



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

2021



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

January 2021



TIPS

The Dressing – Your Bed – by Marcy Lytle

Now's the time for dressing up your bed! It's the time of year when all the bedroom "stuff" is on sale, and a great way to boost your mood going forward. It doesn't have to mean an entire bed makeover (although it could), but there are cute accents and ways to dress up the bed with just one change or two! We've narrowed it down to seven ideas!

New throw pillows – This might be the easiest up-do. Toss out all of your old throw pillows, or purchase new covers, and update your bed this way. If the current throw pillows are too small, too many, too few, or the wrong colors, then stand back and look. Decide on a few new ones, vary up the shapes and sizes, and go shopping! [Amazon.com : throw pillow covers](#)

A throw at the foot – Maybe your bed looks fine, but you feel it just needs one extra thing. What about adding a throw at the foot in a bold geometric print or color, to add a pop to your bedding! And you'll also have a cozy pullup on those cold January nights. How about a fun plaid? [Blankets | Throw Blankets | Kirklands](#)

Mix up prints – One idea is to keep your basic comforter and ditch all the matching shams and pillows, and mix it up. Keep that one neutral hue and then add some prints and textures in your pillows. Seriously, this can give you an entire new look that's fresh and up to date! Here's an example of mixing up prints!

Arrange another way – If you normally fold back your comforter and stand up your pillows, try it a different way. Stack your pillows instead! If your throw pillows line up like soldiers, consider turning them sideways or at an angle! Get a friend to help you with vision!

Move it – Consider rearranging your bedroom and moving the bed to another wall. Get rid of clutter or extra furniture that's just collecting dust. Minimalize so that your bedroom is inviting and cozy, not overstuffed and busy.

The headboard – If you don't have one, create one. If your headboard is outdated, change it up. There are SO MANY options for headboards – ones from old gates hung on the wall – to a huge tapestry instead of a connecting wood piece. Or a beautiful art piece. Look on the internet and be inspired!

A whole new setup – Maybe it IS time for a new comforter – the whole set. Instead of getting a bed in a bag that coordinates perfectly - try mixing up the pieces. Purchase just the comforter you love, and then shop for all the extra pieces and put together your new look. How fun would that be?

Start with a vision, collect photos of ideas you love, and then make a list of what you'd like to do. Not good with vision? Ask a friend to come along and help. Then start moving, rearranging, adding new and tossing old. Pretty soon, you'll have a whole new look that invites you in once again...

SEVEN FOR YOU – Bath Time

It's January, and warm hot baths or showers might be calling us to linger, soak or stand in the flow for a while. Our panel of women were asked to share their picks for products, experiences, etc. that make their bath time personal and relaxing. It's fun to hear what other women do, and then try one of these ideas ourselves! After all, you've been working hard this past season, and you deserve a long, pleasant cleanse...underneath warm hot water...don't you?

I am not a bath person. I like my shower, though, but I want it quick and done. I have used the same Dial Basics HypoAllergenic soap along with Tresemme shampoo and conditioner for years because they work with my allergies. Too much fragrance can start a headache or start me sneezing. I have found one other shampoo I really like. It's Avalon Organics Volumizing Rosemary Shampoo. I found this at Central Market in Fort Worth, Texas years ago and I was hooked on its soothing rosemary smell. It can be found at other Natural Grocers too. And every time I use it I can't help but sing the song, "Rosemary and Thyme." Remember that song? I don't think that's the title but that's the part I know and like to sing. Do you sing in the shower?

[Amazon.com: Avalon Organics Shampoo, Volumizing Rosemary, 11 Fluid Ounce: Beauty](#)

I'm not a bath lingering person, at all. Once the water cools off, I'm out. However, my husband and I both LOVE special soaps. We buy them all year long – natural fragrances – handmade – whenever we get a chance. For winter, I love the eucalyptus and peppermint scents, or grapefruit. We buy them at farmers markets or other places where vendors sell their creations! Gruene Witch Apothecary is a favorite place to order from! Their facial coffee bar is the best!

[Organic Handcrafted Soap ~ Gruene Witch Apothecary](#)

No baths for me unless it's for therapeutic reasons under doctor's orders! I take hot showers at night. I don't have a particular routine, unless I need to wash my hair, in which case if it's early enough I will wash it at night. I hate going to bed with wet hair and then I really have a bad hair day the next day, so I prefer to wash my hair in the morning. Immediately out of the shower I will put Lubriderm lotion or coconut oil all over my skin. (The best thing about winter bathing is no regular shaving of your legs! That's always tricky when you're a woman of a certain age who wears glasses to read. Seems that I'm always missing spots when I shave!)

