

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

I know most of us feel besieged by the many demands for our attention, so I'm grateful you have chosen to give your attention to these pages and these practices. I think it is going to be time exceedingly well spent. Before you read past the introduction, however, I'd ask you to stop and be sure you have first read the book to which this study guide is a companion, *Loveable: Embracing What Is Truest About You, So You Can Truly Embrace Your Life*. Though I believe this companion can stand on its own, it stands a little taller and a little more strongly if it stands upon the shoulders of *Loveable*. I hope you enjoy both, and by "enjoy" I mean I hope you enter into the joy of becoming your truest you. It is a joy that can never be taken from you.

Best,
Kelly

Before We Begin...

*Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes,
how do you measure, measure a year?*

*In daylights, in sunsets,
in midnights, in cups of coffee,
in inches, in miles,
in laughter, in strife.*

*In five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes,
how do you measure a year in the life?*

How about love?

“SEASONS OF LOVE” FROM RENT

How do you measure a year?

Recently, I talked to a frustrated woman who had been reading through her journal entries from the past year. She told me her entries from a year ago closely resembled her entries from a week ago. Despite her many efforts to grow and change, she found herself approximately where she started. This is how life goes, isn't it? We have good intentions—people we want to become, love we want to give, and lives we want to live—but life just sort of gets away from us, one second, one minute, one hour, one day, and one week at a time. It slips by in a flurry of hurry, a deluge of distractions, and sometimes a painful paralysis. We give all of our blood, sweat, and tears to shaping our lives into something that feels peaceful, yet in the end our lives feel *piecemeal*.

What if the next year could be different?

And what if the secret to it being different wasn't all that mysterious? What if the difference in your next year is the difference between having good intentions and having good *intentionality*? What if the key to living your life to the fullest is not living each day as if it's your last, but living each week with clarity and with focus? And what if the focus of each week progressed in an order specifically designed so those weeks will add up to you becoming your truest you?

In other words, what if you made your next year the year of listening, loving, and living?

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The library books are overdue.

In our house, that's no small concern. My kids are obsessed with books. When the monthly book order forms come home from school, they pour over them and circle the books they want, as if pouring over a toy catalogue and constructing a list for Santa. The book order forms are like Christmas, and the library is like Halloween, where a stranger who acts kind and seems really interested in them distributes free and seemingly infinite delights.

We go trick-or-booking frequently.

When we do, the kids want to gorge themselves. So, like Halloween candy, we've set a limit to the number of books they can consume — they are each allowed to check out ten books per visit. Yet, with three kids, that's still a lot of books and a lot of dimes each day they're overdue. So, realizing they're overdue, I ask my wife where I can find them. She says she thinks they're already in her car. I make a mental note to check the minivan before she leaves.

But I forget.

Now, the kids are home from school, they want to get their next library fix, and I want to minimize the damage to my wallet. We pile into my car, drive to my wife's office, and dig through the debris field that is our minivan. Amidst the carnage I find a shoe that had gone missing, a desiccated apple core, and a weird purple puddle that was probably a crayon before the summer heat melted it into molten color.

But the books are nowhere to be found.

So we return her keys, clamber back into my car and head home, preparing to search the house with a fine-toothed comb. However, we don't need the comb, because as soon as I open the door, I see the books immediately. Actually, I don't see the books; I see the *bag*—a repurposed

grocery bag that has seen better days—in which all of the books have been collected. They've been sitting there in the entryway all day. I'd walked past them countless times, probably even looking directly at them, but never actually *seeing* them. Having been told the treasures I was looking for were somewhere else, I'd failed to see what was right in front of me.

Our worthiness is like those library books.

On the outside, our bodies often feel like that old, repurposed library bag—banged up, worn, torn, frayed, and, as they say, a little worse for the wear. But on the *inside*. On the inside, each of us is full of worthy treasures. On the inside, each of us has a soul in which a spark of the Divine remains defiantly alight. This soul is our truest self, and it is brilliant. Matchless. When it comes to souls, God does not lack creativity—he doesn't do repeats. On the inside, we are each our own unique and worthy version of loveable, we are each our own particular reason for delight. This is our truest identity. Yet, somewhere along the way, that identity goes missing, like a bunch of beloved library books.

