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TIPS

Seven for You – Cozy and Comfy – by Marcy Lytle

My favorite fall/winter lounge attire is a blanket poncho I was given for Christmas many years ago. It was given to me by my daddy's lady friend that he was with for many years. She was a part of our family and we all dearly loved Liz. Her gifts weren't always my taste, although she never knew that. She was the sweetest with the biggest heart so I would never have told her that. One Christmas she gave me a pair of earrings that I love and another Christmas she gave me a blanket poncho. It was really pretty but I didn't think it would be something I'd ever use. Then I tried it out! It quickly became a favorite, cold weather lounging attire. I can wear it everywhere and I feel like I have a warm blanket wherever I go. Moral of the story, always give a gift a chance. - Carole

I love this subject! I love my house shoes and I have a new pair arriving today! For some reason I like having shoes on my feet either inside or outside, and my favorite shoes are my house shoes. I only wear them inside since I don't want to track stuff in. They make my feet happy!

I am more of a nightgown girl but in the winter, I will wear pajama pants. I never wear long sleeve because I am so hot-natured. My husband will be covered up in blankets and I am like, "What?" My favorite brand of sleepwear is Soma - I like the feel of the material.

We do have a tradition where I buy everyone matching pajamas for the holiday. My older guys kind of roll their eyes about it but they are always good sports. I just think it's fun! I need to work on them for this year! – Melissa

Cozy could be my middle name! I love all things cozy. My morning outfit for drinking coffee, reading devotions and answering messages consists of super soft Joggers, a soft tee, and a hoodie, all from Old Navy. (Side note: thank you Old Navy for renaming "sweatpants" as Joggers, even though I would never jog. "Sweats" sounds so anti-cozy). I have an extensive collection of joggers and hoodies, because I wear the same outfit at night when I write. I choose function over aesthetics with these slippers from Amazon. They need to be waterproof for taking the dogs out no matter what the weather is like, and my feet need some arch support. And they have a soft fluffy lining for coziness! – Angela

<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?pid=6082440220004&pcid=999&%3Bvid=1&%3BsearchText=women%20vintage%20joggers>
https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B078WQJ5PB/ref=ppx_yo_dt_b_search_asin_title?ie=UTF8&psc=1

I LOVE a good robe. The perfect one will invoke thoughts of cooler weather, curling up on the couch, hot tea, and maybe even a fire in the fireplace. Finding the perfect robe is no easy task. It needs to be warm and comfy but not too heavy, a darker color that will not show spots & washes easily, and with an attached belt so it's always ready to go. No zippers-ever! My current favorite robe has served me well for many years. I do hope she can hang in there for several more. She's like an old friend that I only get to enjoy a few months of every year. When I see her, she makes me long for colder weather. Isn't she lovely? – Shelley

Kirkwood Kitchen Heated Blanket, Soft Throw Heating Blanket with Portable USB Outdoor Blanket, Stadium Blanket, Picnic Blanket, with a pocket to warm just your hands :) Can buy on

Amazon for about \$50. I love that this blanket is soft and portable. No electric cords to get tangled in. It is great for outdoor games, picnics in the fall, or just sitting outside on a cool night. There is a pocket just for your hands, special for your hands. - Edith

Cozy socks are my jam in the winter. My niece recently sent me a pair of knee-high cozy socks, and I have other seasonal ones as well. I think they're a great stocking stuffer! The softer and fluffier, the better.

I recently was gifted the orange cozy set pictured above from Third Love. They're a bit pricey, but the quality and fit and coziness is excellent. The bottom and the top can be mix-matched with other pieces in my closet, and layered, as well.

I've seen several matching pajama sets – top and bottom – at the discount stores like Marshall and Ross. I picked up a couple and love them so much – super comfy and they feel so cute. - Marcy

The Dressing – Layered Up – by Marcy Lytle

It's November! I can hardly believe it, but here it is, and temperatures are falling and winter is calling! Here where I live, we layer a lot because we get warm-ups between cold fronts, and the back and forth requires that we be prepared from morning to evening! Cardigans and oversized sweater vests are the perfect choices for layering up so that shopping, wrapping, visiting and all the things can be fun this fall!

Cardi over jumpsuit – Go ahead and keep wearing your summer jumpsuits, but add a cozy thick cardigan over top. I found this jumpsuit at Earthbound in the mall, added a stretchy belt, and this favorite sweater by Merokeety – ordered from Amazon.

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07WF77PHD/?ref=idea_lv_dp_ov_d&tag=onamzmarcel05-20&linkCode=ic6&ascsubtag=amzn1.ideas.2TVKQTSKJZ8G6

Crisscross over button up – Criss cross waffle weave sweaters are great for fall – and layered over a long sleeve buttoned blouse elevates the look and provides extra warmth. Sweater is from Amazon, as well, and I had the shirt. Use what you have in your closet to start your layers!

Short sweater and a scarf – That same blouse is the bottom layer in this look, with a shorter open front sweater, and a scarf just twisted and tied. Love mixing blue with gray for those chilly fall days...

Open dress as a jacket – I'm pretty sure this is a dress, but when I saw it on the rack in Dripping Springs, Texas, I thought it would be cute over a graphic tee as a jacket. It works!

Pullover sweater atop a dress – This dress is a stripe long-sleeve from Merokeety (off Amazon) and I've layered a crossbody dressy sweater over the top. Any dress can be the bottom layer for a sweater on top!

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0964XQPLD/?ref=idea_lv_dp_ov_d&tag=onamzmarcel05-20&linkCode=ic6&ascsubtag=amzn1.ideas.2TVKQTSKJZ8G6

Oversized sweater vest – Have you seen these? They are one of my favorite fall trends, and this brown cable knit sweater vest is a fave over a plaid shirt I've had, from Target. You can find sweater vests at lots of stores, including the discount stores like Ross, where I found this one!

Padded tee trio – These tees were popular in the summer, where the shoulders are padded! Just pop one on over a tight knit sweater and add a scarf, to layer up your warmth this November!

Crop on top – I found this fun crop pink sweater on clearance at Urban Outfitters – I love a good clearance sale! I popped it over a tighter and cozier top for warmth, with some cuffed jeans I found at Walmart. Have you checked out their pants? Great prices and fit!

That plaid shacket – I was resistant to these, as many of them look like farmer's jackets to me! But I do like the look of some, and this cozy one I found at Ross. These are everywhere this fall, from long to short, thick and cozy and comfy, in all colors! Snag one!

Long sleeve tee over dress – It's a summer spaghetti strapped dress, kept in the closet for the fall season. I have a few long sleeved graphic tees that are great popped over the top, and knotted at the waist. Why "knot?"

White dressy long cardi over anything – I love this long sweater I found at TJ Maxx. It's elegant and warm, and elevates anything you want to wear underneath it!

Stand in your closet and pull some of your shirts and dresses and jeans to the side, and then start thinking of layers. Shop for perhaps a vest, a new cardi and a couple of pullovers that you can mix and match. Check out Walmart Fashion for some new pants. And then purchase a new scarf to tie them all together! I found some great ones on Amazon for just \$5.99 and I'm wearing one in the picture at the top of this page!

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08F4WD17P/?ref=idea_lv_dp_ov_d&tag=onamzmarcel05-20&linkCode=ic6&ascsubtag=amzn1.ideas.2TVKQTSKJZ8G6

Three Moms – Liked by Kids – by The Cousins

Mom of Two

Shopping for my girls is always so much fun but can also be stressful! They have a new "favorite" toy every day, and tend to bore of other toys easily. Going into Christmas or any birthdays, we have a rule in our house - One In, One Out. If the girls get a new baby doll, they have to give away one they already have, or any other similar toy. Over the years, here are some items that have been a huge hit in our house and tend to never go out of style:

- Zingo (Family Game) - https://www.amazon.com/ThinkFun-Zingo-Winning-Pre-Readers-Readers/dp/B01DY818JG/ref=sr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=Zingo&qid=1633554225&s-toys-and-games&sr=1-2
 - My girls absolutely LOVE this game! It is competitive, it helps them focus and learn new words. It is very simple yet thought provoking for young minds. They ask to play this daily!
- Playdough - my girls have loved playing with play dough from the time they were one until now. It provokes creativity and keeps their little hands busy while I get some chores done! Yes, it can be a mess to clean up but it is worth it. There are SO many options and gadgets - we have a basket labeled "playdough" that stores all of our containers and supplies.
- Amazon Fire Kids Tablets - https://www.amazon.com/Fire-7-Kids-Edition-Tablet/dp/B07H8WS1FT/ref=sr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=fire+kids+tablet&qid=1633572658&sr=8-2
 - If you are looking for a safe electronic device for your little ones, this is a perfect option. Lots of fun, educational and interactive games. If you are an Amazon Prime member, you have access to shows & movies. You can also stream Disney+ and several other apps on the device. You can set "timers" on the tablets that will lock when their time is up, and very good parental controls.
- Play Kitchen - We bought our oldest daughter (who is now 5) a pretend kitchen playset when she turned 2. She still loves it today, along with her younger sister. This has been one of my favorite purchases because it is something that gets years of use. There are so many options to choose from that vary in price but we went with a modern set (please - note it did take A LOT of set-up and patience)
 - https://www.amazon.com/KidKraft-53364-Uptown-Kitchen-White/dp/B01CE7H13K/ref=pb_allspark_dp_sims_pao_desktop_session_base_d_5/146-5418824-3830303?pd_rd_w=eCRel&pf_rd_p=e896123b-6614-49c5-873e-d532e726c2f0&pf_rd_r=RDA3F9F1VKK4X55A1W78&pd_rd_r=a77c4d17-71ae-4bf8-8b73-3fa02c379c55&pd_rd_wg=RFhh2&pd_rd_i=B01CE7H13K&psc=1
- An Experience - One of my favorite gifts to give is not a physical toy, but an opportunity to build memories with our girls... A train ride on our local railroad system, a trip to the Pumpkin Patch, a few hours at the jump trampoline, a pedicure, a date night with Daddy, a trip to Dollywood, and the list goes on! When you spend money on this rather than toys, it never gets thrown away, and usually always brings so much joy to each of us!

