

The
**Balanced
Teacher
Path**



How to
Teach, Live, and Be Happy

Justin Ashley

The **Balanced Teacher Path**

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free spirit
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Introduction

The Balanced Teacher Path

When I was a senior in high school, I was living in poverty and just trying to make sense out of my circumstances. My parents had recently divorced. My sister and I were torn by it. My family was scraping by month to month, paycheck to paycheck, struggling at times for groceries and other necessities.

At school, I was the shortest boy in class, pimply faced, with a mouth full of braces. Teasing and bullying happened daily. And like all seniors, I couldn't help but worry about the future. *I'm seventeen now. I'll be out of school this time next year. What am I going to become?*

I felt limited. Boxed in. There weren't a lot of options for a poor teen working as a fry boy at a fast-food restaurant after school to make ends meet. I contemplated working my way up the ranks to become a store manager. But one day in between classes, my school counselor stopped me in the hallway and pulled me into her office. She told me about the North Carolina Teaching Fellows Scholarship—a fund that would completely cover the cost of college, as long as I committed to teaching for four years after graduation.

Earlier that semester, I had taken a Teacher Cadet class—an elective course where students assist an elementary schoolteacher—and really enjoyed connecting with kids. So I was definitely interested in teaching. But my chances of getting the scholarship seemed slim. My counselor explained that thousands of high school students applied each year, and only a few hundred would win the honor.

I didn't feel as though I could stand out in any way. It was like a Hail Mary play, but I decided to go for it. I wrote the required essay and mailed it in with the application, joining a long line of candidates vying for this chance.

A few weeks went by, and I still hadn't heard anything back. I had nearly forgotten about it. But then I walked to my mailbox and saw a letter addressed to me from Raleigh. I ripped it open and read:

“Congratulations, Justin. You have been awarded a full scholarship to a North Carolina University of your choice.”

I will never forget that moment, reading the letter with tears of joy flowing down my face. I felt as though I was getting a new start. No more fry boy. I was going to get out of my hometown, change the world, and become a teacher.

Fast forward to the first day of summer in 2015. After several years of teaching in North Carolina—starting in elementary education and eventually moving to middle school—I was checking into rehab for depression and a prescription-drug addiction.

Wait, what? So much for changing the world. It felt like the end for me. What had happened?

The End

The students had left for the summer. My room was packed up. It felt empty. The back wall was lined with my students' desks. Their textbooks were stacked in a corner, towering like a Manhattan high rise. In the front of my room, the whiteboard still reeked of dry-erase marker. The board itself was clean. Snow-white. Empty. A blank slate.

My mind, however, was busy creating a list of reasons to quit and never return.

For seven years, I was in love with the job. Whatever It Takes was my mantra. I gave kids my everything. On Saturdays and Sundays, I came up with killer class projects and graded papers by hand. From Mondays to Fridays, I taught my heart out. To my principal, I was known as the *yes* man.

“Mr. Ashley, can you lead the Faculty Advisory Committee?” *Yes.*

“Mr. Ashley, can you coach the Odyssey of the Mind team?” *Yes.*

“Mr. Ashley, can you present at the staff meeting next week?” *Yes. Yes. Absolutely yes!*

By all appearances, I was on the path to being the Perfect Teacher. I made positive phone calls to the parents of my students every month and replied to email messages each workday. I even made home visits for conferences and tutoring sessions.

These people needed me. I couldn't let them down. So I ran when they called for help. I ran like an Olympian sprinting for the gold. The cheers in the crowd encouraged me to keep running. My class earned high test scores. My principal gave me “distinguished” ratings. My students were featured in newspapers and on TV. And I was given a few trophies: Rookie Teacher of the Year in 2008, District Teacher of the Year in 2011, and North Carolina Teacher of the Year in 2013.

This may all seem glorious, but all that glitters is not gold. That's why after seven years of running, I found myself slumped over in a rolling chair, contemplating throwing in the towel for good.

While I was winning as a teacher, I was losing in every other field. I'd devoted so much time to being the Perfect Teacher, I hadn't noticed that other parts of my life were falling apart. My marriage was in trouble, I was nearly a stranger to my son, and, after paying bills, I had less than \$100 in my bank account. To top it off, I had become hooked on prescription pills: amphetamines and antianxiety meds each day, with a heavy-duty sleep aid each night. For a long time, I didn't see it. But I slowly came to the conclusion that the problems in my personal life were rooted in my unflinching commitment to my work life.

So by summer 2015, I was in my classroom making a list of all the reasons I should quit my job. I didn't want to quit teaching, but I didn't want to teach anymore either. I didn't know what to do. I grabbed my workbag and drove home.