Or, rather, like a bunch of beloved library books, we *think* it does.

Inevitably, we human beings encounter this thing called shame—it's the message that who we are isn't good enough, not *loveable* enough—and it comes to us in limitless guises. In the tired sigh of a weary parent. In the quiet loneliness of an empty cafeteria table. In a friend who quits talking to us or a schoolyard bully who starts talking *at* us. In the rebuke of a frustrated teacher. In the low grades on the report card or the high-pitched conflict in our parents' marriage. It's the message advertised on the billboards of a global culture telling us we still haven't done enough or bought enough to be good enough. Eventually, this shame message becomes our core belief about who we are and, over time, like a bunch of treasured library books, we believe our true self has gone missing.

Until, one day, we realize we are overdue to find ourselves once again.

So, we start asking: *Who am I? How can I find my place in the world? What am I here to do?* Then the voices of shame around us—and inside of us—send us on a wild goose chase. (I realize here in the metaphor I have equated my wife, who encouraged me to look for the library books in the minivan, with shame. All I can say is, it is not easy to be married to a writer.) Shame

whispers, “You become loveable when you’re loved by the right people. You will be delightful when you delight everyone *else*. You *are* nothing until you *do* something. You find your worth by *proving* your worth. Your life will be magnificent when you’ve *accomplished* something magnificent.”

And so our lives become one long search of a chaotic minivan, as we scour the debris field of life for a self we can treasure. We search for our true self in the right relationship or the right crowd of people or a spectacular achievement. When we’re making progress in these areas of life, we begin to hope we’re good enough, and, when we experience setbacks, we become certain we are not. Then, we start searching again. Meanwhile, our true self is right under our nose, just waiting to be found.

Just waiting to be seen once again.

In psychology, there are many models of identity formation. Each of them explores how our identities are formed throughout the lifespan, based upon an interplay of our genetics, environmental influences, cultural factors and so on. The word *formation* suggests the creation of something out of nothing, as if each of us is born a vacant plot of land and it is up to our parents, pastors, peers, and teachers to construct a new person upon it. Then, according to these models, when we enter adulthood, we take over the construction project and continue building our own identity. For a while, as a psychologist, I thought that’s how it worked—I thought it took a lot of hard work to build who we are.

But then I actually started listening to my clients.

They didn’t say, “I want to build who I am.” They said something very different: “I want to figure out who I am.” Not, “I want to construct myself.” Rather, “I want to *find* myself.” That sounded a lot less like assembling and a lot more like *discovering*. Slowly, it dawned on me: becoming who we are isn’t about identity formation; it’s about identity *excavation*. The truth is, who we actually are—who we’ve been from the beginning, when we arrived in the world a soul enfleshed—remains buried inside of us, neglected and forgotten. Meanwhile, with the voice of shame urging us on, we keep toiling away on our identity formation.

It’s time to quit toiling.

It's time to quit overlooking the collection of treasures that is you. It's time, finally, to focus on something besides identity formation, because there is no such thing as identity *formation*. There is only identity *recognition*, identity *revelation*, and identity *resurrection*.

PART I: Listening (Identity Recognition)

Whereas shame tells us we must search far and wide for our true self, the reality is our truest, worthiest self has been with us all along, just waiting to be seen. So, becoming our truest self doesn't begin with more searching outside of us for an identity; it starts by slowing down, seeing who we truly are, and settling into the identity that has been with us from the beginning. In other words, becoming who you are *is first* and foremost about identity *recognition*. These are the months of listening.