Mom of Three

Toys our kids love to play with:

Board games – Especially when we are all indoors, the kids love the game of Life and the game Clue. Clue is their favorite, and we can all play it together finding the clues and the mystery!

Miniature white boards and dry erase markers – This has been a family fave for a while. We each have one of the boards and all colors of markers. We play “Three Marker Challenge” – something we have to draw, shut our eyes and choose three colors, then draw and color it. It’s so fun. We also use the boards for Pictionary.

Book series – We watched the movies and now the kids are reading the Harry Potter stories. We talk with the kids about the stories, too. Our two older kids really like that the books are different from the movie, and they like to compare. We see the movie, then they read the books, and this works for us!

Bikes – We go as a family, on a bike ride together. All three have bikes, and it’s an outdoor family activity. A scooter, a bike, roller blades, or something to move outside together is great.

Legos – My daughter saved up and bought a 900-piece set that is a jungle theme with animals – a rescue center. All three kids spent hours putting it together – and that’s one of the first things they’ve worked together (without fighting). It would have taken her forever alone, but this bigger one was easy to split up and work on together!

Sugar and Spice Primed and Ready – by Angela Dolbear

Welcome to the premier of **SUGAR + SPICE**, and everything nice in the world of beauty. Each month we will review products, and share tips on various beauty products. This month, our focus is on primers.

Primed and Ready

Make-up primers can either make or break your foundation. The right primer can smooth out skin, reducing fine lines, wrinkles and discoloration. The wrong primer, or no primer, can leave a creped, blotchy look after applying your foundation.

So how do you know which primer is right for you?

I have a box full of “trial & error” primers. I keep them because sometimes my skin is in a bad place when I try a primer. Maybe it’s dry, because of winter weather, or oily due to high humidity.

So how do I cope with climate changes?

Actually, I have turned to a BB cream, as well as a light tinted moisturizer, as my primers, depending on how much coverage I need. Both with SPF, of course.

For high coverage need days: [Purlisse Ageless Glow Serum BB Cream SPF 40](#) -- At \$38, it's pricey, but the formula is thick so a small dab goes a long way. Great smooth coverage.

For average coverage need days: [Winky Lux White Tea Tinted Veil](#) -- At \$28, it's a bit pricey, but I joined their mailing list, and I get emails with coupon codes. It's a lighter consistency, but the color matches my skin better than the Purlisse BB cream.

On days where my skin needs an extra boost due to lack of hydration or sleep, or both, I dab on a beauty balm with my fingertips. My new favorite is [Honest Magic Beauty Balm](#). Even if my skin gets a bit shiny, it still looks like it's glowing, instead of just oily or sweaty. It keeps my foundation fresher longer as well.

Product of the Month: [Honest Magic Beauty Balm](#) \$12.99 -- I was excited to see how smooth and glowing my skin looked after finishing my make-up. You can use this balm on any part of your face. My cheeks are usually dry, with a lot of texture from old acne scars. This balm smoothed them out like magic!

Brand of the Month to Try: [Honest Beauty](#) Their products are available at Ulta and Target, as well as on their website. I recently picked up one of their eye shadow palettes, and I LOVE the creamy, well-pigmented eye shadows. The natural yet moody color story is fantastic. I reach for it often. I also have a lip balm, which is soft and creamy, and lasts a long time. The color is a subtle and beautiful berry tone.

Angela Dolbear, Beauty Editor, is the author of contemporary spiritual novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series, and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, as well as many short stories, which are available in paperback, Kindle and audiobook formats on [Amazon](#). She is also a self-proclaimed beauty junkie, and has been since long before her mother allowed her to start wearing makeup at the age of 14. She keeps UPS and the USPS busy delivering small boxes

on a regular basis from Ulta, Sephora, Amazon, and many independent cosmetics companies to her home Nashville, TN. Please connect with her at www.AngelaDolbear.com Blessings!

In the Kitchen – Easy from the Fridge – by Marcy Lytle

The holidays are upon us, and we will be baking and making and serving others, and may find ourselves grabbing fast food or snacking on all the things, because we are just so darn tired! I've found lately that fridge cleanouts are some of my favorite meals, and I've also looked for simple ideas for eating – ones that don't take a lot of time or effort. I think they're great for this time of year, so enjoy each one!

To keep on hand – muffaletta jar, buns or biscuits, rice, veggies, nuts, chips, olives, potatoes, frozen pie crusts, tamales, cheese, greens, ham, apples and other fruit.

Muffaletta – Keep a jar of this muffaletta spread in the fridge, then pull it out for easy sandwiches!

- Ciabatta rolls
- Thinly sliced ham and salami
- Provolone cheese

Just those three things make a mean sandwich. Add some carrot sticks and dip, and you've got an easy meal.

Rice Bowl – I've said this before, and I'll say it again. Rice is a great base for bowls, and then whatever you have in the fridge – arrange it on top! You'd be surprised what all tastes so good together!

- Cooked rice
- Veggies you have – grilled in a pan in a little olive oil and butter
- Red onion - sliced
- Cucumbers - sliced
- Nuts (grilled in a little maple syrup)

Just place the above items in a circle in your bowl, and enjoy.

An Array on a Tray – Grab some of those fall leaf chips from Trader Joe's and then just arrange all the things you have on a tray – for an easy dinner or snack tray for the family or whoever's home!

- Nuts
- Deli meat
- Carrots
- Cukes
- Dark chocolate
- Chips
- Dips

Pull out whatever you have from the fridge, arrange and enjoy in a tray – it all tastes so good! Especially with a little candle lit on the side...

Potato Halves – We recently had these and loved them so much. Usually, we have potatoes on hand, so baked potato skins can be easy and so filling for a simple weeknight supper!

- Russet potatoes
- Canola oil and sea salt
- Butter
- Garlic powder, onion powder
- Shredded cheddar and Monterey jack
- Cooked chopped bacon
- Green onion
- Sour cream (optional)

Preheat oven to 375. Poke the potatoes with a fork and rub them with oil and sprinkle with salt. Bake 50-60 minutes through. (You can just microwave them to save time.)

Preheat oven to 450. Cut potatoes in half lengthwise. Use a spoon to scoop out potato leaving $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch around insides. Melt butter and whisk in garlic and onion powder. Brush over tops and bottoms of skins. Bake 10 minutes then flip and bake another 10 minutes.

Top with cheese and bacon, return to oven to melt, 5 minutes. Top with green onions and sour cream, if desired.

Easy Pot Pie – I found this recipe on my grocery store's site and it was so easy and so tasty. I don't usually make pot pie, but I'm keeping this recipe because of its simplicity and goodness.

- 2 refrigerated pie crusts, at room temp
- 10 oz condensed cream of chicken with herbs soup
- 10 oz frozen mixed veggies
- 1 cup diced sweet onion
- 1 c southern style hash browns
- 3 cups rotisserie chicken, chopped

Heat oven to 450. Unfold pie crust and place in a deep dish pie pan and set aside. (I actually just used the tin pie plates the crust came in...)

Combine soup, veggies, onions and hash browns in a large microwave safe bowl. Stir well and cover with plastic wrap, then microwave on high for 5 minutes. Stir the mixture, cover again and microwave 2 more minutes. Stir and pour into crust lined pan (it will mound up nicely.)

Top with second crust, seal and flute edges, and cut several slits in crust. Cover edges of crust with foil and bake 15-20 minutes until crust is golden brown.

Tamale Bowl – We love tamales. And using them as the base for a “bowl” with chips lined around the edges, made for a super tasty lunch that was easy to throw together.

- Lime tortilla chips
- Tamales

- Black beans
- Shredded cheese
- Fiesta Ranch Dressing
- Green onion
- Avocado
- Pico de gallo

Cut the tamales into one-inch pieces and heat according to directions (microwave works!). Spoon the beans into bowls, top with tamales, cheese, green onions and avocado. Line the chips around the sides. You're done! This can be eaten warm or cold – both are good.

Apple, Ham and Brie Sandwich – If you haven't tried this combo, you must!

- Bread of your choice (I actually used leftover waffles!)
- Brie cheese
- Smoked ham, thinly sliced
- Apple, very thinly sliced
- Salted butter

Layer ham, apple and brie on the bread, and then grill in a pan with butter. Place a heavy skillet on top while it's grilling... These are delicious served with chips!

Tried and True – Instead of Storebought...

Over the years, I've quit buying store bought items and opted to make them myself, and I'm still doing it – because the difference is that good! Maybe you have a few things like this as well. I'd love to hear what they are. Some things require too much labor and time, so I don't make them as often. Others are simple and easy, so I opt for homemade all the time. Here are a few of the things I'd rather make at home than buy at the store.

Rather than list recipes below, I'm going to share why I make it, and let you browse the internet for your favorite recipes. And I'll offer a few hints, as well.

Hummus

Actually, store bought hummus can be tasty. But something about that fresh lemon juice and the whir of the processor gives the homemade a texture all its own, and rich flavor. I have found so many hummus recipes on line, with one of my faves being to add Kalamata olives to the mix...and on top. Another fave is to spring Everything but the Bagel on top, as well!

Granola

Look up Alton Brown's granola – the one with cashews. That's a fave of ours. I try lots of granola recipes. I look for ones that don't require constant stirring or long baking time. There are so many to try – and you can vary up the nuts you include to your taste! Walnuts, pecan and cashews are so good in homemade granola. Also, you control the sugar, so opt for ones that use brown sugar, honey or maple syrup for the sweet.

Flavored Bread (like banana, zucchini, etc.) – Some bread recipes require kneading and rising and waiting. I don't choose those! But I do love the aroma that baking bread brings to the kitchen. I'm guessing most of you have a favorite banana bread recipe. But branch out and look for other breads you may not have tried, and look for simple recipes that are just a mix and bake event. Invest in a good bread pan, too!