[Amazon.com : Lubriderm Daily Moisture Hydrating Unscented Body Lotion with Vitamin B5 for Normal to Dry Skin, Non-Greasy and Fragrance-Free Lotion. 24 fl. oz : Beauty](#)

During the long cold evenings this time of year, a slow hot bath can be a mood changer. I use a cup of Epson salts with a few drops of my favorite essential oil whenever I have the time to indulge. I received a bathtub tray last year for Christmas and it has made bath time so much better. I read or listen to music on my iPad and the tray keeps everything safe and secure. I do keep adding hot water as necessary because the Epson salt works better the hotter the water is. I'll sit there from 20 minutes to an hour if I'm lucky.

[Amazon.com: ROYAL CRAFT WOOD Luxury Bathtub Caddy Tray, One or Two Person Bath and Bed Tray, Bonus Free Soap Holder \(Natural\): Home & Kitchen](#)

I just bought this for my shower...Eucalyptus branch that I found on Etsy. It was \$8.00 for a bunch. Shipping was \$7.00. I'm sure you can buy it cheaper, locally. It's supposed to release the aroma with the hot water...so you feel you're in a spa.

[Amazon.com: Fresh Eucalyptus Branches \(Baby Blue\), Fresh Eucalyptus Shower, Bouquet, Aromatherapy, Spiral, Shower Bath Plant, Weddings \(1 Big Bunch\): Garden & Outdoor](#)

I love to take a hot soaking bath in the evening after I've had a brisk walk around the neighborhood. Usually, I put some Epsom Salts and lavender essential oil for these *no longer spring chicken* bones. I love listening to Spanish guitar music on Pandora while I soak with low lamp light. My favorite one is Armik Radio Station. I can set back and think about the day, what I want to accomplish tomorrow, and then rest. So lovely!

[- Now Playing on Pandora](#)

I love a HOT bath with lavender drops and Johnson's baby shea and coconut oil gel added to the water. Turn on the sauna jets, lay back, with my soft instrumental worship music playing. There is a sky light above my tub, so best time is in the evening watching the moon and stars. Especially if there is a full moon. It is so relaxing, I stay until I feel like jelly when I get out. My husband often says I look like a lobster. My favorite products are pictured below.

[Amazon.com: Johnson's Baby Oil Gel 6.5oz \(Pack of 2\): Health & Personal Care](#)

In the Kitchen – Keep on Hand – by Marcy Lytle

This month I thought it would be fun to share items/products I always “keep on hand” and use repeatedly for meals throughout the week. Some gadgets or tastes we buy end up never getting used, or just taking up too much space. Then there are others we use ALL the time and wish we’d known about them sooner! They help make cooking so much more fun and easy and better!

Here are my top seven, along with a few recipes to go with:

Mason jars – for keeping herbs in water and sitting on your counter to snip and use! I wash my herbs, place water in the jars, and set by the sink to use in the next few days. Otherwise, they go in the door of the fridge!

Cilantro is a favorite herb to keep, and it’s part of this dish:

Chicken Brussels Sprouts Tacos

- Cooked, shredded chicken
- Corn tortillas
- ½ c mayonnaise
- 2 t chili seasoning
- Lime juice
- Brussels sprouts
- Pepper jack cheese
- Limes, onion, avocado and cilantro for garnish

Toss sprouts with oil and broil in the oven (shaking pan often) til they are browned and tender. Mix mayo with 1 T lime juice and 1 ts chili seasoning and stir. Toss shredded chicken with that 1 t chili seasoning. Assemble tacos with the chicken, mayo mixture, and Brussels, then top with the garnishes.

Shallow bowls – These shallow oversized bowls are THE BEST for dips, rice and pasta bowls, or other dishes served in individual bowls. I love them so much. Recently, I used one for a great dip:

Loaded Hummus:

- Store bought or homemade hummus
- Cucumbers
- Kalamata olives
- Grape tomatoes
- Red onion

Chop the veggies into small pieces. Spread the hummus across the bottom of the bowl. Arrange the veggies on top, and eat with pita chips. The bomb. Great for a dinner by the fire, watching a movie.