During these months, you will first begin to slow down, rest, and create space for mindful reflection. Then, you will cultivate awareness of how shame has shaped your story and how, consequently, you've searched for your true self outside of yourself, rather than within yourself. You will learn to recognize the voice of shame within you and around you, and you will begin to listen to a *different* voice within you. I call this the voice of grace, and it emanates from your truest self.

In other words, during these months, you won't have to work harder to become who you are, you'll only need to listen more closely. The exercises during these months will cultivate your ability to look inward for your identity, rather than outward, while listening for the voice of grace which is always and endlessly calling you loveable and beloved.

PART II: Loving (Identity Revelation)

Love is complicated, isn't it?

We long for it and work for it, and yet we often end up hiding from it, disappointed by it, and sometimes even wounded by it. What if, though, love does not have to be as complicated as we make it? What if we complicate love by believing our relationships are where we must find our

worthiness? For instance, if we believe being loved by someone will make us loveable, we will go to great and intricate lengths to get the love we seek. We will become whoever we must be in order to feel beloved, if only temporarily. We will dig through the minivan of life, looking for relationships that will make us feel good enough.

What if, instead, our closest relationships became a place not where we *search* for our truest identity, but the place where we allow it to be *seen*?

Following the months of listening—following the recognition of who we are—come the months of loving. Once again, these months will feel less like building and more like *allowing*, which is a different kind of work altogether. Identity formation will give way to something else: identity *revelation*. Places of true belonging in the world are not as elusive as we think they are. They are all around us, all the time. Our only task is to reveal who we truly are and then notice who enjoys the revelation. These are the people to whom we belong.

At first, this can be scary. Even when you have begun to embrace your worthiness, you don't know how other people will respond to your revelation. So, the months of loving aren't about finding the love of your life or a perfect relationship. The months of loving are about bravery and risk. They are months of daring, during which you gradually shed the heavy burden of the false self you have been hiding behind. They are months in which the pressure to become loveable is replaced by the practice of revealing the loveable person you already know yourself to be. And they are months in which you begin to look for the loveable identity in others as well. During the months of loving, you will begin to glimpse a new vision for love and belonging, one in which you get to be who you are.

And so does everyone else.

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PART III: Living (Identity Resurrection)

“I want to discover my passion.”

This is the wish of almost every therapy client I work with, and it is a loaded wish. It is a way of saying, *I want to figure out what I love to do—the thing that makes my heart quicken, the thing I can get blessedly lost in, the thing that makes the days go fast—and I want to live it boldly.* It is a way of saying, *I want to figure out my purpose. I want to discover why I’m here. I want my life to have meaning.* These are awfully big wishes, and they can easily get hijacked by our shame, which tells us that if we want to matter, we have to do something extraordinary.

What if, though, you are here on this planet, standing on this ground, breathing this air, and living this life, simply to do the things that make you feel fully alive? What if you’re here to simply be who you have recognized yourself to be, by allowing your soul to express itself in the things you do? What if that is the deepest and most sacred purpose of your humanity—to be your truest you in everything you do? What if that’s the way the world changes, one person at a time?

In other words, what if life is not about proving your worth but *living* your worth?

Life is about resurrecting an identity that has been buried away. It’s about rolling away the stone, getting up and walking through the walls of shame that once contained you, and, along with your people, finally being fully who you have always been all along, by doing the things you’ve always loved but never lived. During these months of living, you will rediscover the passions you’ve buried away, the things you want to do in the world, and you will slowly take steps toward resurrecting who you’ve always been.

* * *

I’ve written a book about looking inside, listening for the voice of grace that is whispering there, trusting we’re loveable, and then and only then, truly embracing our people and our passions from this place of worthiness. That book is called *Loveable*, and this study guide is a companion to it. While

Loveable is meant to be read all at once, *this* guide is meant to be read slowly. *The Year of Listening, Loving, and Living* is not meant to be finished and then put on a bookshelf; it's meant to walk with you through your life. It's *Loveable* with hiking boots and a walking stick, prepared to journey with you each week of the next year.