Chex Mix – I'm picturing this one above, because we recently made it. It's a great option to take to the theater or include for snacking while watching a movie at home. I decided to include the simple recipe here: 4 ½ c corn chex cereal, 4 c popped popcorn, ½ c honey roasted peanuts, ¼ c unsalted butter, 6 T brown sugar firmly packed, 2 T light corn syrup, and ¼ t vanilla extract. Mix the cereal, nuts and popcorn in a large microwave safe bowl and set aside. Mix the rest in another microwave bowl and cook uncovered on high about 2 minutes, stirring after 1 minute, until mixture is boiling. Pour over the cereal mixture and stir with a spoon or rubber spatula until coated. Microwave 5-6 minutes, stirring every minute. Spread on waxed paper to cool, stir a few times, then break into pieces. YUM.

Salad Dressing – I have this salad dressing bottle that has the markings, the measurements and everything you need to make several choices of dressing. Then you store the bottle in the fridge. It's the best thing ever...I'll include the link here. Seriously, homemade dressing is so much better than store bought and so easy with this cool and affordable invention!

Pesto – If you have a food processor, you can make pesto pronto. All you need is your greens and a few other ingredients and you've got yourself a spread to use for pasta, veggies, on sandwiches and more. I recently made cilantro pesto because I had an abundance of cilantro I needed to use up. Basil pesto with walnuts is scrumptious. Look up pesto recipes and try all sorts of them. If you don't have a food processor, add one to your Christmas list! I use mine all the time.

Those are a few basic I make often and keep on hand. And they are all great to have when family stops by, or when you need to throw together a meal at the last minute, or sit down to a treat for yourself!



HOME

Practical Parenting – Moms Need Friends – by Marcy Lytle

We were not created to live on an island, and especially Moms were not made to live isolated lives of parenting their children, while wasting away with worry, work, and the stresses of life. But oftentimes, moms end up feeling this way and that isolation wreaks havoc on the mind, body and spirit! Not a good thing! And whatever the reason may be, we find ourselves working and cleaning and caring, without a friend in sight. It may be that we were hurt, don't have the time, or just don't know where or how to have friends.

I hope this little lists helps and inspires you to reach out and make friends, because every mom needs at least a few, so that she's kept accountable, encouraged and motivated to keep going when the going gets tough.

1. Lay aside hurts. Hurtful friendships cause us to back in a corner with our hands out and palms pushing away. I've been there. But just because we were hurt in one relationship doesn't mean all women friends are mean. However, laying our hurt at His feet is the only and best thing to do, so that our hands are always wide open to the next friend nearby...
2. Ask Him for good friends. Maybe we don't ask because we don't think it's necessary or we just don't have the strength. He cares, and he knows we need friends. Ask your Father for what you need, and pour out your heart.
3. Be friendly. Don't wait and pine and sit in anguish because no one's reaching out to you. Call that mom, invite her to the park with you, ask if she can meet for coffee, and be friendly. If she's not friendly in return, or she drains you dry, then keep being friendly to the next, and the next. Ask God for strength to reach out when your arm wants to recoil...
4. Lay aside expectations. Maybe one friend is a good listener, and another is just fun to be with. One friend can't meet all of our needs. But many friends can meet many needs, and we can be the one friend to them as well, to be whatever we bring to the table.
5. Throw away the guilt. It's not wrong to ask for time to visit with a friend, away from the kids. Ask your husband. Or tell the kids it's mom time, and let them watch a movie while you visit in the other room. Moms don't have to be hands-on 24/7. We tire out! Rejuvenate yourself and enjoy friendships.
6. Quit thinking poorly. We often think ourselves right out of friendships. Maybe our house isn't cute enough, we're carrying extra pounds, or we aren't good conversationalists. Stop the stinking thinking and realize that you're awesome and a great friend to know! And smile!
7. Think outside the box. Not every friend has to think and look just like we do. Reach out to that other mom that dresses and looks different than we do, or perhaps she's older or younger. She might be wishing for a friend like you!

Friends are friends forever, that's what the lyrics of a song say. But it's not always true, and oftentimes friendships end abruptly and we don't even know why. Friendship gets a bad rap and we are often the ones that do this to ourselves. Then we sit alone and wonder why we feel

so bad, get so frustrated and hate ourselves. We were meant to have friends, to be friendly, to love well, and love when it hurts.

It's hard. Friendships are hard. But they're also so easy, when we consider all of the above and ask Him for a renewed heart to give...and then receive.

I Don't Do Teens – Know Your Plants – by Marcy Lytle

If you've had a garden or tended an herb box, or even just planted minimally in beds around your home, you know pretty quickly that some plants grow well with little attention and then others need attention almost daily, to even thrive. I tend to continually try to find those plants that need little attention, but often those aren't the prettiest additions to the yard. So sometimes, it's a good idea to have a little of both in our yards for the prettiest view. It's no different with our teens, if we continue on with the analogy of our kids being plants (or offshoots) and our parenting compared to a gardener.

Some plants only bloom in certain seasons. I currently have beautiful mums that have bloomed and the went from being a dull green mound of buds to full color that causes me pause when I walk up to the front door. If you're discouraged that your son won't ever mature and realize his potential, keep watering, keep praying and wait for the season to change...

Some plants need more water than others. In Texas, we look for plants that thrive in heat and drought conditions. But our teens are not drought tolerant plants, at all. They need lots of watering – showers of love and affirmation – daily. And it's hard to offer buckets of water to our teens if our own watering cans are dry. It pays to spend time with Him so that we are full, and have so much to spill over onto our thirsty teens in this suck-dry world in which we live.

Some plants smell fragrant and others have no scent at all. There are just sometimes kids in our bunch that are rule-followers and sweet-natured and all the things that make the pleasing to be around, like a sweet aroma in the room. Then there are some of our teens (from the same family – which is so interesting!) that just smell of dirty socks daily, and we just can barely tolerate the stench of their attitude and disobedience. It's tempting to discard and avoid the stinky socks in favor of the fragrant rose, but both are our offspring and both need attention and a place in our homes. It's hard to not play favorites, but His favorites are all of our teens. Ask for patience, and sit in wonder, as your entire room ambience becomes a beautiful mix of both.

Some plants are better indoors, and other outdoors. Isn't that the truth! Don't place tender plants outside in the winter or they'll be gone in a flash. And outdoor plants that require lots of sunshine won't smile at you, if placed in a dark room. It's good for parents to notice where their teens thrive the best. Maybe she likes to read in a corner, away from the noise, and needs that quiet space before she can interact well with the family. And perhaps he needs the Vitamin D from the sun, and the space to run, before he can be asked to sit at the family table.

It's hard work on parents reading every label our teens wear, because the labels aren't sticky ones that tell us how to water, where to place, or how much space to allow. Instead, we live with these creatures we call children and we observe and we learn and we grow, right along with them, all in the same garden. We are called to provide shade, water, good soil, and lots of tender loving care and pruning to this garden of all sorts of color, size and shape given to us from above.

And best of all, He's promised to meet with us in private when we pray to guide us along the way, on how to care for and know the plants well, so we don't lose one plant – but instead see vibrant growth – as the rains fall and the sun shines.

Be encouraged...and know your plants.

An Adage a Day - The Early Bird – by Carole Gilbert

As I sat one day thinking about Thanksgiving, I could almost smell the turkey and dressing. This made me reminisce about eating that wonderfully yummy and blessed meal. Then as I daydreamed about eating my favorite, a turkey leg, this phrase came to me, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” Of course, I would rather have my turkey in my hand than be wishing for something else that was not there.

This phrase is an ancient Greek proverb and first came out in 1670 in *A Hand-book of Proverbs* by John Ray. I have mentioned his proverbs before. He was a very busy man. This proverb was first used as a hunting expression. Its meaning is very fitting for Thanksgiving. “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” refers to something that is owned as being better than something desired. It simply tells us to be happy, and thankful, for what we have rather than seeking to gain something more. In other words, we are blessed with what we have and desiring something more can lead to our downfall.

This thought is stressed so much in God’s Word. Even King Solomon stated this in a similar fashion when he said in Ecclesiastes 6:9,

Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite.

So, let’s talk turkey. I love turkey and dressing with all the trimmings but more than that I love Thanksgiving. As I’ve gotten older, I sometimes think I love it more than Christmas. Don’t get me wrong, Christmas is by far the most important holiday, along with Easter, because of the reason they are celebrated. And we all know the reason for these holidays is Jesus. But we have gotten to where we stuff so much busyness into Christmas that we don’t have the time to sit and share the love behind the true meaning of the holiday. Thanksgiving, though, is all about gathering and enjoying each other, gobbling up a big, delicious meal together, whether it’s turkey and dressing or something else, and giving thanks for what God has given us. We realize our “bird in the hand” instead of looking for two in the bush.

At Christmas, unfortunately, we’re sometimes going for two in the bush as we unwrap and open our surprises under the tree. I always feel like I miss so much at Christmas because of my busyness. With all our grown kids and grandchildren, I can’t watch everyone open their gifts even though I try to get a bird’s eye view. I always remind myself that my blessings are not in the gifts or gift giving but in the fact that we now have so many family members to try to watch! And I thank my God daily for that!

John Ray had another proverb in that book, “The early bird catches the worm.” This simply tells us that if we want a good end result it’s better to start early. It also tends to make life as easy as pie. So, during the Thanksgiving season I will start my cooking early so I will have more family time. I will then be able to join in as we all sit down and feast together with no other agenda than to enjoy each other and remember what we have and are so thankful for.

Let’s all be thankful for our blessings and give praises to God for our “bird in the hand.”

What are you thankful for? Don't wait. Be thinking about it now. Remember, the early bird catches the worm. Happy Thanksgiving!

GRATITUDE - A Thanksgiving Exercise & Poem – by Jennifer Lytle

Good enough
Right now
Another try
Time to rest
I see... I hear... I feel... I smell... I taste...
Time to rest
Understand
Delight
Encourage

November bridges two of the most commercialized seasons in modern America. It sits right in between the cooler months (or month, if you're Texan) of fall and the coldest months of winter. November offers an opportunity to give thanks before we give and get gifts in celebration of Christmas.

This acrostic poem offers exercises to dig into the gift of gratitude both in anticipation and appreciation.

Good enough

I haven't been able to maintain some components of my work day, but what I have done is good enough.

