



40 REFLECTIONS
ON BECOMING A
BETTER HUMAN

Journey to Love

WHAT WE LONG FOR,
HOW TO FIND IT, AND
HOW TO PASS IT ON

MATT MIKALATOS

Journey to Love is a book I didn't know I needed. It opened my eyes to a more robust understanding of love and what it truly means for love to be patient and kind. In our broken, racially fraught world, we all need to learn how to love better, deeper, richer. Matt's book shows us the way.

MICHELLE AMI REYES, vice president of Asian American Christian Collaborative, author of *Becoming All Things*

Gosh, this is a beautiful book. Matt's vivid stories and powerful insights will linger in your heart and mind long after you finish reading. When I was at one of the lowest times of my life, Matt reached out to show me love, so I know he practices what he preaches. Whether you come from a background where love was abundant or scarce, my prayer is that God will use Matt's words to open your heart to give—and receive—love.

DREW DYCK, editor, author of *Your Future Self Will Thank You*

In a world of power struggles and division, author Matt Mikalatos invites readers to do something extraordinary: inhale goodness and love *and* exhale it to those around them. *Journey to Love* is a rare opportunity, a respite for the weary soul, a breath of much-needed fresh air.

AUBREY SAMPSON, speaker, author of *Known*, *The Louder Song*, and *Overcomer*

I'm not sure how it's possible, but many of us manage somehow to take love for granted. With insight, honesty, and his trademark quick wit, Matt gently makes that impossible, by helping us see new depths in the oldest virtue. Any reader who goes on this *Journey to Love* will return changed, in the best and simplest of everyday ways.

PAUL J. PASTOR, author of *The Face of the Deep* and *The Listening Day*

This beautiful book of meditations inspired me to reflect on the ways I have been loved and how I can love others better. The author shares stories of how he learned

what love is that are both personal and universal. In our heart of hearts, we all long to live a life of both receiving and giving love in deeper ways. This book identifies barriers to loving well and clearly defines what love is, so that we can live the life of love we are created to live.

JOYCE KOO DALRYMPLE, JD, pastor of discipleship at Wellspring Alliance Church

We all want to love and be loved. But what does that mean? Through winsome stories and heartfelt reflections, Matt Mikalatos gently probes what love looks like as he welcomes us on a life-changing journey. Don't miss not only reading this book but putting it into practice. You'll never be the same!

AMY BOUCHER PYE, author of *7 Ways to Pray*

Despite the Beatles' assurances that learning the game of love is easy, I've found we all struggle deeply with this basic need: to receive love, and to love well. In *Journey to Love*, Matt invites us to follow him into a life bursting with love. Our steps are small and halting at first. But as the journey progresses, we find ourselves running, then sprinting, and finally diving headlong into a mystery that's bigger and deeper than we imagined. *Journey to Love* is for anyone you know. Literally. Read it for yourself. Then read it with a friend. Or maybe someone who isn't a friend quite yet. This book is medicine for our hurting world.

JR. FORASTEROS, author of *Empathy for the Devil*

Journey to Love is simply beautiful. Personal and practical, Matt made me feel loved, made me want to love, and showed me how to love. The world will be a better, more loving place because of this book.

ANGIE WARD, PhD, assistant director of DMin at Denver Seminary, author of *I Am a Leader*

Journey to Love is a much-needed reminder that love is not only an emotion but a spiritual discipline and practice. Matt Mikalatos gives readers poignant stories to connect with our hearts and practical exercises inviting us to love with our

whole selves. You'll want to read this book with a journal and practice it with a community.

KATHY KHANG, author of *Raise Your Voice* and cohost of *The Fascinating Podcast*

We spend years investing in education, professions, hobbies . . . but what about love? Do we give any thought toward growing in our ability to give and receive this most precious resource? A quick look at the world—or ourselves—shows how much we could use a journey to love, and in these forty easy-to-read reflections, author Matt Mikalatos gives us the nudge we need.