Little prep/dip bowls – I have a few sets of these. Some are super small for little ingredients when cooking. Another set are a bit larger for dips, alongside a dish like eggplant fries. These were SO GOOD – I was quite surprised at how good these were!

Eggplant Fries:

- 2 large eggs
- ½ c grated Parmesan
- ½ c toasted wheat germ
- 1 t Italian seasoning
- ¾ t garlic salt
- 1 medium eggplant
- Cooking spray
- 1 cup meatless pasta sauce, warmed

Preheat broiler. In shallow bowl, whisk eggs. In another shallow bowl, mix cheese, wheat germ and seasonings. Trim ends of eggplant and cut into ½ in thick slices, then cut those slices into ½ in strips. Dip eggplant in eggs, then coat with mixture. Place on a baking sheet coated with cooking spray.

Spritz eggplant with additional spray, broil 4 inches from the heat about 3 minutes. Turn eggplant, spritz again, and broil til golden brown – about 1-2 minutes. Serve immediately with pasta sauce.

Soup bowls – Do you have a set? My favorite set is from Lakeside Collections because it has a tray alongside for the crackers. The cutest!

Rosemary Lentil Soup

- 1 T olive oil
- 1 ½ cup diced onion
- 1 T minced garlic
- 1 pint cherry tomatoes
- 1 ½ cup lentils
- 48 oz rosemary lemon chicken bone broth
- 2 c Swiss chard, chopped
- 10 oz diced butternut squash
- 1 T kosher salt

Heat oil over medium heat, add onions and garlic til onions are translucent. Add in tomatoes and lentils. Cook 4-5 minutes til the tomatoes begin to wrinkle, then add broth. Bring to a boil and cook 15 minutes. Reduce to simmer and add in chard and squash. Cook an additional 15 minutes til lentils are cooked through. Season with salt and enjoy.

Werthers soft caramels – I love to keep bags of these in the pantry for nights when we just want apples, melted caramel, mini chocolate chips and chopped nuts – a great dinner alternative!

You just add a bit of milk and slowly microwave and stir (like 20 sec increments). Arrange on a pretty plate and you're done!

OXO mixing bowls – This set is my fave, with the rubber bottom and stainless steel insides. They've lasted and lasted! And you always need different sizes for mixing and making.

[Amazon.com: OXO Good Grips 3-Piece Stainless-Steel Mixing Bowl Set: Kitchen & Dining](#)

Sheet Pan Nachos

- Tortilla chips
- Black beans, one can rinsed and drained
- Sweet potatoes, peeled, small diced
- Lime juice
- Chili lime seasoning
- Grape tomatoes, halved
- Scallions, sliced
- Cilantro
- Avocado
- Mexican grated cheese

Mix the potatoes, beans and chili lime seasoning and lime juice in mixing bowl, with 1 T canola oil. Arrange chips on a rimmed baking sheet, then top with bean mixture. Add grape tomatoes and cheese on top, and bake at 350 about 20 minutes until cheese is browned. Remove and top with scallions, cilantro and avocado. Add salsa on top, if you wish!

THREE MOMS – OUR FAVES

We asked our three moms to weigh in on their favorite sites or apps or all the things they browse, listen to or like, and to share that with us for the new year. After all, moms need resources and encouragement and down time to be entertained, learn something new, or just chill and watch. Our three moms have nine littles between them all, from ages 10 down to 2. Here's what they are saying to tune into, this New Year of 2021.

I don't listen to many podcasts or read blogs, but usually when I do listen it's music. However...

I follow Bloom Podcast, done by a friend of mine, Sarah Walters. She was mentor in my Christian sorority. She is a licensed counselor and started a podcast discussing the differences of all our mental and spiritual health, and mindset. She talks about how to heal and grow, and common reasons we might feel jealous or envious. It is designed to encourage us all to find that we are enough and to be content with what we have now. It's very practical and tangible, and she's very easy to listen to. She is based in Austin, Texas. You can find this on Spotify.