Right now

Right now is all I have.
Right now is all I need.
Right now is the only thing in my immediate power or control.
Right now, I embrace what is.

Another try

Another try underscores the principles of growth mindset. It acknowledges mistakes, invites acceptance, and inspires the courage to do it again.

Time to rest

Our physical bodies are designed to partake in daily, weekly, and seasonal rest. Are you getting enough? Are you inviting others to rest too?

I see... I hear... I feel... I smell... I taste...

This is a mindfulness exercise known as grounding. Typically when we are anxious, mournful, or fearful, we have moved our thoughts to something in the past or in the future (the imagined future). This moves our engagement out of the present which robs us. The next time you become aware of yourself disengaging with the present to obsess over something in the future or past, try to re-engage by using your senses. It may sound like this.

I see the blur of the fan blades as they move.
I hear cars drive by on the street.
I feel my foot tingling.
I smell laundry softener.
I taste coffee.

Time to rest

How can you promote healthy and adequate rest in your home? Do you need blackout curtains? What about nights without TV usage? Did you get enough exercise this week to both strengthen your body and encourage deep sleep?

Understand

It's a challenge to seek to understand first before being understood. It's one of my personal missions at this time.

If you feel misunderstood in a situation, can you extend understanding to someone else?

Delight

Delight in the Lord. What does this look like for you? For me, delight in the Lord looks like acknowledging the concern I may have about obeying in a particular area and following after Him anyway.

Encourage

Check out this [encouraging song](#) penned by Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes, or [this one](#) by one of my new favorite groups, Maverick City Music. Music invites your soul to engage with the lyrics. It's one of those essentials for rest and restoration.

May this season be filled with delight and peace and gratitude for every good and perfect gift. May our eyes be attuned to who the Lord has placed in our path for this season. May our hearts rejoice in the simple offers of rest and restoration. Amen.

A Night to Remember – T-H-A-N-K-F-U-L – by Marcy Lytle

I love acronyms, and I think it's a great way for kids to learn and remember all the things. So why not use one for the Thanksgiving devo this month, I thought! Being thankful is quite the art, regarding kids, isn't it? Requiring them say "thank you" is a discipline we all practice and hopefully model. But when we see them begin to cultivate a thankful heart, well that's pure gold. The first time our child says "Thank you" on his own, we want to melt! I'm thinking it melts the heart of God, as well...

Preparation – Print out or make a sheet with the word THANKFUL written down the side of it, and the one word beside each letter. Little kids can draw pictures, and older ones can draw or write words. As you share. One way is to fold a piece of blank paper in half lengthwise and write THANKFUL, and then they can unfold it to write their words on the other side. This can be kept all month as a reminder to give thanks.

T – Think. Close your eyes and think about all the things you're thankful for from this one day in particular. Think about where you went, what you ate, what you saw, what you learned. Write down one of those things on your letter T.

H – Happy. What makes you happy? Is it your toys? Your friends? Your food? Write that down.

A – Ascribe. Teach the kids this new word if they don't know it. This means to recognize the source – so think of something good in your life and ascribe praise to the One who gave it to you!

N – Note. This is another word that means to take notice of – and write it down. So make a note of something you're actually praying for so that you can remember to give thanks when the answer comes!

K – Kick. It's fun to kick balls and kick the dirt, isn't it? Did you know we can also kick away bad thoughts and feelings? We can think on good things and kick away the bad.

F – Fix. There are verses in the bible that tell us to fix our eyes on things above. That means to focus. So when things aren't going our way, we can fix our eyes on Jesus – the Good Shepherd who leads us on!

U – Use. We can use our hands and our voices and our bodies to give thanks. We often clap to thank a performer, or we smile at a person who's kind to us. Let's lift our arms in praise to give thanks to the One who made us and loves us and keeps us.

L – Love. How do you show someone that you love them. You often hug them. Or maybe you say "I love you." But the best way is by doing something kind for them and if it's your parents, it's by being obedient because you trust them. Trust the Lord and lavish (give freely) your love to him in words, songs and deeds.



YOU

Strengthening Your Core – Thanks on Purpose – by Marcy Lytle

I'm not sure there's a much better way to stay strong spiritually, emotionally and mentally than by practicing the art of being grateful. And it really does take practice to make it part of a daily routine. In fact, I've done that a few time in different ways, and I'll share those below. Being grateful means sitting up and noticing the beauty and the blessings around us, even when there might be clouds and rain falling at the same time. And being thankful really lifts the spirit, when it's practiced daily.

Here are some ideas on how to practice gratefulness daily this month:

- Text a friend or group of friends daily - three things you're thankful for. This keeps you thinking and holds you accountable. And it's fun!
- Buy a journal just for writing down your daily thanks, and do it for an entire year (I did this and it was hard and good, at the same time!)
- When taking a daily walk, put away earbuds and iphones and random thoughts, and focus on the beauty in creation – and give thanks.
- Make it part of your nightly skin care/bedtime routine. As you cleanse and prepare for bed, think through your day and silently give thanks.
- Perhaps use the alphabet, and thank Him for all A things one day, B the next, and so on. Then repeat.
- As you're enjoying your morning coffee or tea, say out loud your thanks so that you can hear yourself count your blessings.
- Focus on a different family member each day and give thanks for something about them, as you pray for them.
- Purchase a book on giving thanks and read it through this month.
- Write down one daily thanks on a strip of paper and toss in a jar. Ask a friend to do the same. Read them together on December 1.
- Keep it all about the practical, and give thanks for food, clothing, and stuff that keeps your life going – naming them one by one.

I love lists and schedules and plans, because it helps me stay focused on the task for the day. Adding in gratefulness, in my opinion, will only make me smile more, lighten my load, and encourage me to be a little kinder because I've noted all the little blessings that come my way every day. It might be a quick rain shower that waters my garden, a juicy apple that curbed my hunger, or a text from a friend asking me to lunch. Stopping to note and give thanks to the One above will make this a November to remember...

Under Pressure – The End Game – by Debbie Haynes

You know the story...of the prince to pauper and back to prince again story...of the guy in the bible named Job. But here's a little background on Job that you might not know. He was born 350 years after Noah died, he was Jacob's grandson, and he was about 70 years old when all of his trials started. He was also a perfect and upright man, a guy that feared God and avoided evil. He continually prayed for his children, and he was extremely wealthy.

And then there was this discourse between Satan and God, where God pretty much bragged and lifted up his servant, Job. And Satan, in bold arrogance, wanted this prize possession that belonged to God to fall and fail God...and so the devastation began. One by one, Job lost everything, and it says that Job still worshipped, blessed God, and sinned not – and did not even charge God foolishly!

However, the story didn't end there. Satan wanted God's glory for himself and he wanted Job to curse God. That was his end game. So Satan began a horrible, agonizing torment of Job in his body, and Job's own wife tells him to just curse God and die. We also know that Job's friends began their own private psychotherapy sessions on their friend, offering accusations, which resulted in mass confusion and they were at best – miserable comforters!

Job began to pour out his soul to God and yet found no answers. Until chapter 38, when God begins his own interrogation of Job. He sits in silence and listens. God describes his mighty power over and over again and Job's response is this, in verse 42:

Lord, I know you can do everything.

I just didn't understand, things too wonderful for me to know, which I knew not.

And Job repented. The Lord dealt with the so-called friends. And at the end of the same chapter, we read that after Job prayed for his friends, God gave Job twice as much as he had before. The latter end of Job was greater than the beginning.

Maybe you're nodding by now and saying you've heard all of this before...so what?

Things seemed so unfair for Job, so unnecessary and so harsh. And we too feel that way in seasons of our own lives. We cannot even begin to understand how good could result from the pain and loss we're currently in, and we begin to think if something hurts SO MUCH, it must not be God at work in our lives.

But James 5 says those that endure are counted as happy. And it then refers to the end of Job's life. And from there we can look at the end of our own lives, all of our lives, when we read the end of the Bible in Revelation 12:11. One by one, we will overcome the accuser – that same Satan – that wicked evil doer – because of Jesus.

Has God quit performing miracles? No way. But often the miracle isn't what we're asking for, but rather pure gold that comes through fiery trials.

Life is absurd. Life is unfair. Death interrupts. But we can raise a fist at God or sit in quiet and peace and wait for his voice. And we can observe his power in all of creation around us.

We love you, Jesus. We ask you to bring our friends and families together as you did with Job, for the celebration of what you've done in restoration of the loss. For you restore bigger and better than anything we could ever achieve on our own...Amen.

Healthy Habits – Silence – by Marcy Lytle

I have been thinking about silence lately, and even wrote about it in another story. But in this column, I'm going to be sharing our silence can be good for our health! And while it may seem impossible to find silence, especially if you're a mom of a bunch of littles, it might be something we all need to look for and welcome when it does arrive...in the most unlikely places...and maybe unwelcome, as well.

The silent treatment happens – Maybe your child or your spouse is giving you the silent treatment because of an argument you're in the middle of, and it's gotten loud and accusatory and not pleasant one bit. The silent treatment is maddening when we're the one talking and desiring to be heard. But if someone's giving us the silent treatment, take it, and listen to what they're not saying. And listen to your own heart and words. It could benefit the entire family.

Silence can be a wise decision – Perhaps he's doing that again, or she's gotten on your last nerve, or the kids have run you ragged on a long afternoon and there it comes...almost like acid reflux you cannot stop...those words. It's tempting and an automatic response to use words like "stupid" or to attack character with phrases like, "Are you crazy?" or to scream and curse at the ones we love. In Job 13 it says that sometimes silence is equivalent to wisdom. It's hard, but if we can choose silence when our own volcano is erupting, how wise we are.

Silence enables us to listen – Have you ever been in a shouting match with someone and each of you is so loud you really aren't listening at all? You've basically tuned out what they're saying because your ears and your heart are both hurting. When we feel like shouting and we both choose to be silent and perhaps add that with time, coupled with a note instead of speaking out loud, we really might actually hear one another and resolve a conflict in a healthy manner.

