

EARN YOUR HARD™

Choose the Hard that builds you.

EDEN RODRIGUEZ

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Signed by Eden Rodriguez: _____

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How to Use This Workbook

This book is for teens. It's even better if you read it alongside a parent, coach or another adult you trust.

Why is it called Earn Your Hard? Your Hard is one difficult thing you choose because it's worth doing. Earn Your Hard means pushing yourself into things you didn't know you could do and learning who you are through doing them. You don't earn your worth. You already have it.

Read my story, then do the work. When you see lines, write. When you see a question, answer it honestly. Nobody has to see your answers but you. If you're using this book in a class or a group, you decide what to share.

Look for the “What I Learned” boxes. They're the lessons I wish somebody had told me sooner.

Write in pencil or a ballpoint pen. Markers can bleed through the page.

Take your time. You don't have to finish in one day. One chapter at a time is fine.

In Chapter 10, you'll make a 30-day promise and track it on page 79. That's where this book turns into your story.

If something feels too heavy, tell a trusted adult right away. You don't have to carry it alone.

I'm not trying to be perfect. You'll see me make mistakes in this book. I left them in, because that's how I learned.

— Eden

Before We Go Any Further

My faith is an important part of who I am.

So I'm going to talk about God in this book.

I'm not going to pretend I have everything figured out. I don't. My faith is still growing.

But I wouldn't be telling you my real story if I left God out of it.

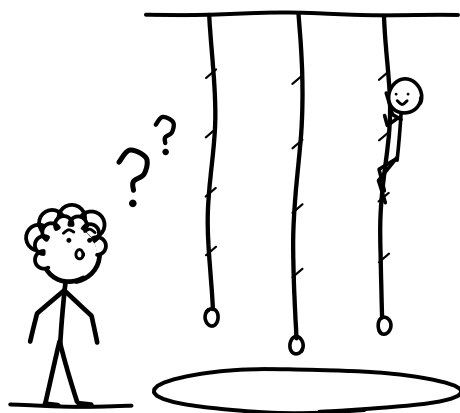
If that's not for you, I understand.

If you keep reading, I'll share what I believe, what I'm learning, and how my faith has shaped the way I think about identity, confidence, failure, and doing hard things.

— *Eden*

CHAPTER 01

FIT IN



What is this?

Before I Tried to Fit In

My dad put me in a wrestling room I did not choose.

When I was little, we lived in a few different places because of the family business, and it was hard for me to make friends. Every time I started to get to know some kids, we moved. I never had one solid group.

So my dad kept signing me up for things where I could meet people. When I was four or five it was taekwondo, at a place called Tiger Kicks, and I loved it. But most of the time, my toys were my best friends.

When I was around nine, we had just moved to New Jersey. That summer it was a gymnastics camp.

I wanted to make friends. I just didn't know how to say, "Let's hang out." So I pushed a kid into the foam pit. I wasn't trying to be mean. I thought we were playing around. He didn't.

Later, at pool time, he and two of his friends jumped on me in the water. We all got in trouble, and my parents got a call. On the way out I said, "I'm never coming back here again."

We were still driving out when my dad saw kids running up and down and flipping tires. He walked up to the man in charge and asked, “What are you doing with these kids?”

“I’m training them,” the man said. “For wrestling.”

Next thing you know, I was signed up for Spazz Wrestling. I did not walk in there because wrestling was my dream. At that age, I was not thinking about discipline, confidence, or becoming a better version of myself. I was a kid following my dad into a warehouse.

The place felt like a dungeon to me. The lights were dim. Black wrestling mats covered the floor with a red circle in the middle. Long ropes hung from the ceiling, and kids my age were climbing them. I thought: *What is this?* The garage doors stayed open, and in the summer the heat came straight inside. The coach had a whistle. Old-school hip-hop, breakdance music and Jamaican songs played while he yelled instructions. There was nowhere to disappear.