Some of my favorite Instagram accounts are (ones I actually go to and check!):

Candace Cameron Bure – She was DJ from *Full House* and she's a believer and a mom. She talks about mom life and business life and her faith. (candacebure)

Nicole Walters – She has adopted three children and she's hilarious. She runs her own business. So she shares marketing, career, and life. She's so fun to follow! (nicolewalters)

Joanna Gaines – for décor ideas and she and her family are so fun to follow! (joannagaines)

Jasmine Roth – has a show on HGTV – super practical ideas on house designs and décor and DIY. (jasminerothofficial)

The people I "follow" the most are my family and friends! I know that sounds cheesy but that is truly the case. I get so many ideas, suggestions, encouragement from just following family/friends on Facebook or Instagram - or through phone calls. If I had to pick certain blogs/apps/account I would pick:

1. *A Bundle of Thyme* because it provides great ideas on activities to do with kids, encouragement for your marriage and yourself!
2. Busy Toddler (Susie Allison) on Instagram - you have to check her out if you are looking for creative ideas to entertain and enlighten your kids at home. Her sensory boxes are GENIUS!

Other than that, I get most of my encouragement, ideas, parenting tips from my close family/friends, God's word, and other parenting books. I would love to start listening to more podcasts but I'll add to my "one day" list...when my kids are a little older and life isn't so demanding...

It's hard for me find time to listen or browse, as I barely make it through the day, because of this crazy season! However, I do the Bible Recap – a podcast that recaps my bible reading for the day.

Our kids are part of Orange Curriculum through our church – but I rarely get to it. There's a parent's app for that.

In the evenings our family participates in an 806 prayer or on the way to school, I do a verse of the day – through the Bible App. 806 is the time we as a community gather on our porches to pray.

Jamie Ivey has a great podcast for moms, where a gathering takes place to talk about all things in life – and it's so inspiring and fresh.

Have a New Kid by Friday is a really good parenting podcast. They share simple parenting principles and common sense psychology – check it out!

The Briefing by Albert Mohler. It's a daily analysis of new world events from a Christian world view. It's really good! [The Briefing - AlbertMohler.com](http://TheBriefing-AlbertMohler.com)

Tried and True – Shop Small – by Marcy Lytle

Over the holidays, I tried to shop small businesses. There was even a special weekend devoted to shopping “small” where individual artisans and shops were open for shoppers to learn and buy and enjoy their creations! So I thought it would be fun to share my favorite small businesses and what I’ve bought there, and how I love it all so much! As you use up your Christmas cash or now look for something for yourself, consider these shops!

You’re a Peach – This young woman is new on the business scene, and I’ve ordered jewelry from her – handmade and crafted – so unique. Boxed so pretty, as well, when it’s mailed. Love her Instagram page!

Shop Alma – I met this friend at a booth where I bought several pieces, and have continued to see her around at other events. She is always changing the inventory and has some really cute tops!

[Alma Boutique: Chic, Trendy, & Affordable Women's Clothing Online \(shopatalma.com\)](http://shopatalma.com)

The Humming Bird and the Beagle – I’ve known her almost her entire life, and didn’t know she was so artistic! I framed one of her art pieces and have it in my den, along with earrings and a necklace. She creates, and it results in beauty!

[The Hummingbird and The Beagle](#)

Mad Dash Mixes – I’ve been following this company for a while, and love their mixes that make weeknight meals delightful. Seriously, every mix I’ve tried so far has made a super delicious dish!

[Making Your Life a Little Easier. - Mad Dash Mixes](#)

Small Town Elegance – We visited this store on vacation in Uvalde, Texas, and I loved their clothes and the prices. It’s a small shop, super sweet owners, and it was on the corner of the quaint downtown. Follow on Instagram.

Nancy Hallmark Pottery – We met this lady and her artwork at a vendor show at Brentwood Social House in Austin, and fell in love with her one-of-a-kind bowls and mugs. I seriously want to start collecting bowls!

[Home | Nancy Hallmark Pottery \(square.site\)](http://square.site)

ALV Art Studio – This is a young mom of four, and her artwork is so pretty. We bought a trinket dish and bookmark from her booth at a small business event in Pflugerville, Texas. The colors are stunning.

[Handcrafted Fluid Art and Resin Decor and Earrings – ALV Art Studio](#)

Oh the Joy – This Nuskin seller (my daughter) works harder than anyone I know. She knows her products, she offers sales all the time, and she delivers some of the best skin care – I have many of her products! You can shop her site on line, or through Facebook.

[@kamrinwolfe | Linktree](#)

Redefine Design – The owner of this home décor company used to be my favorite weather person on the news and then she left...and reappeared on Instagram! She has lot of creative ideas (I recently added wood beads because I saw one of her posts!). Check out her site!