Silence with Him opens our eyes – When we are constantly chattering about all of the chaos around us and weeping and crying, it's good for a while...because it unloads the heaviness and the pressure. But when we're finished, if we sit and stay silent and await instruction and love and affirmation, we just might hear it. Sitting still and silent in His presence is pure gold, and that results in pure health both spiritually and physically.

Silence is uncomfortable – and being uncomfortable is sometimes SO healthy. Just like exercise can be painful, the benefits outweigh the pain. Have you ever been to dinner with another person and no one knows what to say? Silence is awkward, but's it mostly that way when the two people don't know each other very well. Once we are comfortable in their presence, we don't mind sitting with a bit of silence so that we can look around and observe and take in the moment, and observe something we may have missed, had we been constantly talking.

I'm thinking some of us are okay with silence more than others. Too much silence because we are too alone isn't healthy. There's always a good balance. But too much noise is equally unhealthy, because noise drowns out things we need to hear. Noise in traffic might drown out a siren we need to hear. Noise in a classroom prohibits learning from taking place. And noise in our homes makes for tension and stress.

It's going to get noisy this holiday season, most likely, either in your home or at the home of relatives, or even just in the stores or all around us. There are the sounds of the season we all love to hear, like carols and bells and all things jolly. But then there's the silence of that first snowfall that causes us to pause and look and wonder and listen.

That's a healthy response to the wonder of the Creator when he comes to visit our yards and our homes and our hearts.

In a Nutshell – Crazy Faith or Just Plain Nuts – by Jill Montz

40 years ago my parents opened the doors to the Pecan Shed in the small farming town of Byers, Texas. In what was literally a two room shed, (no electricity, no running water, not much but a few walls, a roof and a floor) they began selling pecans in the shell to local members of the community and those traveling along Hwy 79 between Texas and Oklahoma. This young couple with two young kids had been making ends meet for quite some time and this was their next adventure.

Little did either know that 40 years later, the two room shed would grow into a business that includes 1,000 acres and over 25,000 pecan trees, two retail stores, and employs over 30 people year round. I know my parents were determined to make it work, but I doubt either could have imagined then that their pecans would be shipped all over the United States and to places all over the world.

Back then, many well-meaning members of the community didn't foresee the success that was to follow. As my dad planted trees back in the late 1980s, several local folk stopped by to admire the orchard he was laying out. More than a few commented how he would never see it yield much in the way of a living. They didn't mean ill will towards my dad, but many had only seen pecan orchards that were not managed well or at all and thus took decades to ever produce commercially. My dad had a different vision and while it still took around eight years to do so, those trees did produce commercially and have ever since.

We have lived through a lot over the last four decades. Some things Mother Nature threw at us...droughts, freezes, tornadoes, insect invasions, and diseased trees. Some things the world hurled our way...market crashes, high tariffs, and spray drifts from aerial applicators. And even a few mistakes we made ourselves (probably too many of those to actually list). But through it all, the trees have grown deep roots and thrived...and so have we.

If you would have asked my brother or me back in high school if we wanted to work at the Pecan Shed or in the orchards, we both would have responded loudly with a "NO!" We saw our parents put blood, sweat, and tears into what they were creating and Jake and I were hoping college degrees would get us a few miles from home and a few more hours off the clock on a weekly basis.

Jake graduated from Tarleton State University with a horticulture degree. It didn't take Dad long to coax him back to the orchards to help for "just a few months." That was over 20 years ago and Jake is still on the Montz Pecan Company payroll. I, on the other hand, held out a little longer. I spent a year after graduating with a Master of Business Administration degree working in a local hospital's human resource department. While I loved the people I worked with, I missed my jeans and tennis shoes that are standard dress code at the Pecan Shed. Plus, I was looking to start a family and wanted more flexible hours. So when Mom called to say she wanted to retire to be a fulltime Memaw (thanks Jake for that first grandgirl!) I took over Mom's duties of running the only retail store we had at the time.

Even then, I am not sure I knew what was in store for all of us. We all had dreams of bigger and better. But so far, at least for me, this family business has well exceeded anything I imagined. We still hold true to our roots. We still want to provide some of the best pecans in Texas along with the best customer service. We still try to treat our staff and customers more like family than the bottom line. We still are grateful to God daily for the blessings He has heaped on our family and our business. And we all still have a few big dreams for the business going forward.

I have been reading a book by Michael Todd called *Crazy Faith – It's Only Crazy Until It Happens*. This book reminds me that we all need faith but having “crazy faith”...well that takes some effort. Noah had crazy faith until the rains came. Then he looked like a pretty smart dude.

What are you having faith for? What are you having “crazy faith” for? What are some big dreams that scare you? What are some dreams you have that you are even scared to whisper? If anything was possible, what would your family, job, life, or free time look like? For me, just the idea of HAVING free time is taking some “crazy faith” these days!

As the Pecan Shed and my family hits this 40-year mark I am challenging myself to put on paper some big dreams I have for the business as well as for myself, personally. Some of them are very exciting and some of them just scare me to death. But all of them will take faith and a few will take “crazy faith” to see to fruition. 40 years ago my parents might not have labeled it “crazy faith” when they opened the doors to the Pecan Shed, but looking back it was just that.

Life Right Now – Failing Forward – by Hanna Bouck

I fail most things twice.

Which I think gives more legitimacy to the tag line, “Third time’s a charm.”

For reference; I failed my driver’s test twice and passed on the third time. I failed my college math class twice; passed on the third time. I applied for a specific job in college twice and finally got it on the third time. And finally, I dated two guys before I met my husband (he was the third.) So, you get the point!

I have also always been really discouraged by my failures. I am queen of seeing everyone else succeed and then becoming my own worst critic. I have felt (and honestly, still do) like everyone else is thrown into beds of roses and I have to roll through the thorns a bit before I reach the promised petals. Not putting myself as a victim - but more of a frustrated participant.

So, why do I seem to always fail more than succeed? Honestly, I don’t have an answer. I do think maybe it is in reality God’s grace in my life. Knowing that if I wasn’t without hardship and grief, I could quite potentially be the most prideful and least sympathetic person you’d ever meet. Ouch.

Maybe, it’s also to allow me to actually appreciate the “third time” successes a little more. And perhaps I can then be a celebrator and a cheerleader for those that do make it, and be appreciative when I make it.

I could honestly keep going on with what those reasons may be, but I do know what they’re not. They are not without purpose.

Life right now for me feels like a lot more thorns than it does roses. But it’s the fragrance of Jesus and His unwavering grace and love for me that keeps me failing forward.

Keep failing forward and falling into His arms friends...with me. It’s the best place to be.



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Stumbling Barefoot – by Bekah Holland

You know, for someone who is pretty intentional about being honest about their life and being real with people, I sure do keep bumping into things that humble me a little more. And then I have some choices to make. Do I keep smiling, putting on a brave face and fake it 'til I make it? Do I just laughingly mention a tough day? Or do I get real-real.

For most of my life I fell squarely into the *fake it 'til you make it* bucket. As long as I kept smiling and fixing and doing, with what appeared like endless energy and selflessness, eventually I would believe it myself. Which is great and all, except when I started burning out, melting down, crying in the closet and couldn't seem to keep a solid grasp on anything resembling someone who has her life together, it all kind of fell apart.

With some things, I still seem to have a hard time sharing my struggles. Especially things that go on in my mind and heart. The things that I can easily hide or gloss over. A lot of it is my trying to protect others from one more worry. But I think there might be a little shame in there, as well. Shame that I'm so blessed but can still feel so empty. Shame that I can no longer be what everyone needs me to be at just the right time.

But you know what is better than putting on a "brave face" and pretending everything is fine? Admitting you are decidedly not okay. And you know what's even better? Taking a single step. Making an appointment. Talking to your people. Taking your meds. This sounds easy to someone who hasn't ever experienced depression or loss, been overwhelmed or broken.

Even though I have a great support system, I've somehow deluded myself into thinking that my value to is based mostly on what I am able to take on, how happy my people are, how well I'm able to shelter others from the ugly parts of life. Some of that comes from being raised by a mom who always did it all and with what looked like grace and ease. Now that I'm on the other side, I'm guessing she was just clawing her way through each day, each new struggle, like the rest of us mere mortals.

Some of my views of what makes me valuable are self-imposed - like a prison sentence in which I've acted as my own judge and jury. And when I let it, social media plays a part as well. It's so easy to see a snapshot of a single frozen moment in someone else's life and draw the kind of conclusions that make me wonder whether other people are much better at this whole juggling act, or if maybe I am just exceptionally bad at it.

We all have pretty snapshots that look like we have things together. The ones that manage to miss the laundry baskets that have been waiting to be folded (or maybe have just taken up permanent residence in that spot), or a full sink and cluttered counters, or the spill that we called the dog over to clean up. Those snapshots may show smiling kids in clothes that look like they've been washed this year, instead of the ones that could probably stand up on their own, and the screaming match and chase scene that just went down in our living room because...kids. Or maybe they show a warm look shared with our partners, but not the passive aggressive attempts and making him put the toilet paper roll on the right way (which as we all know, is only one acceptable way...mine).

But all these snapshots, the good, the bad and the embarrassing, are just that....solitary moments in time. And sometimes, those are the ones we hold on to. But maybe that's where we're going wrong. Because life isn't a moment in time. It's a journey. Sometimes it's a long,

rocky journey and our flip flops broke so we're stumbling barefoot through it, but still. We're all just limping through, at times. Every single one of us. But I've found, through much trial, error and late night tubs of ice cream, that the limping through is usually easier if we have someone to go through it with. Whether they're limping too, or they're cheering us on, or maybe even giving us some duct tape to fix the flip flop so we can walk a bit easier (I more than likely have lost most of you with my flip flop analogy, but if you've ever broken one while out in public, you get it).

So let someone in today. Let them love on you, laugh with you, maybe cry some, too. And when you can hold your head above water, go love your way into someone else's mess. Make a cake, take out the trash, take their kids to the park, send ridiculous cat videos and Tik Toks to make them laugh. We can all use someone to trust with the whole truth, not just the nice parts we share with the rest of the world. Go find that person, whether it's your partner, your best friend, your neighbor, your mom or your therapist. Because I believe with all of my heart that God didn't make us to do this alone. He made us for communion with Him and community with others.