CATHERINE MCNIEL, author of *All Shall Be Well* and *Long Days of Small Things*

Wherever you are on your own journey to love, you will find your next step in this book. Through thoughtful reflections and simple, practical exercises, Mikalatos encourages and challenges readers to act toward believing in and freely expressing radical love. In our divisive culture, this book is a refreshing call to a transformational way of living that is possible for any of us.

GINA BRENNA BUTZ, author of *Making Peace with Change*

Matt Mikalatos is a fair, wise, and trusted voice online and in person. His new book, *Journey to Love*, is exactly what our splintered, weary world needs. I especially appreciate the example of the beautiful, healthy, loving friendship Matt, a married man, shared with Shasta, a single woman. A gifted writer and communicator, Matt fills these pages with inspiring stories, hard-won lessons, and challenges to move us toward greater love. Thank you for pointing us back to what really matters.

VIVIAN MABUNI, national speaker, founder of *Someday Is Here* podcast, author of *Open Hands, Willing Heart*

There are highly regarded books that you slog through, wearily wondering what the fuss is about. And then there are books you didn't know you needed until the

first chapter grabs you by the heart and doesn't let go. In *Journey to Love*, Matt Mikalatos serves as expert trail guide on a lyrical exploration of the most maligned, misunderstood, transformative power in the universe: love. Share this beautifully crafted love letter with everyone you know.

MAGGIE WALLEM ROWE, speaker, dramatist, author of *This Life We Share*

Journey to Love is an experience you don't want to miss. Each entry, reflection, and exercise will delve deep into your soul, cause you to ponder, and ultimately change your heart. Someone once said, "If we don't love, we will not live." Matt guides us on a journey, showing us how to give and receive love, how to delight in God's love, and ultimately how to live. I laughed (and yes, I cried) as I read of and embraced the tenderness and power of my Savior's love for me. Through Scripture, personal experiences, and practical applications, *Journey to Love* will change your life—it did mine.

DR. CYNTHIA FANTASIA, author of *In the Lingering Light*

Journey to Love is an invitation to peer into a truly vulnerable and sacred pilgrimage of love that author and sojourner Matt Mikalatos has committed his life to. With every shared story and soul-stirring perspective, you'll long to love more.

DESTINEE REA, cofounder of BOLD

Journey to Love gives attention to timeless secrets of a life well lived. We should never tire of our authors setting the table of love and grace before us. Every generation is hungry. I'm grateful Matt is doing his part, illuminating all sides of the heart and mind—and the world-changing subject of love.

CHARLIE PEACOCK, Grammy Award-winning music producer, author, founder of the commercial music program at Lipscomb University

journey to love

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HOW TO PASS IT ON

MATT MIKALATOS



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with Tyndale House Publishers*



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*The greatest thing you'll ever learn
is just to love and be loved in return.*

eden ahbez

INTRODUCTION

*B*efore she died, my friend Shasta asked me if I would speak at her funeral.

She sounded uncertain, even a little awkward when she asked, like maybe I would say no. Which seemed ridiculous, laughable even, after all we had been through the last four years. The cancer diagnosis, the surgery, the chemo, the radiation, her hair falling out, the painful side effects from the treatment, the giddy moments when the doctor said it was all working, the sobbing disappointment when it wasn't. I had driven her to countless doctor's appointments, filled out financial paperwork, done her laundry, washed the dishes, cooked meals, bought groceries, and a hundred other things.

I had been dreading her question, had been trying to avoid it. I kept holding on to hope, kept suggesting that there would be a new treatment, a new doctor, a healing, something. I kept saying we didn't know what was going to happen. I was still trying to convince myself that death—her

death, at least, her imminent death—wasn't a sure thing. We didn't need to make these sorts of plans.

But today I was sitting on the floor beside her bed, like I had done so many times before, and she was lying there, her face toward me. The sunlight from her window shone on her scalp, her hair gone again in a last-ditch effort to slow the gnawing sickness that was eating her lungs, her liver, her breasts, her bones. She was too thin. And she was too tired for me to keep sidestepping this conversation.