[Redefine Designs Co.](#)

Bright Box – Not sure they are small any more, but I'm including them here, anyway. They send curated boxes of cheer to people, ones you can pick or ones they have put together – all at a VERY affordable price. They're super CUTE and both recipients I've sent one too loved them!

[Brightbox | Spreading Happiness One Box at a Time \(brightboxes.shop\)](#)

Gem Junkie – This shop has been around, but I'm including it because the prices are so small but the cuteness is so big! \$5 earrings! I love them all. Check out the selection!

[SHOP | gemjunkie \(wixsite.com\)](#)

What are some of your favorite small shops? Share below so that we can all enjoy!



HOME

Practical Parenting – Represent – by Marcy Lytle

My son-in-law shared a story recently with our church about how he disciplined his youngest. The kids had gone out to play and had been instructed to clean up the dog poop in the yard, but the youngest DID NOT want to do it. He was not happy; in fact, he was angry and picked up a golf club in the backyard, and threw it – hard. It went right through the back window of the house!

Needless to say, Dad was upset and started out the back door to reprimand and scold, but he stopped. He saw his son in the corner of the yard crying, totally aware of what he'd done and he knew it was bad. My son-in-law said he stopped and felt a tug at his heart and in his mind that asked the question, "How are you going to represent Me to your son?"

Dad waited until his anger subsided and then exited the back door, and that 5 year old son was already repentant and sorry. Waiting it out, allowing Dad to calm down, and enabling Son to soak in, resulted in a moment of repentance, forgiveness and acceptance that MIGHT not have happened if Dad had screamed and slammed the door and railed in anger.

I've thought about his story now for days, and how we all have misrepresented God to our children many times. We're human. We get angry at disobedience, it upsets us that our kids don't listen, and we get tired (so tired) when we are trying to work, raise a family, keep life going, and then...the kids! It's normal for us to scream and lose it, BUT stopping to consider our representation of HIM to our kids is such a wonderful thing to do!

God says if we need wisdom, we can ask Him and he will give it to us – liberally. He also says to not provoke our kids to wrath. It's hard to ask for wisdom when we're in a rage, and it's almost impossible to not provoke when glass shards are in the carpet.

But look again at this story and what happened when Dad stopped and heard His voice, and that question:

"How are you going to represent me to your son?"

I've found that lots of times the reason we misrepresent God to our children is because we don't know God's character ourselves, or we had harsh parents, as well. But if we can stop and learn, ask for help, and grow in patience, our kids WILL respond.

- God says a soft answer turns away wrath. We can't give soft answers in the heat of a moment.
- The father of the prodigal son welcomed him with a royal robe. If our fists are up, our arms are not open, and there's no robe in sight.
- A fruit of the spirit is gentleness. Rage and gentleness cannot exist together in the same boxing ring. The rage has to subside; lie down and surrender, so that gentleness wins.
- We are to train up our children, because they're going to mess up and step out of line. But our children are not lions to be whipped onto a podium. They are sheep that are to be led to green pastures and still waters.

We all know what we're "supposed to do" and we fail. That's okay. At those times, we can ask our kids to forgive us. That's huge. But the more we practice stopping, listening and waiting before we react to disobedient children, the more repentance will take place before we ever say a word.

I Don't Do Teens – A New Room – by Marcy Lytle

It's a New Year, the holidays are over, and here we are in 2021. Our teens have suffered right along with us, waiting for the pandemic to end, while they too have a stream of emotions from all of the weirdness in the world. But they probably don't have the skillset of how to relate those emotions or handle them, well. We haven't even figured that one out, and we're the parents! And just like we sometimes need a little newness in our wardrobe or the house, etc., our teens might be happy with a little newness as well.

What if that newness came in changing up their bedroom? After all, it just might be the catalyst that sends them into 2021 with a bright attitude of hope and joy. Here are a few tips on how to change up their room (or let them do it) without breaking the bank, painting the entire room or making it a project that takes way too long. Little changes can bring about a lot of fun.