Take one step to tell someone you need help, or a hug, or more ice cream without judgement. Shoot a text to the mom from PTA who just looks like she might need a pick-me-up (or a partner in crime). Whatever it looks like for you, just do one thing that makes you a little vulnerable with someone you trust. Take down the walls and maybe hang up the superhero cape for a bit (but keep the crown, because you deserve that crown). Let someone see into the real parts of your life. Be someone that another woman can be real with, too.

And it won't happen all at once. But bit by bit, you might just find your way back to the light...where you belong.

"Maybe I can't stop the downpour, but I will always join you for a walk in the rain."

-Dr. Sukhraj Dhillon

Date Night Fun – That Was Nice

It's the countdown now toward the end of the year and it's baking, buying, wrapping and spending...and it can all become quite overwhelming and take over our evenings and weekends. However, this month we're including date night ideas that are simple and sweet, easy to put together, and will leave you both saying, "That was nice," when it's over. After all, you still need time together to chill and connect and all of these other fun duos:

Puzzle and Pie – Go ahead and cut yourself a slice of that pie you're going to bake for Thanksgiving early, and enjoy a piece or two together, while you put together a simple puzzle that you can do in a couple of hours (keep it 250-300 pieces). I saw some cute ones in the Dollar Spot at Target. Heck, make pie your complete dinner and feel no guilt!

Salad and a Show – Winter salads are a thing, you know, so peruse the internet and find a good and simple one – or just use what you have in the fridge and be creative! Create your salads together, then sit down for a Netflix show or an old DVD you haven't watched in ages. It can be a thriller or a rom-com or even something historical! You pick.

Cider and Constellations – Set your lawn chairs on the driveway. Heat up some apple cider, grab a big blanket, and sit together as the stars make their appearance in the night sky. Sit in silence and sip for a while, then marvel together at His handiwork and give thanks.

Bakes and Books – Baked potatoes are an easy dinner for two – just include your favorite toppings – and break them open and enjoy. Set out a big blanket on the floor and enjoy your steamy bakes and then read books together. You can read aloud to each other, flip through a travel book to be inspired, browse old photo albums – your choice.

Donuts and Drives – Make it an early date and stop for donuts and then drive. Drive to see the sunrise if you're early risers, or drive through a neighborhood with restored homes. Pick a variety of donuts and critique each one. Then stop and take a brisk walk so you can eat some more...

Are you nodding at how nice those all sound? Date night doesn't have to stop when the madness begins. It can just be a simple activity with eats for two, to make you both smile because you connected in such a nice way...

For Better or Worse - Have Fun Together – by Kaelin Scott

Do you have a lot in common with your spouse? Or are you pretty much complete opposites who somehow go perfectly together? Either way, a lot of marriage is about compromise. And I've found that this is especially true when it comes to having fun.

What do you like to do, and what does he like to do? Chances are, you don't like all the same exact things. But I'm also betting that you enjoy spending time together and want to share the things you enjoy. That's where compromise comes in!

Maybe one Saturday you can spend time learning something your husband likes to do, then the next weekend you can teach him one of your hobbies. Or if you're like me and don't really have any hobbies, maybe you can learn something new together. Go with him to do something he thinks is fun, and then switch and do something you love.

Now, this is easier said than done sometimes, especially when you have young kids like we do. But it could be simple things. Do a puzzle together, or read him a poem you really like. Walk the dog together instead of going by yourself. Bust out the karaoke microphone and take turns serenading each other. Even if something isn't exactly your idea of fun, you can make it fun by watching your spouse enjoy it.

So many people these days have their thing that they do, while their spouse has their own thing. There's nothing wrong with that! By all means, we don't have to do everything together all the time. But sometimes it's nice to include each other in the things we enjoy, because then we get to enjoy them together. And that's always a nice way to spend the day!

Whether your husband is an avid fisherman/hunter like mine, loves golf, goes for long bike rides, builds stuff in the garage, etc., take an interest in his hobbies. Choose to go have fun with him once in a while. It will show him that you care, which will make him feel important. And it will bring you closer together too. Sounds like a win-win situation to me!

After 40 Years – Late Night Devotion – by Marcy Lytle

For years, my husband and I talked about our desire to spend time reading the Word together, but it rarely happened. We tried this and that, but every time we started a schedule it failed...and we were back to square one. I resented him for not making it happen, and I said enough to make him feel bad about it, too. Not a good combo. Finally, one year – and I don't recall when – we found a 365-day devotional book and laid it by our bedside and began this routine...

When the room lights go out, he grabs the book, turns on his lamp, puts his glasses on his nose, and I snuggle up near him and listen as he reads. Often we are tired, but this routine has settled us into a rhythm that we both quite like for lots of reason. And it takes lots of effort to do it, as routine, because it's easy to let it slide when it's late, one is busy, or all sorts of reasons.

1. It requires that we both retire at the same time. If that doesn't work for others, it can be another time when you're together consistently.
2. It requires that I put away my phone and really listen to the words he's reading loud.
3. It requires discipline to read it any way, even if we're tired, because that one page of truth settles our minds and hearts nightly, before we sleep.
4. It's a connection point for both of us to think about a particular verse or story.
5. It's a faith builder and a reminder of his goodness to us and ours.
6. It's short and sweet and easy to do, but has such a wonderful outcome.
7. I remember to thank him often when he picks up the book, and I smile when I dust off that table when I clean.

It's so simple, I don't know why it took us so long to find this connection that works for us. I know some couples pray together. But I know many couples that do nothing to connect spiritually.

We both lead such different schedules with our work during the day. We don't really study or search or learn in the same way, so bible study together isn't a good fit for us. And sometimes we pray for needs as they arise, but often our prayer times are different as well. He prays early, as he lingers in bed. I pray throughout the day, especially in the car. So it took us a while, but we eventually found out that the night reading works and settles and blesses and it's actually fun.

There are SO MANY devotional book options out there, for reading. And it doesn't have to be long and drawn out, it can be simple and short and sweet. Especially right before we go to sleep.

We've been doing this for a long while now, and we're on the hunt for a new book for the new year coming up soon. It will be fun to start another...and another...and another. Because snuggling and listening to his voice read truth that sinks into my soul is the one of the sweetest and most solid connections we've ever made. And it makes me adore him every single night, as we adore HIM together.



ENCOURAGEMENT

I Choose Faith—November 2021

The life I live is not what I thought it would be
Back when
Back when I thought things should be tidy,
Tied up with bows, and presented on silver platters.
The truth is they're not and never will be.
The truth is the bows unravel no matter how tight
I tie them. The platters are tarnished and dented,
Banged about and thrown at walls that do not give in
To my demands.
But I choose faith, not fear.

I will not be afraid of the path taken in the dark night
I will not be afraid of ships sinking in a roiling sea
I will not be afraid of shouts or whispers warning of future doom
For my children--for those I hold close and tight.
For the world--crumbling, wasting, consuming, burning.
I choose faith, not fear.

The kingdom of the world is failing
The kingdom of heaven is reigning
Though What Is seems not to be
And What Is Not asserts its false presence
As though it were,
I choose faith, not fear.

In faith I love those who untie my bows and break my platters
In faith I see the light at the end of the dark path
In faith I know the ship will ride the roiling sea
Faith silences the voices that speak impending doom
Faith inspires the faithful to serve, to love, to create, to solve, to give hope,
To bring the peace and light of What Is into What Is Not.
And so I choose faith, not fear.

Rooted in Love - Overcoming Unbelief – by Kaelin Scott

One of my current favorite Bible stories (because my favorites change all the time) comes from the 9th chapter of Mark. It tells the story of a man who brings his demon possessed son to Jesus, begging Him to drive the evil spirit out.

He delivers his request, telling Jesus, “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” To which Jesus replies, “If I can? Everything is possible for one who believes.” Then the man exclaims, “I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief!”

And what does Jesus do? Does He dismiss the man? Tell him to come back when his faith is greater? No. Jesus delivers a miracle. He brings healing to the man’s son, rebuking the spirit and driving it out. Talk about a faith booster!

Jesus could have told that man to go away. He could have turned him away because he had doubts. But He didn’t. He had compassion on the man and his son, and He answered their prayers.

I can relate to that unnamed man in so many ways. Clearly, I believe in Jesus and His goodness and trust Him with my life. But sometimes, I struggle with unbelief. I battle with doubt. Does that nullify my faith? Does it make me ineligible to receive God’s blessings? Not at all! It makes me human.

If you’re waiting on prayers to be answered or waiting for a miracle, keep asking and keep believing. Don’t let your doubts outweigh your faith. Remember what Jesus told the man – everything is possible for one who believes. He will come through for you, one way or another. He will answer your prayer.

Friend, having doubts is normal. Seasons of unbelief or struggling with faith are normal. But the important thing is that you never lose sight of what you believe. Always know and remember that Jesus is good. He is powerful. He is love. He is truth. He is light. He is life.

He knows what you need. He knows your thoughts. He knows your heart. He knows your hurts. He already knows, and He already has the answer. That doesn’t make traveling the road easy, but it means we don’t have to worry about the destination. He’s got it under control. We just have to believe.

I know, much easier said than done. Simply believing. Well, I don’t think any of us will ever get it completely right on this side of heaven. But I do know that Jesus has grace for our human hearts. He knows that we don’t totally get it, and that’s okay. He still loves us and wants to richly bless us. He wants to take care of us, because He is our good Father.

If you’re struggling to believe, pray that simple prayer: “Help me overcome my unbelief!” And then watch Jesus work in mighty ways. Personally, I think that turning Scripture into prayer is very powerful. So find some other verses, turn them into your own personal prayers, and keep on believing that His words are true.

He loves you, friend. And He is listening to you. Don’t forget – anything is possible. Just believe.

Simple Truths – A Losing Battle? No Way – by Marcy Lytle

No matter what age you are at the moment you're reading this article, you're growing older. Even women in their young 30's talk of botox and getting rid of fine lines, which quite amuses we women of the wiser ages. And it seems that every decade of a woman's life, she thinks about the aging process, different limitations creep upon her, and it's so easy for depression to settle in as the years pile on...