I found my house to be a lot like my classroom—mostly empty and silent. My wife and son were out for the evening. I was completely alone. It was clear that something had to change. *I had to change.*

So what does a lonely, dead-broke, burned-out, pill-popping Teacher of the Year do on the last day of school? He checks into rehab. My wife left

work early; we talked it over and agreed on a plan for recovery. Not long after, I voluntarily enrolled in a nearby rehab facility.

“What’s your profession?” the nurse in the front office asked me as we filled out the paperwork.

“Teaching ... for now.”

It took seven years of sprinting for me to discover that the Perfect Teacher Path can contribute to self-destruction. This was not at all how I pictured my life going.

The Problem with the Perfect Teacher Path

Teachers are nurturers by nature. It’s part of our programming. It’s instinctive to help everyone: students, parents, principals, and fellow teachers. We think that if we can effectively solve others’ problems, we’re doing the right thing. If we can just close the achievement gap, if 90 percent of our students will just meet growth, if our principal will just approve of us, then we’ll be perfect. Whatever It Takes. But there is one problem: This mindset that serves our students so well has the power to drive us to burnout, to extinguish the fire for teaching. This is an issue for many of us.

Burnout can happen to anyone, and the signs can sneak up on you. Maybe you’ve got several years of teaching under your belt, and lately you hear yourself snapping at students for petty offenses. Or maybe as soon as your principal starts talking in the staff meeting, you assume more bad news: *What are they going to dump on us now?*

Or you might be a new teacher, and your creative juices are running dry prematurely. Coming up with fresh ideas for lesson plans is already feeling overwhelming. And with so many papers to grade, you skip writing real feedback and instead give participation grades.

You are pulled in so many directions: planning, assessing, teaching, learning, and responding. It’s hard not to feel helpless, as though there isn’t enough—material, time, technology, or support—to do your job effectively.

Many teachers feel burnout. The warning signs listed above are just a few. Fortunately, this doesn’t have to be our experience. There is a way to teach and still be happy. It’s a secret path, one far less traveled. I was lucky enough to stumble across it while I was in rehab.

The Life-Changing Lesson I Learned in Rehab

I started the summer of 2015 with an all-inclusive, four-night, five-day vacation in rehab. That definitely hadn't been part of my original plan for the Perfect Teacher Path.

Throughout the week, I received great treatment from the staff. The nurses made sure I had clean clothes to wear and good food to eat. The counselors listened patiently while I explained my career, family, and medical history. The doctors ran diagnostic tests and reviewed reports with me in great detail. The staff made me comfortable during my stay, but they didn't teach me the lesson that changed my life. That lesson came from another patient. I didn't even get her name.

She was young—in her late teens or early twenties—and yet she taught me such a wise, profound lesson. For teachers, the greatest lessons can come from the humblest of places. It happened during a breakout session in the main meeting room. I was seated in a circle with other patients. We were doing introductions and sharing a few personal tidbits with the group. One by one, patients were asked to give their names and share one thing—one accomplishment—that made them proud.

Teaching is one element of who you are, but it's not everything.

First, a golf club manager told us about his rise to the top of his industry. Then, a landscaping business owner told us he was proud for starting his own business. After that, a guy who was the first person in his family to earn a doctorate degree shared his story.

Then, the young woman spoke up. I tried not to stare at the bandages over the cut marks on her arm as she gave her name. With a strong sense of conviction, she said:

“I am student. I go to school. I also work a job. But more than anything, I am a mom. *I am a mom*. A proud one. I've heard a lot of people talk about their jobs and successes in their careers. I am not rich. I am not a boss. But I am a mom. More than anything, that's who I am, and that's what I'm proud of.”

I am a mom. Something within me clicked when I heard that. When trying to decide what to share about myself with the group, I hadn't even thought about my son or my wife. My only instinct had been to talk about teaching. After a few minutes, it was my turn to speak. I cleared my throat and said, "I was going to introduce myself as Justin, an American history teacher and North Carolina Teacher of the Year, but the Mom of the Year changed my perception."

I raised my voice boldly as she had and continued, "I am Justin. I am a proud father and husband."

As the people in the circle continued speaking, my thoughts drifted back. I was starting, finally, to make sense of my troubled past. It became so clear. Since my first day of teaching, my identity had been completely wrapped up in the teacher persona. *Mr. Ashley*. But what about *Justin*? What about *Husband*? What about *Daddy*? What about my health? What about me?

And that's what I learned. It's the lesson of a lifetime for a teacher: Teaching is one element of who you are, but it's not everything. You can be a good teacher, even a great teacher, but you don't have to be a perfect teacher. This was the end of the Perfect Teacher Path for me. If I was going back into teaching, I was going to do it on my terms and no one else's.