1. **Start with the desk.** Ask your teen to peruse the internet for pictures of desks and organizers, etc. for an example of how they'd like it to look. Maybe you have bins or baskets in the house they could use, or they could even visit the Dollar Store for bins and use washi tape or decals to personalize them. Encourage them to organize loose items into bins, and then add a few "theme" pieces to their desk – maybe a succulent, a framed print or picture, or their favorite collector's item or award. [Storage Organizers - Dollar Tree, Inc.](#) [Amazon.com : washi tape](#)
2. **New bedding.** This can get pricey, so if the comforter is still good, opt for 1-2 new throw pillows. Or even just order covers for their existing pillows. Amazon has a lot of choices! Perhaps there's a blanket on sale in January (a great time to buy them!) they could fold across the end, or a cool "statement" pillow for front and center! [Amazon.com : teen pillows](#)
3. **One wall makeover.** Consider letting them make one wall over with a huge art piece of some kind. It might be a piece of fabric with an image on it they love, and they could hang it like a mural. Maybe there are some stick-on decals or lettering they'd like to script across the wall – a favorite verse, or lyric to a song, or words to encourage. [Amazon.com : wall decals teen](#)
4. **The dreaded closet.** Teens and closets are usually a stinky messy mix. Offer to get in there and help with big baskets and bins. Or purchase a drawer set at a thrift store, to place in there to get things off the floor. Give them a large box for tossing what they no longer wear, consider using all white plastic hangers, and help them make a small wall area for dressing – with a mirror and a small shelf or jewelry organizer. [Amazon.com: Jewelry Organizer Wall Mounted Set of 3, Wood Hanging Jewelry Organizer Holder with Removable Bracelet Rod and 24 Hooks,for Hanging Rings, Earrings, Necklace Holder \(Toasted brown\): Home Improvement](#)
5. **Add a mirror.** Mirrors can be costly, but there are often great options at the discount stores. Adding a mirror in a corner or on a wall can make their room seem larger, and add so much. They could even embellish it to their own taste! [Amazon.com : teen mirrors for bedroom](#)

6. **A new rug.** Maybe their current carpet situation is a sight you'd rather not look at, or their room looks like a mishmash and needs something to pull all the colors together. Stand back and ask them to envision a new rug to pull it all together. Perhaps a geometrical one, or a solid plush rug, or something really different. Check out IKEA!
7. **Hang pictures.** Teens usually have lots of pictures on their phones of their friends and places and fun, so let them print out a few and help them make a collage on a shelf or hanging on a wall, or even from a string. There are so many picture options for walls, and all so cute! [Amazon.com : picture hangers string and clips](https://www.amazon.com/picture-hangers-string-clips)

Before you start, ask your teen to go through those above seven, add their own, and figure costs of all of their "ideas" and even draw it out on paper, so they can see how each new idea is going to work and fit into their space. And, of course, a big cleanup will need to happen BEFORE any up-do takes place. But that's okay – a new space might be the motivation. And helping them clean and having fun conversations and laughs might be fun for the two of you, as well! Just pick one thing at a time, as money affords, and get started on their new room and new outlook and new joy for 2021.

Chipped China - All Things Bright & Beautiful – by Jennifer Lytle

Do you recall when [this song](#) was revived and sung in churches around the early '90s? With this new year, I feel Holy Spirit asking me to allow that song to reverberate in my soul. It's a season to embrace the beauty of . . . all things . . . bright . . . and beautiful?

It's a gift to endure with joy the learning curve, the growth stage, the not quite there yet phase. It's a gift to witness with wonder the toddling babe, persistently striving to take care of himself while creating more mess for you. It's . . . a gift . . . to [celebrate socially distant holidays](#) . . . or welcome in new public servants, both locally and nationally.

I feel Holy Spirit inviting me to look anew at the things I easily could grumble about to even the most remote stranger. It's not hard to find *something* to be frustrated with or exhausted by . . .

This past spring, when my son was learning to ride a bike without training wheels, I found joy only in the idea of achieving my goal (I can honestly say, it was my goal and not my son's). I had been coaching our son. It sounded something like this,

"Just try."

"You won't be able to do it unless you do it."

"You have to jump on there!"

My coaching seemed to do anything but encourage him, so I gave him some space and started to continue on our trek.

For a reason I can no longer recall, I was pushing my husband's bike instead of riding my own. The seat was way too tall, yet the coach in me wondered what sort of example I was setting by keeping my own two feet safely on the ground. I did not feel comfortable jumping on that bike and going for it, but I wanted to show myself and my son that,

"I can do it. So can you."

I ended up riding while standing and ultimately was able to sit on the edge of the seat and push the pedals with the tips of my toes. I even rode that bike up a hill despite my lack of preparation or properly fitted equipment. It wasn't my son's achievement I ultimately became content with - it was my own. Though I had and exercised the skill I wished for my son, my perspective shifted and I found something new to find joy and contentment in.