I follow quite a few women on Instagram that vary in age from 20 – 70! And quite honestly, some of the older women are just as striking as those that are younger – and it has a lot to do with their attitude about aging!

Here are a few things I've experienced and noticed about the beauty of growing older, and ways to deter depression, and welcome the aging process with joy:

A smile is everything. Smiling at any age brightens the face, lifts the cheeks, and works better than any highlighter found in our makeup bags!

Confidence in fashion is fascinating. I may not dress like she does, but when I see a woman sporting a sweater with a belt, colored tights, or anything she puts together – and “struts her stuff” – I smile. It's easy to lose confidence in fashion as we age, so make the effort to settle in to your own style and own it – with pride!

Heels aren't everything – I felt dismayed in the past couple of years as I realized that stilettos and super high heels are out for me, because aging does that – it cramps your feet! However, I've seen so many women rock the flat, wear the booties, and spruce up an outfit in the cutest flats ever! Heels aren't necessary for walking tall at all!

Color – yes! We don't have to settle into grays and beiges as we grow older. The bright hues are for women of all ages, and I've found that wearing bright colors that match my eyes, or contrast my skin tone, makes me feel better emotionally and physically. Try it. It works!

Trends aren't just for the young – You're right. Maybe jeans with torn holes everywhere and crop tops aren't for the aging. But some trends can be incorporated into our style without effort – see the TIPS page The Dressing! Be bold and dare to enter those stores with the young style and be inspired to add something trendy to make it your own!

Don't dress to please your kids – From the time your kids can speak and notice, they might point out that you look fat, or weird, or they won't be seen if you wear this or that. And even when your kids grow up, they may or may not approve of your clothing choices. Don't make the mistake of dressing to please your kids. Dress for success – and that means wear what makes you feel good and happy.

Ask for help – If you DO struggle with confidence in dressing and makeup and all things fashion related and it gets worse with age, shop with a friend. Peruse the internet. Choose a few basic style you love and go for it! Maybe you're a classic Ann Taylor style – embrace that look!

Perhaps you love the color and angles that Chico's sells. Or you live for comfy and cozy. Pick a couple of looks that you love, and boost your closet around those.

Hair up there – Hair changes as we age, as we have children, in color and texture. Find a style you love, ask a hair stylist for suggestions, then go with the flow and enjoy what you have! Thinning? Grab some cute hats. Graying? Either color or not – but smile at what you see in the mirror. Feel flat and drab? Try some new hair products.

Depression and Deflation – It's easy to end up depressed on any given day, at any given age, when we look in the mirror and don't love the changes we see occurring. Sagging skin, droopy eyelids, wrinkles and changes that are occurring way too fast. Seriously, pray about all things, including how we feel about the way we look, and invite HIM to stand beside you as you gaze at yourself in the mirror.

Smile big, whether you feel like it or not.

Seek help from a friend you trust and admire.

Start with something small that you'd like to change or embrace.

Sigh a good sign of relief that you're running a race to endure...

Step away from what's expected and step into the fact that you're accepted and beautiful at any age.

And that's the truth!

The Battle against the Evil Gluten-nator

I thought I might be dying.

It felt as though the whole of my digestive system was being turned inside out, like an old sweatshirt. The pain and cramping was so intense. I prayed--more like begged--God to take the pain away.

This cannot be good! I thought to myself.

After several more these episodes like this, I messaged my doctor, since I try to avoid going to the actual doctor's office, since I don't like it.

Thankfully, he promptly replied with a few suggestions to try. The only suggestions I had not tried yet was cutting gluten out of my diet.

What is gluten? I thought. It sounds made-up. Like something someone would say to get out of participating in P.E., or a big Trigonometry test. "Oh, I can't play dodgeball today, Coach, my gluten hurts."

I knew gluten had something to do with wheat. So I turned to the all-knowing Google search engine.

According to celiac.org, "Gluten is a general name for the proteins found in wheat (wheat berries, durum, emmer, semolina, spelt, farina, faro, graham, KAMUT® khorasan wheat and einkorn), rye, barley and triticale – a cross between wheat and rye." *Hmmm, sounds harmless,* I thought. "Gluten helps foods maintain their shape, acting as a glue that holds food together. Gluten can be found in many types of foods, even ones that would not be expected."

Yep. I found that last statement to be so true, as I began my journey to eradicate gluten from everything I ate.

Gluten is everywhere. Hiding in just about every kind of food. It's like the nemesis to a superhero, who always turns up at the worst possible time.

But the good news is, once I transformed myself into Super Label Reader Girl, I immediately felt better. It was like night and day, as the saying goes. No more near-death-feeling pain.

No more waves of gastrointestinal Armageddon. Unless something slipped through undetected. Like BBQ sauce. Which may contain soy sauce. Which is fermented wheat. Which, of course, has gluten.

Dastardly Gluten-nator strikes again.

So this is my life, I thought. "I can do all things through Christ," I quoted to myself. My husband Tim was a huge help too, in our fight against the terribly elusive Gluten-nator.

I hunted down recipes, learned about different types of flour for cooking, like almond and rice flours. And some exotic varieties like arrow root and cassava flours.

I ordered gluten-free foods from Whole Foods Market via Amazon. I found some tasty alternatives to my favorite foods. The gluten-free brown rice and lentils pasta from Trader Joe's is so delicious, with a subtle nutty flavor. And it's so light in my tummy.

But truthfully, some of my favorite foods are just not the same without the gluten. Like pizza. And bread. And fried chicken. And biscuits. Did I mention pizza?

Almost two years later, as I was well-settled into my gluten-free life, I was putting together another “safe” food order on Amazon, when up popped in my search a supplement to aid in the digesting of gluten.

Immediately Jack Skellington’s song from *Nightmare Before Christmas* when he stumbles upon Christmas Town, played loudly in my head, “What’s this?! What’s this?! WHAT IS THIS!?!“

I dug into the reviews. I read almost all 786 5-star reviews for [GlutenEase](#). I read how the supplement contains enzymes that help gluten-intolerant folks such as me digest wheat products without incident.

Can this be true? I read somewhere that a product like this was in the works, but I didn’t put a lot of stock into it.

So I ordered a bottle.

It arrived within a day or two. All the good reviews made me hopeful, so I eagerly removed the safety seal, and downed one of the beige capsules with a glass of water. Like the precious antidote to an evil poison.

Then, I bit into a fresh slice of sourdough bread.

So good! I swear I could hear angels singing. The light fluffy texture and delicious slight bitter taste brought tears to my eyes. I prayed that I would not experience any aftershocks, so to speak.

Night came. And the following day. Nothing. No gut splitting stomach cramps. No foggy head or painful, stiff joints.

Hallelujah!

The next experiment included a homemade cheeseburger with a real bun from the bakery section of our grocery store.

Oh. So. Good.

And again, no complications or side effects. The next stop on my gluten crawl was pizza.

Tim and I went to our favorite pizza place in West Nashville, Five Points Pizza. I made sure I had a GlutenEase tablet tucked away in my handbag before we left. And I made sure I took the tablet, just before biting into the steamy cheesy goodness.

The chewy and fluffy crust was amazing.

Again, no problems. I was seriously praising God. I still get a lump of gratitude in my throat whenever I think about it.

While I was praying and praising God, He showed me that I didn’t ask Him for help with my gluten problem. And that I should examine my heart as to why that is.

I didn't even think to ask the Creator of Heaven and Earth to help with my gluten issue. Why? Did I think He wasn't capable? No. I have seen and experienced many miracles and mighty works of the Lord God Almighty.

Did I think I wasn't worthy of asking for His help? Maybe. I suspect that I didn't ask God for help because I settled for "this is just the way it is, so deal with it." *Really?* Yes.

Did I think God was too busy for me to ask Him to make it so I could eat my favorite foods? Did I think this was a menial request, that I shouldn't bother Him with? Yes and Yes.

My worthiness is not part of the equation when it comes to asking the Father of Heaven for help. I was made worthy when I believed in the saving work of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection for me, and for everyone.

I am His child. It is my truest identity.

God gave me a gift I never ventured to ask Him for. He showed me the way to eat anywhere.

I have restored to my Bucket List to: 1. eat a croissant in Paris, and 2. to enjoy a plate of Cacio e Pepe pasta on the Amalfi Coast in Italy.

His goodness and lovingkindness blows me away. And overwhelms me.

Now, every time I eat a sandwich, or a slice of pizza (yay!), I think of God's goodness. And how much He loves me.

Amen and amen.

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series, and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, as well as many short stories, which are available in paperback, Kindle and audiobook formats on [Amazon](#). Angela writes real, relevant, relatable, and reverent fiction, with an aim toward spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ, while hopefully inspiring readers to laugh and/or cry. She loves reading, writing prose, as well as writing and recording music with her husband Tim in their studio in Nashville, Tennessee. Please drop by and sign-up for news and to read new stories and hear new original music at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>. Blessings to you!

Moving Forward – Where Would We Go? – by Pam Charro

Many of his disciples went back and no longer walked with him. Then Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to leave, too, do you? But Simon Peter answered, "Where would we go? You have the words of eternal life."

John 6:66-68

If you have walked with Jesus for any amount of time, you probably know how Peter felt. So much of what the Bible teaches can be difficult to swallow and makes us unpopular; and, no matter who we are, life is painful and disappointing sometimes.

Yet, once you believe Jesus, it's so hard to *un-believe* him because nothing compares to knowing him.

I am in yet another season where I am asking him to fight for me. I don't want to feel powerless and uncared for; I need to know that he sees and will work for justice on my behalf. But as strong as that longing is, as much as my mind and flesh want to demand a particular outcome, I must come to grips with the fact that his way of doing things may leave me feeling hurt.

I then have a choice to make:

Will I put God on trial and possibly walk away if I judge that he has failed me?

If so, where would I go?

I might as well decide in advance that I will already surrender, no matter how I might feel later, because he truly is Lord and has the right to do whatever he chooses. It's the only alternative to resentment and misery, which are just taking the long way around to ultimately surrendering anyway.