As you set out on this journey, you will discover a few things about how this companion guide has been laid out. First, the weeks are not marked with dates but with numbers, because this guide is meant to be read and practiced from the beginning. This is intentional, because what we've heard during our months of listening is the foundation upon which we love, and the love we find encourages and supports the living of our passions. Our truest identity, if it is to be fully discovered, is best discovered in this order. Having said that, this guide is not a formula. It does not contain the secret to a perfect life. It is simply, well, a guide, suggesting that living intentionally, in a specific order, increases the odds of us fully inhabiting our truest self.

Second, this is a study guide full of *weekly* inspiration and practice. This, too, is intentional. It is difficult to cultivate any experience worth cultivating in a day. I wanted to avoid rushing you through the recognition, revelation, and resurrection of your identity, because you are worth the time it takes to go slowly and intentionally. So, for the next year, begin each week with the weekly reading and with enough time to practice the short exercise that follows it. Then, throughout the week, each day—or on as many days as you can muster—return to the practice of that exercise. If you bring that kind of dedication and intentionality to the practices in these pages, I believe you will be astonished by what can happen in a single trip around the sun. Having said that, if a year of these practices still feels to you like rushing through some very tender experiences, slow down. This isn't about accomplishing; this is about *becoming*.

Third, readers of my blog will quickly discover that, while the exercises contained herein are completely original, most of the weekly readings have been previously published in some form on my blog. While *Loveable* is almost entirely original content, this guide has been curated from existing content. Yet, I hope you'll also feel like you're reading it for the first time. What I mean is, in my weekly blog posts, I write about whichever part

of the human journey is most interesting or inspiring to me during that particular week. Some weeks, I write about listening, other weeks loving, and still other weeks about living. But I write about them randomly, out of order. So, in a way, this guide is also an organizer—it draws a selection of my randomly ordered writings into the previously unarticulated spiritual structure out of which they originally arose. In that sense, if you’ve read them before, I hope you’ll read them now with new eyes.

Fourth, I hope this study guide will help to naturally answer a question I often hear from people: “How do I know when it would be good for me to see a therapist?” If, at any point in the year, you find yourself resistant to practicing one of the exercises, or if you feel stuck and unable to progress to the next week and the next exercise, this can serve as a caution, suggesting there is more complicated discovery to do than a book can offer. These are challenging exercises—each one is a practice I have found to be helpful in my practice with therapy clients and in my own personal journey—but rarely can one person practice them all without companionship. If you find yourself in need of someone to walk with you, I hope you’ll make the call. Ask your friends and family for a good referral. Find a therapist. Invite a little extra companionship on that leg of your journey.

Finally, remember, this is a *companion* guide. While it can be read on its own without first reading *Loveable*, the rich concepts explored herein—shame, worthiness, belonging, passion, and purpose, to name a few—will be most thoroughly understood and effectively engaged with if you read *Loveable* first. Like all good things, I think it will be worth the wait.

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When we walked in the door and saw the bag of library books, my kids squealed with delight. What if the whole universe is squealing with delight about you?

God knitted himself into us. And, they say, he also exists outside of us, in a form too magnificent and mysterious to completely comprehend. I sometimes wonder what it’s like when God—like my kids upon discovery of their books—looks upon the loveable people he created. I wonder what

it's like when he squeals with delight. I wonder if that's another reason for the rainbow. I wonder if that's the reason for tulips in the springtime and gentle rain in the summertime and autumn's dying brilliance. I wonder if that's the reason for the feel of a newborn's skin and the crackle of flames in the fireplace and snow days and blessings and miracles and inexplicable joy. I wonder if all of it is God squealing with delight about who we are.

Friend, you may feel like a mess and your life might *look* like a mess, but you are also, already, the loveable person you've always been and the loveable person you are already becoming. All of creation squeals with delight about your truest identity. May you, someday soon, delight as well.

Recognize who you are.

Reveal yourself.

And resurrect your truest you.

One blessed week at a time.