



Justin Ashley
art by Cory Thomas



BLAZE YOUR OWN TRAIL

**IDEAS FOR TEENS TO FIND AND PURSUE
YOUR PURPOSE**

Justin Ashley
art by Cory Thomas

free spirit
PUBLISHING®



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Edited by Alison Behnke

Cover and interior design by Courtenay Fletcher

Illustrated by Cory Thomas

Free Spirit Publishing

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9850 51st Avenue North, Suite 100

Minneapolis, MN 55442

(612) 338-2068

help4kids@freespirit.com

freespirit.com

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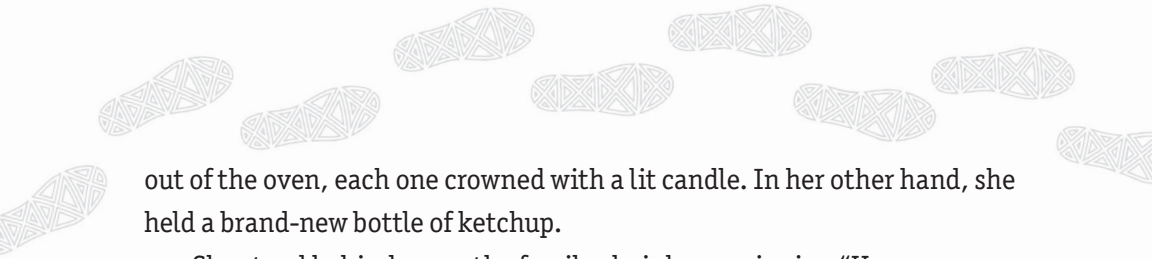
INTRODUCTION

I was a weird kid.

For example, my favorite food on earth? Biscuits and ketchup. It was cute and funny at four years old but kind of strange when I was still eating it at 12. By this time, there was a part of me that was embarrassed by my preference. Shouldn't I just be normal and eat a plain biscuit (or one covered with gravy or jelly) like everyone else?

The answer to that question came to me on my 13th birthday. My family had planned a big party at my grandparents' house. They sat me down at the dining room table by the kitchen, surrounded by my aunts, uncles, cousins, sister, and grandfather.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my grandmother sneaking in from the kitchen. She held a plate of 13 crisp, golden biscuits in one hand, hot

The top of the page is decorated with several light-colored, geometric, woven patterns that resemble traditional basketry or textile designs. These patterns are scattered across the top edge, with some overlapping the text area.

out of the oven, each one crowned with a lit candle. In her other hand, she held a brand-new bottle of ketchup.

She stood behind me as the family choir began singing “Happy Birthday.” I looked up at her and, to this day, still remember her warm smile and gentle eyes, sending me a clear and glorious message: “Embrace your weirdness. Don’t be normal. Be you.” In that rite of passage from childhood to adolescence—just when I was about to conform—my grandmother loved me, adored me, and celebrated me in a way no other person in my life ever has.

I’ve been living the weird life ever since. I might seem to be a strange mix of apparent contradictions to others, but to me it all just feels right. I was raised in a Baptist church, and I also practice Buddhist meditation and study Stoic philosophy. I have a cross tattoo on my arm and work summers at the local Jewish community center. I was born and raised in the South, and still live there, but I also thrive on meeting people across the country—and around the world. In my free time, I enjoy reading about Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and UFOs. I love walking in nature alone, and also playing team sports like basketball and football. I’m a macho man who has a mental illness and isn’t ashamed to talk about it openly. I’m a teacher who cares at *least* as much about my students having fun while they learn as I do about the scores they get on an end-of-year exam.

Some kids start life strange and lose that uniqueness as they get older. Society conditions them to be more “normal.” Me? I’ve only become stranger with age.

I have my grandmother to thank for that. She provided me with a unique birthday gift, giving me the courage to forge ahead and blaze my own trail. And above all, she taught me *self-acceptance*. What I’ve learned over time is that sometimes you will have approval and support from loved ones around you, and other times, they won’t celebrate you the way you wish for. It’s in these moments, most of all, that you’ll need to accept and celebrate yourself.



ARE YOU WEIRD?

How about you? Are you weird?

Are you obsessed with '90s grunge when all your friends only listen to the latest hits? Do you like to dye your hair purple or rock an '80s mullet? Are you the only person who laughs at your jokes? Does it feel like no one in your school—or even your town—shares your political views? Are you deeply spiritual even though no one else in your family believes in God? Do you question the existence of a higher power even though your family attends worship every week? When you look in the mirror, do you feel like you're too tall or too short?