Balance. That would be my new focus: the Balanced Teacher Path.

The Balanced Teacher Path

Since I've returned to the classroom, I've discovered the difference between the two paths. The Perfect Teacher Path is about miles-per-hour, but the Balanced Teacher Path is about symmetry, not speed. Sprinting, or even jogging, is the wrong strategy. It takes a walking pace, a careful rhythm, as if you are crossing a balance beam. You can't run across recklessly at full speed. If you do, you'll lose control and fall. But if you move slowly and strategically, it can be done.

What does this approach look like in practice? At the parent meeting? At the dinner table? On Sunday afternoon? Or on Monday morning?

A Balanced Teacher looks at the bigger picture. A Balanced Teacher pursues happiness, not perfection, in every area of life and not just one. A

Balanced Teacher:

- says *no* to the wrong opportunities at school
- says *yes* to weekend dinners with friends
- takes trips with family or friends
- avoids conflict in the workplace
- lives below his or her monthly wage
- makes learning fun every day at school
- accepts feedback from the principal
- communicates to parents with a quiet confidence
- takes her or his own recess after school
- plans dream work weeks

The Benefits of the Balanced Teacher Path

This even-keeled approach to teaching doesn't benefit just you. It helps those in your inner circle, too. Your friends, family, and coworkers. And, of course, your students.

When compared to the Perfect Teacher Path, the Balanced Teacher Path allows you to protect your passion and affect more students in a deeper way, over a longer span of time. You won't burn out. You'll be happier and healthier. And you'll last longer.

You can walk this path. You deserve this path. Your chosen career shouldn't leave you feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or depressed. If this is where you are right now, the good news is you can take a detour. Life is too short. This job can be exciting. The journey can be enjoyable and meaningful, but the first step is to stop the sprint.

In the chapters that follow, I'll walk you through ideas that have helped me find equilibrium. We'll look at changes I made—big and small—that you might make as well to bring balance to four key areas of your life: social, career, physical/emotional, and financial. I genuinely hope my experience helps you start along the path to your own balance.

Remember Lao Tzu's words of wisdom: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

Let's start with that first step.

Part One

SOCIAL HAPPINESS

For those who don't guard against it, teaching can create an unwelcome sense of isolation or solitude.

Weekend schoolwork steals time away from our families. A low salary limits our budgets for shopping trips and outings with friends. And while we're teaching at school, we're physically trapped in the classroom as the only adult in a room full of kids.

Summertime is a different story. You don't have to read test papers (as long as you don't teach summer school). You have more opportunities to relax. Time, more often than not, can feel endless.

Until summer's end. That's when time speeds up, and before you know it, you're back in your classroom.

Social Happiness is about building, or rebuilding, a network of connections with the people in your life—your spouse, children, friends, fellow teachers, boss, and students. This diverse crew can cheer you on, push you forward, and pull you up when you're feeling down. So it's important to keep those connections healthy.

It's natural to let the high demands of teaching dictate your social life. But if you put energy into opening the door, inviting people in, and breaking out of your room, you'll find yourself on the way to achieving the balance you need.

Chapter 1

Be Wonder Woman, Not Superman

I remember watching the movie *Freedom Writers* in my college dorm room. As a teacher in training, I wanted to be just like Ms. Gruwell, the main character in the movie. Through grit and ingenuity, she transformed a seemingly unteachable group of poverty-stricken high schoolers into a devoted class with a hopeful future.

To do this, she threw herself into her job. She took a second job to buy classroom supplies, took her class on a field trip to Washington, D.C., and put in long nights reading and grading her students' diary entries. Even though her husband left her because she worked so much, she transformed the lives of her students. She saved them.

When I was assigned my first class, I tried to be like Ms. Gruwell. I showed up to school early. I stayed late. I tutored kids after school. I called parents each month with updates about their child's progress. I volunteered to lead a club because no other teacher would. I took my kids to Washington, D.C. Everyone at school saw me as a superhero, but I was being a villain to my family and myself. I was miserable and exhausted, but I believed I was saving my students, and that was all that mattered until Jan, my faculty mentor, stopped me as I was power walking down the hallway.

Alarmed by the look on my face, she asked me what was wrong. I told her I didn't have time to talk and needed to get back to my room immediately. She stepped in front of me and pressed further, "You're not going anywhere until you tell me what's wrong."

I gazed down while trying to hold back tears. Then I rattled off a dozen things I needed to do before the day's end. "I've got a field trip to plan, a club to lead, parent phone calls to make, and kids to tutor—"

Before I could finish spewing it all out, she stopped me. "How do you feel right now?" she asked.