There was a conditioning drill called the burner: sprints, bear crawls, seal walks and army crawls. We duck-walked across the room carrying a heavy medicine ball. We held planks and push-up positions while the coach watched to make sure nobody lifted their body or broke early. When the workout got hard, I looked toward my dad on the side of the mat. I wanted him to get me out of there.

He did not.

He was right there. I wasn’t in danger. I just wasn’t comfortable.

At the time, it felt like I had been thrown to the wolves. Quitting did not feel like an option. I did not understand why my dad would leave me in something that hard when I clearly wanted out.

What I didn’t know yet was what that warehouse really was. It was a private club that built state champions. I didn’t start in a rec league or a beginner class. That room was my introduction to wrestling.

Years later, I understand it differently. That room showed me what it felt like to be uncomfortable and keep moving. But it also taught me something I had to

correct later: pain by itself is not proof that something is good for you. At nine, I only knew that the whistle blew and I had to finish the next drill.

WHAT I LEARNED

Being uncomfortable isn't the same as being in danger. The adults who love you won't always rescue you from hard things, but they will keep you safe.

That room is also where I met Julian Smith. He was about a year younger than me, and he was one of the first kids I got to know. We became wrestling partners, and sometimes we did private lessons together with our coach. Today he's a U15 Pan American champion, and I'm still rooting for him.

His parents, Daquan and Toni, became friends with mine. My parents didn't know much about wrestling back then. The Smiths taught them what the sport was really about: how hard it is, and how much it teaches you. They talked about training, eating right and keeping your mind focused, and my parents brought those conversations home to me.

I didn't love the burner. But I saw the same kids every week, and after all that moving, that was new for me. Between that room and my elementary school, I finally had friends.

Then COVID happened, and the structure I had known disappeared.

Wrestling stopped for me. Julian kept training through all of it. That's where our paths split.

My elementary school closed too, so all of a sudden I wasn't seeing my friends anymore. It felt like my whole world had stopped.

I didn't want to do school online, so my parents found a small private Christian school that was still open in person. I didn't know anyone there. We wore masks all day.

At first I felt alone. I didn't really know how to talk to people. Everyone was pretty nice, but it took a while.

Then I became friends with this one kid, and one of the things we did all the time was eat.

Like, a lot.

So naturally, I started gaining weight.

At the time, I didn't really care. I was young. I wasn't looking in the mirror thinking about my body or wondering who I was supposed to become. I was just living my life.

On the weekends I mostly stayed in. I watched movies, started learning about anime, and played a lot of Fortnite. It was comfortable. And when you're a kid, comfortable feels good. You don't know yet what it's going to cost you.

For a little while I had a YouTube channel too. I recorded myself playing, and I started learning how to edit my own videos. I even had an idea to talk about something positive while I played.

But over time, I definitely became more shy and less confident.

Then sixth grade came. That's when things really started changing for me.

My old friends from elementary school felt like I had disappeared on them. And middle school was a lot bigger, with kids from other schools. I didn't really know anybody.

I remember being nervous about everything. Talking to people. How I looked. How I sounded. Whether people thought I was weird.

I was really into an anime called Hunter x Hunter. There was a character named Killua, and I thought he was so cool. I started wearing black and white. Somewhere in there, I convinced myself I was "emo."

One night I was in my room with my parents, and they asked why I looked so sad. I was basically like, "I'm emo. I don't have any friends. Nobody wants to be my friend."

Looking back now, it's kind of funny hearing myself say it. But it wasn't funny to me then. I actually felt that way.

I'd see other kids hanging out and think: *Why can't I be there too? Is there something wrong with me?*

I was angry and confused with God too. I asked why He was making me a loner.

I felt alone. I was anxious. I didn't like how I looked. I didn't really know who I was. And more than anything, I just wanted some friends.

There wasn't anything wrong with me. I was still the kid from the foam pit. I just didn't know how to make friends yet.

In seventh grade, I met the "cool kids." Or at least who I thought were the cool kids.