For four years, I had worked to make sure that when she asked me for something, the answer was always yes. But this question . . . I wasn't sure if I could do it. Because she had said, "*When* I die" instead of "*If* I die," and everything in me wanted to say to her, "We just don't know what's going to happen. You could live another twenty years. You could outlive us all. You might have to speak at *my* funeral."

But instead I said, "Of course," and we both burst into tears.

Not fighting that "when" felt like the first step off a cliff. We were in free fall now, and there was no more denying that gravity had taken control.

We were both still crying when I managed to choke out the words, "What do you want me to say?"

A new strength seemed to come over her. Her tears stopped, and there was a determination in her eyes. She didn't need to think for a moment about my question.

"I want you to tell them that they are loved," she said.

"Who?" I asked.

So she gave me a list. Her parents. Her brother. Her niece and nephew, her sister-in-law, all her family. Her friends. Those who had stuck by her to the end, those who had quietly disappeared as she sank into deeper illness, those who hadn't spoken to her in years, those who had betrayed and hurt her. The friends of her parents who would come to show their support. The strangers. The church staff at her funeral.

This desire of hers to tell people they were loved did not come as a surprise. Shasta was the woman who knew the name of every employee at the local pho shop and the names of their family still in Vietnam. She had befriended the checker at the local grocery store and been to see his jazz band play on a Friday night. She counseled the nurses about their personal lives while she sat in the wide chair, chemicals dripping into her veins.

"Everyone," she said at last. "I want you to tell everyone how much they are loved."

I thought of the vast number of people in the world. Of the people who know love well, who have lived with it their whole lives. Of the people who have never been loved, who scarcely believe it exists. Of those who are like broken cups, who feel any love that comes to them just seems to drain away through some unseen crack, some hole in their hearts.

I thought of the many times when I had been unsure I was loved, the astonishing loneliness of that question. I thought of the times love had filled me like helium, when I thought I might lift off the ground from the joy of it all. I thought of my dear friend. For the last year, we had never let

a day go by without telling each other, “I love you.” A text, a phone call, face-to-face—we hadn’t missed a day. Now she was asking me for a miracle. Tell everyone, every person I could find, that they are loved. I didn’t see how I could do it. On the other hand, I didn’t see how I could say no. Not to her.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.”

She smiled, radiant with affection, and said, “I knew you would say yes.” She closed her eyes, still smiling. I wiped the last tear from her face. I pulled her blanket over her shoulders, and a gentle peace seemed to cover her too. She hadn’t said, “Write a love letter to every person on the planet,” but she knew me. She knew that’s what I would do.

She knew that I would be turning it over in my mind—how to take you on a journey to love. How to show you the sights, how to lay out the map, how to walk with you from here to there.

So here it is. My best attempt at keeping my promise. Let’s take this journey together, and trust that if our paths are different, we are still headed to the same destination. *You are loved.* My hope is that we can move past hearing those words and get to the place where we truly, honestly experience it, believe it, and can show others that it is true of them as well.



PART ONE

*Preparing
for the
Journey*

*Describing love is like describing
the mountain on which you are standing.*

*You want to tell of snow-capped peaks,
the sun splashed on wide swaths of stone.
You want to say, "See how it towers over the valley.
See how its long shadow covers the world!"*

*But where you stand, you only see a meadow
bursting with orange flowers and the deer
walking single file, their ears flicking
toward the song of water over smooth stones.*

Love is like that.

*You want to say it changes everything,
say every person on earth is painted with it,
say it is the towering truth of the world,
say that it conquers, captures, collides with us all.*

*But what you see is a kitchen when you are six.
Your father lifts you to the counter
and spreads strawberry jam on toast
and you didn't even know in that moment*

*that this was love because you asked for bread
and your father gave you toast
and not a stone.*

LOVE EXISTS

Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.¹

ST. PAUL

About six months after Shasta passed away, I made a new friend. This was a big deal. I was still raw emotionally, still recovering, still struggling to sleep through the night, and really just sticking to relationships that felt easier to carry—my wife, my kids, my family and closest friends. But I met Quentin, and I really liked the guy. I made some effort to build a friendship. We grabbed lunch from time to time, and we enjoyed hanging out.