Or, even if none of these exact questions resonates with you, do you ever just feel like an outsider?

If so, the pages that follow are for you. This isn't a warm, fuzzy book about loving yourself. It's about creating and owning your own weird, wonderful path and embracing it with your whole spirit. It's not about following somebody else, but about leading yourself all the way to a destination *you* define, even when others call for you to turn back and follow the beaten path.

THE THREE PATHS

If you are committed to this process of forging your unique path, you can become a trailblazer by taking three simultaneous journeys, which make up the three sections of this book:

- 1. THE INNER PATH:** This section is about interpretation. You'll learn how to create a fresh vision for your future, translate the dreams that come to you at night, use technology for good, regulate your emotions using ancient Stoic wisdom, breathe through your fears, connect with nature through techniques such as *earthing*, protect



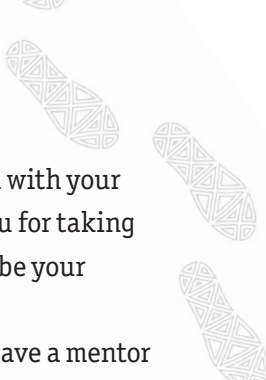
yourself from becoming a Zombie Student, and use your unique personal values as a compass to move forward.

- 2. THE OUTER PATH:** This section is about connection. You'll set up a Teen Squad, figure out how to benefit from negative feedback without being so hard on yourself, intersect your path with friends and family by going on mini-adventures together, create a sanctuary for studying, practice a Danish concept called *hygge*, honor the heroes in your story, and exercise the Stoic principle of *amor fati* to find gratitude in any environment along your path.
- 3. THE ONWARD PATH:** This section is about determination. You'll explore ways to incorporate more movement into your life, reach back and revive a few simple joys from your childhood, create (and follow) plans for school days as well as your time off, strengthen your mental fortitude based on the theory of multiple intelligences, learn to communicate from your head and your heart, have courageous conversations with anxiety, and help yourself heal if you experience depression.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

You can read this book as a free spirit—from beginning to end, end to beginning, or by flipping to the chapters that may resonate with you in the moment.

For example, if you are fearful about something that may happen in your future, chapter 5 (“Stare into the Snake”) could be helpful. Or if you are struggling with friendships, you could read chapter 9, which is all about creating a Teen Squad. You could even page through the book simply reading chapters with artwork that really catches your eye. The main idea is this: I want you to feel free to pick this book up, put it down, and come back to it when you desire.



Whichever way you choose to proceed with this book—and with your trailblazing mission—I know this is no easy road. I applaud you for taking this path. And I also want to let you know up front that I can't be your leader. Only you can.

However, if you're ready to blaze your trail, it will help to have a mentor with a little trailblazing experience of their own. I'll do my best to be that for you—not to define your path for you, but to prepare, equip, and nudge you in the direction that calls to you. Not to give you all the answers, but to offer you ideas and support. To bring light to the traveler's spirit that may still be in darkness or lying dormant within you.

CARVING YOUR PATH

It probably won't surprise you that a lot of people—including a lot of teens—deal with mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. You may have faced such challenges yourself. I know I have. One reason for this may be nihilism, the belief that life has little or no meaning.

Plenty of teens see the path their teachers, parents, and community have laid out for them: attend school, get married, have kids, work for decades, retire (if they're lucky), and die. They might think to themselves, *This is it? This is what life is all about? What's the point? I don't want to play the game. I quit.*

If this is where you're at right now, it's not a bad starting point, believe it or not. We can begin here, but this isn't how it has to end. If you don't like the plans laid out for you, create your own. Map out a new path, using your values, vision, and purpose. There is so much joy and adventure in the path of self-discovery you are about to take.

In the words of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, "No one can build you the bridge on which you, and only you, must cross the river of life. There may be countless trails and bridges and demigods who would

gladly carry you across; but only at the price of pawning and forgoing yourself. There is one path in the world that none can walk but you. Where does it lead? Don't ask, walk!"

It's time for us to start walking. Not yet outward, nor onward—but first, within.

I can't wait to hear what you think of this book, and if the ideas in it worked for you—or if you have ideas of your own to add. If you'd like to share your thoughts with me, please email me at justinfashley@gmail.com, message or tag me on Instagram [@justinashley](https://www.instagram.com/justinashley), or write to me at:

Teacher Created Materials
P.O. Box 1040
Huntington Beach, CA 92647

Justin



CHAPTER 1

CREATE A VISION BOARD TO TEXT THE UNIVERSE YOUR DREAMS



Harper Grace.