They were the kids who would mess around in class, make everyone laugh, and get attention. At the time, I thought that was what being cool looked like.

So I started hanging around them. The problem was, I didn't really feel like I fit in with them either. I felt like I had to give them a reason to keep me around.

And apparently my solution to that was to make myself look ridiculous.

I would make noises in class, mess around, and basically do whatever got a laugh. If they laughed, I felt noticed.

The teacher would tell me to stop. I'd say okay, and I meant it. Then somebody would laugh, and I'd do it again.

Then they started inviting me to sit with them at the lunch table. When you're not really close to anybody, that's a big deal.

I became the class clown.

WHAT I LEARNED

Attention isn't the same as respect. People laughing at you isn't the same as people liking you.

I started getting in trouble. Teachers started looking at me like I was a troubled kid, and that felt wrong, because I knew that wasn't who I was. I don't blame them. It was all I was showing them. My parents would find out. They'd get mad. Sometimes they'd take my phone away.

And I get it. From their perspective, their kid was going to school and randomly deciding to act out. But taking my phone didn't really change what was happening, because my phone wasn't the reason I was acting that way.

My parents weren't in school with me. They couldn't see what was going through my head when I walked into a classroom or tried to figure out who I was going to sit with. They didn't feel how insecure I was.

And I wasn't exactly coming home and explaining all of this either. I don't even think I fully understood it myself.

Part of me knew that wasn't me. When I was little, I was a Boy Scout, and I wanted to build houses for the homeless. My parents taught me to be respectful. I didn't want to disrespect my teachers or act like an idiot to make some kids laugh. I just didn't know any other way to make friends. It felt like it was either act like that or be alone. So I told myself I was being cool.

But really, I was just becoming a follower.

It doesn't happen all at once. It's little things. You do something you normally wouldn't do. People like it. So you do it again. Then again.

And after a while, you don't even realize how much you're changing yourself just to make other people happy.

WHAT I LEARNED

You become like the people you hang around. Choose friends who pull you toward the person you want to be.

What I Didn't Understand

At the time, I thought confidence and approval were basically the same thing.

If people liked me, I felt good about myself. If people laughed at what I did, I felt cool. If I felt included, I felt confident.

But that's not really confidence. Because the second those people stop giving you that approval, what do you have left?

Now I look at being "cool" completely differently.

To me, it's way cooler when somebody knows who they are and doesn't completely change themselves depending on who's standing around them.

Of course I still care sometimes.

But there's a big difference between caring about someone's opinion and letting their opinion control you.

You can only fake it for so long. By eighth grade I was tired of getting in trouble, so I started just being myself. And those same kids were fine with it. I thought I had to be a certain way. Really, I just had to be me.

What eventually helped me wasn't waking up one morning and magically having confidence. I had to start giving myself reasons to believe in myself.

Before any of that could happen, I had to realize I couldn't keep becoming whatever everyone else wanted me to be.

Your Turn

Who do you feel most like yourself around?

Is there anybody in your life right now that you act differently around just because you want them to like you?

What's something about yourself you've tried to hide because you thought people might judge you for it?

What does being "cool" actually mean to you?

If you stopped worrying about impressing people, what's something you'd do differently?

Try This

For one day, pay attention to why you're doing things.

Before you say something, post something, or do something just because everyone else is doing it, ask yourself:

Would I still do this if nobody was here to see it?

END OF PREVIEW

What happens next?

Eden goes back to the wrestling room he once wanted to escape.
He is bad at it. He keeps showing up anyway.

Then he gets something wrong, falls off, and has to rebuild.
That is where the real lessons are.

IN THE FULL BOOK

- **10 short chapters** of Eden's real story
- **22 "What I Learned" boxes**, the lessons he wishes someone had told him sooner
- **Writing prompts in every chapter**, so your child does the work as they read
- **The 30-day promise and tracker**, where the book becomes their story
- **A guide for parents and mentors**, with seven conversation questions

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