May Jesus fill your heart with all things bright and beautiful in this new season, too. May Jesus breathe life into the weary places of your mind.

But you, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high.

-Psalms 3:3

An Adage a Day - All Dressed Up – by Carole Gilbert

Do you ever find yourself “all dressed up and nowhere to go?” It is the New Year! I want to get dressed up and I want to go somewhere. But that does not always happen. And I might be a little odd, but I have my stay at home clothes and my going shopping or errand clothes. I also have my Sunday best clothes. Are you like me? And my clothes are in style and out of style, but I think they are all my style and cute as a button.

During the pandemic I wore my stay at home clothes all the time. I would see Marcy Lytle, the owner of this magazine, posting cute outfits and I would wonder if she only wore them out on the town? This started to inspire me.

After a few months of looking at my errand clothes and not putting them on I decided I needed to wear them anyway, even if I am not going to “gad about town,” as the English say. At the drop of a hat I started to do this. And it made me feel “dressed to the nines” instead of feeling like I was at “sixes and sevens.”

The English use these idioms with numbers to describe how they are feeling. Nines refers to perfection, or to the highest degree you can be. Sixes and sevens refer to confusion or disorder. I think I would rather be “dressed to the nines” than dressed in disorder and I would definitely rather be prepared to go even if the going doesn’t happen. That’s what the idiom “all dressed up with nowhere to go” means and it came about in the early 1900’s. It is in reference to being prepared for something that will probably not come about. I like being prepared and I like the feeling I get when I am dressed to the nines.

I remember a time my husband and I were all dressed up with nowhere to go. It was our anniversary and he had rented a limousine to take us to our evening out destination in grand style. He even got me a corsage to wear. Our children and the babysitter wanted to see inside the limo before we left. We let them sit inside it for a few minutes and as my oldest son got out, he began to be sick right beside the limousine. So, we got out also, only to go back into our home with our sick child and send the babysitter on her way. We did get to go on a limo ride a few years later and I treated my children with kid-gloves until we left.

So, after thinking this through, I decide to wear my nicer shopping clothes whether I was leaving home or not. It helps me feel uplifted and ready for the day. And I am sure my husband likes it too. Maybe it is time for you to go ahead and knock your socks off. Don’t be a plain Jane. Wear those in style or out of style clothes. Be a fashionista, like Marcy. We all need to feel a little more uplifted these days. I am not saying to wear your Sunday best to cook supper, but then again, why not? Give it a try, maybe you and I are cut from the same cloth.

I think Timothy had women in mind when he wrote 1 Timothy 6:7-8, “for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.”

Sounds like Timothy understood us girls well. I may sometimes feel like I have nothing to wear but at the drop of a hat I realize that, thanks to God, I have everything I need.

A Night to Remember – Hot Dog! – by Marcy Lytle

We recently purchased a cute hot dog maker to use with the kiddos. It's so fun, and we couldn't wait to try it out. Hot dogs are usually eaten in the summer at picnics or ball games. But what about having hot dogs with the kids in January, picnic style, in front of the fire while learning about the "length" of his love! Purchase those bun length franks, some buns and toppings, and you're set up to learn about the great love of God.

Preparation: Set up a hot dog station, and include Nathan's Hot Dogs if you can find them, along with buns and toppings. Have a tape measure or ruler available.

About how long is your hot dog? (Let the kids guess and then measure). Can you guess how long God's arms are? Isaiah 59:1 says Behold, the Lord's hand is not so short that it cannot save..." That means it extends all the way around the world to the farthest reach to every person. Those are some long arms!

Do you love everything about hot dogs? (Let the kids talk about their own individual toppings and how each person is different, but that's the beauty of hot dogs – we can customize them to our taste!) Did you know that God loves the whole world and has us all in his hands, no matter our differences? John 3:16 reminds us that God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that if we believe we have eternal life!

Have you ever wondered who invented the hot dog? Hot dogs, or frankfurters, originated in Germany. But the man who popularized them in the U.S. was Nathan Handwerker, a Jewish immigrant. He lived on hot dogs for a year and saved \$300 slicing buns, until he was able to have his own stand. He charged half of his competitor's prices, 5 cents, and people flocked to his stand – and Nathan's Hot Dogs were born! The greatest inventor of all time, however, is God! It says in Genesis 1 that he created the heavens and the earth. That means he created Nathan and he created you and me!

