she can't yet imagine surviving.

So when you write from the woman ahead of you, don't make her too wise.

Let her still be you. Grateful for her life, but not above it.

There may be things she wishes had gone differently. That was never the point, an immaculate future with nothing to regret. Life rarely divides that cleanly into right choices and wrong ones.

Let the letter wander.

Let her tell you what she remembers, what she understands differently now. Let her admit, honestly, that there are still things she doesn't know either.

She isn't here to tell you how to live. She's here to give you one more angle on the life you're already inside.

Mine started like this.

You are a legend. You overcame things you genuinely didn't believe you would, and you didn't just survive them, you thrived. Some part of you always knew this is where you'd end up. You and I and the girl you were are more connected than you think, deeply resonant, all three of us. You were a shamanic soul long before you had the word for it.

I won't tell you your letter needs to sound like that one. Yours might be quieter, or funnier, or considerably more annoyed with you than mine was. What matters is that it comes from somewhere further along, looking back with something closer to pride than judgement.

You've done this before, you have become somebody your younger self couldn't have pictured.

One day, the woman you are right now will be someone you remember, too. She may look exactly as you imagined. Or nothing like it.

Either way, she'll know something you don't know yet.

She'll know what you did next.

That's reason enough to write the letter.

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The psychology in this book is here to support the exercises, not to turn them into promises. Where I refer to research, I have tried to distinguish what the evidence actually suggests from the way I am interpreting it for this work.

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