You might not know her name, but for a while, a whole lot of people did—for all the wrong reasons. When she was just 11 years old, Harper sang the national anthem at a Major League Soccer game in front of over 20,000 fans.



If you've never seen the video, be warned—it's challenging to watch. To put it mildly, Harper struggled through the song. Almost immediately after her performance ended, it went viral on news outlets and social media. People were calling it one of the worst performances of the song in history.

Can you imagine what that must have felt like for Harper? She was a young girl with big dreams who fell short in her significant moment and was then publicly shamed. I wonder if, when she went out, people recognized her, pointed, and laughed. That was likely a rock-bottom time for her, and she probably spent some time feeling sorry for herself. It's only natural. But rather than *continue* to meditate on her failure, she decided to focus on the future. As she explained it, "I created this dream board. It has all the things that I want to accomplish when I'm older."

All around the board, she placed printed pictures and magazine cut-outs of guitars, pianos, music notes, people she wanted to help, and places she wanted to go. In the center she put a list of things she wanted to accomplish. One of those things was to try out for *American Idol* and "maybe win."

In 2018 she got her chance. She sang two songs in front of Katy Perry, Lionel Richie, and Luke Bryan. With a guitar in hand, she played an original song called "Yard Sale." She also performed Khalid's "Young Dumb & Broke." And she crushed it! She received substantial compliments from each judge for her songwriting and vocals.

At the end of Harper's performance, Katy Perry asked to see her dream board, which she'd brought with her to the audition room. Katy took her pen, crossed out "maybe," and wrote, "Going to Hollywood." Luke Bryan handed her the golden ticket, and Harper made it to the Top 50, out of thousands of contestants. Redemption!

REPLACE SHAME WITH SELF-COMPASSION

Have you ever experienced failure like Harper did at that game—even if your audience wasn't as big? Have you felt so locked up in a past mistake that you couldn't think about anything else or you felt like a total failure every time it came to mind? It might sound like this:

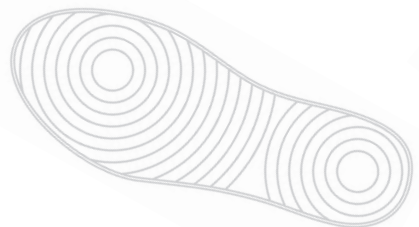
- *"I bombed that math test. I'm so stupid."*
- *"I tried to talk to them, and they didn't even respond to my text. I'm such a loser."*
- *"I lied to my mom, and she'll never look at me the same. I'm a bad kid."*

These kinds of thoughts all come from a singular source: *shame*. Shame says, "I'm a bad singer. I'm a bad student. I'm a bad athlete. I'm a bad friend. I'm a bad person." Shame is destructive and can keep you stuck in the past. On the other hand, *self-compassion* offers a way forward after you've been through something hard. It gives you tools for the future, because it doesn't suggest you are bad in nature—only that you had a bad performance.

Shame is a critical inner voice. At a fundamental level, it's the belief that you aren't enough—whether because of a mistake, or a series of mistakes, or simply because of some core aspect of yourself. This voice can become so loud and so intense that it overpowers your identity, casting a shadow over your past, present, and future. But with self-compassion, difficult experiences become opportunities to give yourself grace (pun intended) in the present and ultimately catapult you into a better future.

What does self-compassion sound like? Here are some examples:

- *"My shots were off this game, but my form is good and I believe I'll have a better game next week."*



- *“While this friendship didn’t work out, I know my worth doesn’t come from getting others to accept me. I earn my worth by being my true, authentic self. Those who love my vibe will connect with me. Those who don’t, well—they don’t need to be part of my life.”*
- *“I didn’t understand a lot of the content in this unit, but my intelligence isn’t determined by one failed test. I’m a smart person with a strong work ethic.”*
- *“I hit the wrong notes today, but I have a beautiful voice and will continue singing.”*

Harper may have initially felt shame after failing to perform the anthem in a way she knew she could, but she didn’t get stuck there. She accepted the event as part of her past, turned her attention to what lay ahead, and worked hard. And that’s why she earned that golden ticket to Hollywood.

One way to work with a feeling of failure or mediocrity is to do precisely what Harper did and create a dream board, also referred to as a vision board. Why is this important? For one, it shifts your mindset from the past tense to the present and future tenses. This shift is essential, because the truth is that you have zero control over what’s already happened. Your power and your energy—even if they’re still dormant—lie in the present. Now it’s up to you to awaken them, through inspiration and imagination. By creating strong mental, visual, and tangible images of what you desire in the months and years to come, you are waking up that present energy and moving forward with clarity.