I paused, wiped my eyes, and looked up at her. "Overwhelmed ... really, really overwhelmed," I replied.

"So next time someone asks you to do something, remember the way you're feeling right now, and instead of saying yes, respectfully tell them no."

Looking back, her advice was certainly a game changer for me. But in the beginning, it wasn't easy to say no, even after the pep talk in the hallway. Teachers have an innate desire to help others. Heroism is in our blood. We need to save the world from ignorance and destruction. We need to fly to every student, parent, principal, and peer that yells for help. And in the beginning of our careers, at least, we think we can help them all, just like Superman.

Be respectful to everyone who asks, but say no to the nonessential tasks that don't align with your priority list.

You might feel the same urge, this desire to be Superman at school. Though we can't kill the instinct, we can satisfy it by being a different superhero altogether. Instead of Superman, be Wonder Woman.

Wonder Woman is a natural role model for teachers. Look at everything she can do:

- She flies an invisible airplane and can travel undetected.
- She has a golden Lasso of Truth that forces anyone in its grips to be completely honest.
- She can easily run sixty miles per hour.
- She can pick up objects as heavy as 50,000 pounds.
- She can stop bullets with her bracelets.

Wonder Woman has only one weakness: chains. If chains are welded onto her bracelets, she loses her powers. She can be rendered powerless by the objects that protect her. It's the same for teachers. We can use our power or give it away, based on our commitments. For teachers, overcommitment is the chain that binds us.

If we overcommit, if we try to do too much at school and do whatever it takes so that all kids learn, we can't accomplish anything. We will lose our superpowers. To be a Wonder Woman Teacher, we can tell some people yes, but we will have to say no to others. By doing this, we keep our hands free. This seems counterintuitive, but we need to prioritize ourselves first. Putting ourselves first is not selfish. By doing so, we equip ourselves to be more giving to those in our network—students, peers, friends, and family members. It's about saying no to select situations. That's the hardest part: making sure we choose which battles to fight and which ones to walk away from. Here are a few strategies that might help.

Spend Most of Your Time on the Things That Matter

Most

Peter Bregman, author of *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*, suggests a technique that I've found helpful: determine your top priorities and spend 95 percent of your time on them.

I listed my key priorities on a large, bright sticky note and taped it on the inside front cover of my planner. It serves as a reminder when I'm planning out each day. Grab a sticky note and try it. Of course, your list might vary from mine. These are some of my examples:

- Be happy and healthy.
- Be a loving, dedicated husband and father by spending time with my family.
- Make learning enjoyable and meaningful for students.
- Spend quality time with my closest friends.
- Act in accordance to my faith.

When a mother asks me about tutoring her son on Sundays, I pass on it because spending time with my family is higher on the list. When another teacher asks me to help start an after-school club, I decline because I wouldn't be able to work out at the gym.

My priority list is a constant gauge that differentiates between the *great* and *good* ways to spend my twenty-four hours each day. After you make your own list, post it where you'll see it: in your planner, on your refrigerator at home, on your desk at work, on your phone, or in a desktop file on your computer.

Be respectful to everyone who asks, but say no to the nonessential tasks that don't align with your priority list. I'm not saying you have to say no to everything, but stick to doing the things that interest you and say no to the ones that don't. This will disappoint some people: administrators, students, parents, and other teachers. You will receive eye rolls, sighs, and condescending emails. But you'll serve these people better in the long run if you're not exhausted from overextension.

In *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, Greg McKeown points out that while turning someone down is uncomfortable in that moment, it creates a more comfortable future. Many teachers cave in and say yes under pressure, but once they make the commitment, they will more than likely regret it later. By selectively saying no and enduring the temporary discomfort that goes along with it, your chances of avoiding overextension are much improved.

Quit One Thing

Here's another strategy to try: Identify three activities you do each week that eat up a chunk of your time, things that you could quit doing right now. These activities could be a committee role, a weekly quiz you grade, or an after-school club you volunteer for. When you've got three picked out, eliminate one of them.

By saying no to just one thing, no matter how small it is, you are changing your mindset from Superman to Wonder Woman, from Whatever It Takes to What I'm Capable and Willing to Do. You're quitting one thing so you don't burn out trying to do everything.

The Superman teacher rarely lasts long in the classroom. What *Freedom Writers* doesn't tell you is that Ms. Gruwell quit teaching after five years. There is only one type of superhero who lasts in the classroom: It's Wonder Woman. Protect your superpowers. Don't overcommit. Don't get chained up trying to be everything to everyone. Save yourself so that you can continue fighting for yourself and your inner circle.

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