Quentin was going through some hard times—a water leak in his apartment had ruined all his belongings, and then he found out there was asbestos in it. Then, to make matters worse, he texted me a picture of his lungs from a doctor's appointment. He had lung damage from the asbestos. He

was going to need to raise some money to get a hotel room, replace his belongings, and now have surgery.

I kept staring at that picture. Shasta's breast cancer had spread into her lungs, and I had seen plenty of scans. And Quentin's "asbestos damage" looked suspiciously like cancer to me. I sent the picture to my doctor friend, who told me that the scan was of advanced cancer in the lungs. Furious, I pushed on some other details. That's when I discovered that Quentin was a con artist. There was no leak in his apartment. His belongings weren't damaged. He hadn't been exposed to asbestos. He was befriending me to use me, to get my money. And, worse, knowing what had happened to my good friend, he had *sent me a picture of lung cancer*.

Have you found yourself in a moment like that? Where you thought someone was your friend, only to discover they were just trying to get something from you, to use you? And it's no surprise—in fact, it's to be expected—that you would walk away from an experience like that and have your doubts about the existence of true friendship, of real affection, of love.

One of our first fears about the journey to love can be *What if no one ever really loves me? What if the whole thing is a myth or a fantasy? What if other people are pretending? What if I've fooled myself into believing that it's something I can find, and it just . . . isn't?*

These are frightening and painful questions. Many of us have asked whether our parents truly love us. Some of us have wondered that about a spouse or partner, or even asked

whether there's anyone out there who would want to be in relationship with us at all.

But if love isn't real, then we have universally—as human beings—fooled ourselves.

Love is a concept that every people group on earth believes in. Some languages make no distinction between the colors green and blue.² At least one language doesn't have numbers.³ There are words that appear in one language but not in others. But every language in the world, without exception, has a word for love. Love is a universal human concept.

The most ancient human literature talks about love of some kind, going back to when we first started recording our stories, poems, and thoughts in written form:

- ▶ Almost five thousand years ago, a Sumerian king named Shuruppak wrote to his son that “a loving heart maintains a family.”⁴
- ▶ Our oldest versions of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* are four thousand years old, and in it, our hero Gilgamesh speaks of his love for his dear friend Enkidu.
- ▶ Almost three thousand years ago, the Chinese poet Meng Jiao wrote a poem about the love of a mother for her child in “A Traveler’s Song.”
- ▶ There is some debate over the date, but at least 2,400 years ago, the Hebrew book of Job—one of the oldest complete works of human literature—tells the story of a man who loses everything, even though he is a good person. He speaks of receiving love from God

when he says, “You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit.”⁵

Four thousand years ago, people were thinking about love. Four thousand years from now, people will still be thinking about love, talking about love, trying to understand love.

So here we are. I know you’re wanting to talk about love, to grow in love, to become more loving, or you wouldn’t be reading this book. Maybe, like me, you’re dealing with an endless well of grief or sorrow and not sure how you could possibly add another relationship, or how to handle the ones you have. Maybe you’re tired, or broken, or numb. Maybe you’ve been hurt, and your heart gives you a sharp warning every time you think about trusting someone else. Maybe you’ve reached a plateau, and you see the mountain of love rising over you, and you’re saying to yourself, *Where I am is good, but I want to go higher.*

However you’re feeling, most of us have so many questions as we set out on this journey:

- ▶ What is love?
- ▶ How do I find it?
- ▶ How do I learn to accept love?
- ▶ How can I learn to love other people?
- ▶ If love exists, what does that mean for me?
- ▶ Why haven’t I experienced love?

We need to explore all these excellent questions. But there is one we can lay to rest: Does love exist? We already know the answer.

Love is. Love was. Love will be.



REFLECTION

Are you ready for the journey ahead? How are you feeling? Excited? Scared? Tired? Angry? What are you hoping for as we move together on this journey?

EXERCISE

Describe the state of your life as if it were a house. What does it look like? What condition is it in? What do you like about it, and what do you want to change? Write this description down, or draw a picture, or record a video about it, so you can remember this in the future. If you're feeling brave, share it with someone.