Where would I go when my whole life's search for truth, life, peace and joy have led me to the most faithful person I will ever meet?

So, even if it hurts (and it will sometimes), I am staying right here, next to the One who loves me and deserves my trust. No matter what.



FRESH THYME

Fresh THYME - Mulligrubs

...a despondent, ill-tempered or sullen mood...

I mentioned this in an Instastory recently and some listeners had never heard of this term! I used it to describe my mood that day, feeling “down in the mulligrubs.” Imagine a dungeon that’s dark, a place where you can’t see the light, and perhaps the darkness is just closing in and getting darker...that’s the mulligrubs!

I’d say that a lot of us have felt this over the past couple of years, whether it be due to Covid, job losses, fear of the future, worry over the economy, or just day to day struggles with paying bills, dealing with kids, making dinner, and being caught off guard by disaster and trouble. But then there are days when everything can be going just swell, and we still feel like we’re down in the mulligrubs.

Here’s how we sometimes handle this dark dungeon of despair:

- We set up camp and wallow, which actually feels good on some dark, cloudy days.
- We focus on all the darkness that has closed us in and locked us up.
- We delve into a good book or eat our way to happiness, or fall over into a long nap.

There’s nothing wrong with any of the above once in a while, but dealing with the mulligrubs on a consistent basis with those reactions really settles our feet into concrete where we are unable to even take a step into the light!

Did you know that *Mulligrubs* was actually a television series aimed at kids that aired in Australia back a few decades ago? It was best remembered for a blue screen with just a set of eyes, a nose and a mouth – the face of Mulligrubs! I didn’t even know this when I used the word that day!

I don’t like feeling down in the mulligrubs. I’d say it differs from depression, because for me the mulligrubs is just a despondent feeling that comes and goes, for no particular reason, or if there is a reason – it’s here today and gone tomorrow – thank goodness!

Here’s how it might be better for us all to handle a mulligrubs day:

- If it’s Monday, chalk it up to post-weekend blues and plow through it.
- If it’s thoughts that are making us blue, elevate them with truthful statements about who HE is.
- If it’s tiredness, take a nap or ask for a break.
- If it’s heaviness, visualize laying down those heavy loads at His feet and leaving them there.
- If it’s just a blue day that’s come our way, wait for the sun to blow the clouds away.

Mulligrubs. Just saying the word sounds funny, and that might even elevate our mood. Just talking out loud about it helped elevate mine. And this time of year, when it’s all about good cheer, we can often chide ourselves if we’re just not feeling it.

Don't chide, don't scold yourself, and definitely don't lock yourself in. It's just a feeling that we feel that we can't really define, and truth be told – we're going to be okay – because tomorrow's another day...

FRESH THYME - A Million to One – by Marcy Lytle

I've wanted to write a screenplay showing all of the times God answers our prayer that we are not even aware of. We all focus and stumble around on the unanswered prayers of life, but I'm betting there are a million answered prayers to every one of our unanswered prayers. I'm praying big time for healing for a few friends, and they need miracles. I've been in this position before and seen miracles take place, and I've also been disappointed when they didn't. It's human to feel disappointment when we ask for big things and they don't happen in our timing or in our space. It's heartbreaking.

I thought I'd just list out (not a million, so don't worry) a dozen answered prayers that I imagine in my mind that "could be" scenarios in my movie that I think about sometimes in my head, and see if you might want to do it yourself, as well.

- I wonder how many times God has sent a snake slithering away from me, so that I don't step on it, when walking or hiking.
- I wonder how many viruses showed up in my blood and then exited my body, because of grace and prayer.
- I wonder how many near deadly disasters on the highway were averted because I ran late leaving for an event, and missed that crazy driver headed the wrong way.
- I wonder how many times I've eaten bad food and it didn't upset my stomach, because my body was covered at the time by healing.
- I wonder how many times storms headed toward my street dissipated and dissolved with one word from his mouth.
- I wonder how many times my kids were caught on a playground before their foot took a misstep and they landed hard on the ground.
- I wonder how many blessings fell from heaven on a daily basis because of my parents and grandparents' prayers.
- I wonder how those groceries or that dress or those tickets went on sale just when I wanted or needed them?
- I wonder how many times God was pleased with my praise, my trust, and even my failures?
- I wonder how many times God carried me across burning sand beneath my feet when I didn't even know I was in his arms?
- I wonder how many times He's whispered of his love to me with the stars and the moon and the sun, and I missed the whispers because I saw the clouds?
- I wonder how many losses I've had that were actually wins, but I just don't know it and never will?

I'm thinking there a million to one acts of protection and love, and even when we think we see the "one" misstep on God's part, or inaction, or silence or a big fat, "NO" to our request, it's still an act of love and protection that we just can't see. Because we only have eyes that look horizontally and not vertically, so many times.

Make your own list. Wonder with me. And trust that it's actually more like a billion and a billion more...from now through eternity of acts of grace from Him to all of us, every single minute of every single day.

FRESH THYME – Those and Them – by Marcy Lytle

We are all so different, aren't we? And while the Church is often criticized for judging those that are different "outside," what about all the judging that goes on inside the Church? I've for sure been a part of that activity, and I've often justified it because others and their differences just were so bothersome and hard to understand, and I judged their spirit, their actions, and their words...and nothing good came from that.

Let me explain.

There are those that call themselves intercessors and pray for people and nations and cities. They see things in other realms when they pray and often their talk is different than what I would say or think. But I've recently come to give thanks for these people that see and pray and do things differently than I do. I'm not one of them, and that's just fine. They have their place and their prayers move mountains.

There are those that believe in healing and miracles, so much that they dare not ever speak anything otherwise. They won't allow any verbiage other than positive words, and it can be hard to be around those Pollyanna types. We that are realists have trouble hanging with those that are spiritualists, if we want to give them a label. But thank God for those who believe in miracles and pray for them, when the rest of us cower in fear and just hope.

There are those that live off the land, store up for emergencies, and it might appear as hoarding or hibernating to those of us that are social and out there living life, without preparing one bit. But who's to say they're not hearing and obeying what they're supposed to do, and who's to say we might not need what they have in time of great need? I'm thankful for those that store up and prepare, even when it seems odd and different from me.

There are those that are wearing this or saying that, or going here or drinking that, and when it doesn't fit into my upbringing and my theology, I've struggled in the past with understanding and trying to figure out their Christianity. It's not my job to do that, and it's a huge relief to get go of that activity of the mind. Judging others by the way they look and act and calling that religion is dangerous, and I don't want to be a part of that!

I'm thinking you too have a category of people in the Church that have either annoyed you or hurt you or you've not understood, because their "ways" and actions are so weird, in your estimation. I get it. But I'm pretty sure I've annoyed others too, by my ways and actions or inactions, on any given day. And realizing that we too walk and perform and act in the ways we think are best and the ways we understand, and that others might not get it either, is a big step in loving others IN the Church, especially when they don't live like we do.

Lay down that load if you're carrying a grudge or a judgment against fellow believers. It's not doing anyone any good. And learning to smile and give thanks for differences instead of worrying over them enables us all to be free to serve Him and trust Him to finish the good work he's started in all of us.

It's hard.

But it's wise.

And it's a totally bright night when we all shine in our differences, one little candle at a time...

FRESH THYME – Unwelcome Guests – by Marcy Lytle

Here where I live, fire ants are a problem. They emerge in mounds after a rain, and when they sting they hurt. And they are a nuisance in parks, right where we set up to have a good time. How dare they? Also, I recently planted my fall greens in my raised herb box, and something has eaten every single plant all the way down to the dirt! I'm on a rampage trying figure out what happened and what I can do to rid my produce from these unwelcome and unwanted guests!

Fire ants respond to sprinkles around the mound, but they are always present under the dirt just waiting for a new spot to emerge when I'm not looking. I know many of you can relate! And these pests in my planter box, I'm guessing, are squirrels or rabbits. Squirrels have also eaten up my outdoor tablecloths by nibbling patterns of holes throughout, and making me so angry!

I was thinking about these unwelcome guests that scurry around in my yard, especially at night, because they know I'm asleep...I guess. Or do they know? That's when they show up and dare to destroy. And it's also true that unwelcome guests show up at night in my mind, as well. Much like these pests in the yard, they nibble away at any growth I may have had in my walk with Him, and leave me bare to the bones sometimes, if I welcome them in and they stay.

So I've been learning (yes, it's a lifetime process that we learn something new every decade) how to rid my mind of unwelcome guests that dare to nibble and sting and bite and destroy. And here are a few things that perhaps you already do. But if not, I hope they help keep your garden robust and growing, instead of bare and not showing...

Visualize – I often visualize laying the nibblers at his feet like worry and fear. I see myself dropping them in a paper bag and leaving them there for Him to take care of and destroy. Seeing this picture of the transfer from my hands to his helps me.

Ask a friend – I have a good friend that prays for my worrisome head and heart, and I pray for hers. Often, it's easier to have faith for a friend and her to have faith for you, and it's so helpful and comforting to know she's praying!

Hear the Word – Yes, we know it's important to know it and read it. But it's also important when we read it. For us, it's the last thing we read before we turn out the lights...a short scripture devo...that settles our hearts and reminds us of the goodness of God. That's like sprinkling cayenne on the fears and seeing them run.

Recall – It's helpful to recall his faithfulness in times past, in the events of the day, or in the lives of our children, so that we remind ourselves that He knows, he cares and he acts. You know the replays that take place on football fields in pro games? They give clarity on the last play, so the teams can move forward. It's no different for our minds. Recall gives us clarity and truth of who God is, so we can sleep tight...without a bite.

Dance – Have you ever danced before retiring at night? While you're cleaning your face or getting ready for bed, play a song with lyrics that make you want to sway or move and take your

Partner's hand and dance. Just a three minute song of movement and stepping and smiling and leaning and bending is a great pesticide to the destroyers of the mind's garden.

I hope those help you. Just pick one...and try it tonight...as you sprinkle your garden that perhaps is ravaged by nibblers, to show growth once again...of peace, joy and love.