Here are some ideas for how to start.

1. BEGIN WITH A BRAINSTORM. Whether on paper, on a computer or tablet, or on your phone, write answers to these 11 questions:

- What kind of person do you want to be?
- What do you want to do for fun?

- What story do you want your life to tell?
- What kinds of feelings do you want to have?
- What do you want to feel spiritually?
- What types of people do you want in your life, both now and in the future?
- What do you want to accomplish in school, sports, or elsewhere?
- Do you want to go to college? If so, do you know what school (or schools) you hope to attend?
- What job or career do you aspire to have?
- What kind of life do you want to have financially? What material things do you want?
- How could you support philanthropies or charitable causes you care about—or maybe one day even create a fundraiser or nonprofit organization of your own?

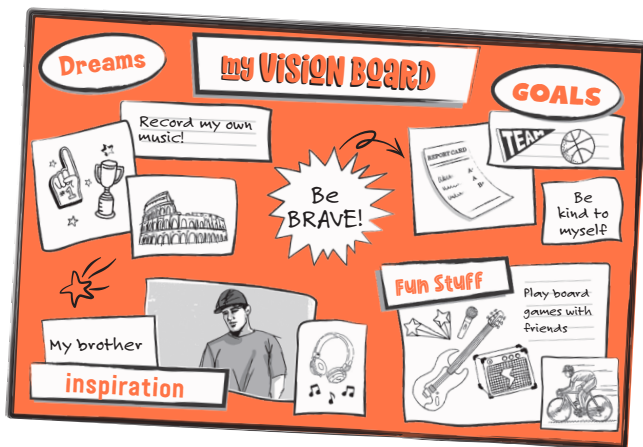
2. COLLECT YOUR MATERIALS. You'll only need a few:

- a bulletin board or a piece of poster board
- markers and colored pencils
- an assortment of pictures you've collected from magazines, online, or elsewhere
- inspirational quote cards with phrases like "We rise by lifting others" and "You were born an original. Don't die a copy." (You can order these online or make your own.)
- tape or glue

3. BUILD YOUR VISION BOARD. Use your answers to the brainstorm questions and your materials to put your vision board together. You can see a sample idea on the next page. If you'd like to use

a template, you can download one at go.freespirit.com/blaze or from the “free stuff” section of my website, justinfashley.com. And have fun! The process of making this board should be creative and exciting as you think about all your ideas for the future.

- 4. PLACE YOUR BOARD IN A HIGHLY VISIBLE LOCATION.** You’ve likely heard the expression, “out of sight, out of mind.” The opposite is also true. If something is highly visible, you’re going to be reminded of it regularly. It’s not magic. It’s magnetic. You’re sending out messages—texting your thoughts, dreams, and desires into the universe. Eventually, ideas and opportunities could come back. To keep the frequency open, place your board in a corner of your room, by your desk, next to your mirror, on the fridge, or somewhere else where you’ll come across it a few times a day.



- 5. LISTEN.** It’s unlikely that the universe will respond immediately no matter say, loud and clear, “Okay—here you go!” After all, it gets a lot of messages. But I believe that if you listen closely, you *will* get a message back. It might be advice left in a voicemail, a book you happen to read at just the right moment, or something you notice a

friend doing. It might be a dream, a line in a song, or a conversation with a trusted adult. When that voice speaks, it's important to listen—no matter how you get the message, and whether you think it's coming from the universe or from within your own heart and mind. And while you wait for the voice, think about how you can *earn* what you desire. What can *you* do to make your dreams a reality?

- 6. TAKE ACTION.** Your vision board is just that—a board full of great ideas—until you start taking action. When you explore your hopes and dreams, ideas will come. When you know what you're looking for, you'll be able to spot opportunities. So pay attention and be ready to respond with confidence, discipline, and bravado. Over time, you are creating a new reality. And a vision board is a great tool to help lift yourself into your desired future.

A FAIRY-TALE ENDING

Walt Disney, one of the great visionaries in animation history, summed it up well: “We keep moving forward—opening up new doors and doing new things—because we're curious. And curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.”

If Harper Grace's dream board helped her go from rock bottom to Hollywood, I wonder where you can go and what you can do, no matter where you are right now. It begins with curiosity and continues with a dream. And it leads to recovery, self-discovery, and reinvention. Don't stay stuck in your past. It's time to get moving.