What is your favorite topping? Mustard and ketchup are the most common condiments for hot dogs, as well as relish and chili. Or do you just prefer plain? Did you know God doesn't have a favorite, because he loves us all so much? In Ephesians 2 it says that God is rich in mercy and because of his great love (limitless love!) he gave to us, the gift of eternal life – even though death was our sure sentence because of sin! He tops us with his love, all of us equally. He loves you, he loves me, and his taste is all-encompassing. If he were to enjoy a hot dog, he'd probably top it with everything on the table!

Have you heard of a hot dog song? People often exclaim "Hot dog!" when they're excited about something that just happened. Maybe they found a missing piece to a puzzle, or won a contest. They might jump up and down and exclaim "Hot dog!" Did you know there's a really old song called "Hot Diggity Dog" that was sung almost 80 years ago! Take a listen! That's exactly what God sings about us every time he sees our face. Zephaniah 3:17 says, "He delights in us! The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing."

Who knew that eating hot dogs could teach us so much about the length of God's great love, how he created us to be loved by Him, and how excited he gets over loving us, his creation!

[Hot Diggity \(Dog Ziggity Boom\) — Perry Como | Last.fm](#)

Tiny Living – Maybe This Year – by Leyanne Enterline

Twas' the season...it was that time again!

I have never felt that I am never prepared for Christmas. It's like a sneak attack or something! I so want to be ahead of the game and especially during this "quarantine" I felt like I should've had the time to get ready, but that didn't happen.

The little decorations that we had were still in a box on top of a bunk bed, no presents had been ordered, and Christmas cards had not been made... agghhh! Where did the time go?

I had to get my winter clothes out of a storage container we had, and for some reason winter snuck up on me, too! I'm so used to our Texas heat I was again not ready for the early freeze here!

Anyone else with me?

Please tell me we have some others procrastinators out there!

The good news about living tiny is that there is not much room for anything, so it didn't take probably but an hour to put everything up. Now if only I had been that quick on figuring out what to get everyone for Christmas!

Our decor consisted of a tiny white tree that I placed on top of our giant dog crate. We had mini decorations for the tree, and I had a cute wooden Christmas block I placed in the bathroom with a Christmas hand towel and some lights outside. That's about it.

It was a tiny living Christmas, but the kids still enjoyed it and that's where we are right now.

I dream of the day of a huge Christmas tree, maybe 2021, with lots of decorations and big star on top!

But for our memories of 2020, we decorated tiny...and didn't miss a joy.

Remember loves grows best in tiny spaces.



YOU

Strengthening Your Core – Weight – by Marcy Lytle

If I'm around a group of women and hear them talk on and on about weight, diets, how awful they look (when they look just fine), I usually walk away. When I read (like I did recently) a headline that says something like "Adele is skinny and gorgeous" I cringe. And when someone comments to a friend that she looks so good now that she's shed 50 pounds, it makes me sad.

Weight is a big deal among women, and I'm hoping to tackle one issue a month this year, in this column to talk about. This month's topic is weight. I'm sure there are some women that don't think about it much, but there are others that obsess about it. I remember as a teen that I weighed every morning and freaked out if I was two pounds heavier than the day before.

Let me stop here and say I'm not addressing weight issues that cause health problems. That's a whole other story. I'm addressing weight problems that cause confident women to become depressed over not looking "as good as she does" their entire lives.

I've been guilty of this. And I still find myself sighing when I look in the mirror and don't see what I want to see!

Here are a few ways of how to tell if weight is too much a part of our minds:

- We become depressed if we enjoy one chocolate cookie.
- We over exercise (where it interferes with life) so that we "feel good" about ourselves.
- We constantly go from one diet to the next, and never really enjoy a meal.
- We think if we lose a certain number of pounds, then we'll be happy.
- We avoid eating at all; then we binge because we are ravenously hungry.
- We silently judge other women that we see as being overweight.
- We envy those who are thin and "pretty."

I'm not a therapist or a psychologist by any means, but I know what I've experienced as I've grown up and gotten older. I remember the pressure from peers to look good in a bathing suit. I recall being afraid I'd be asked if I was pregnant if my stomach wasn't flat, after I got married. I recall feeling guilty because I ate the bun on a burger, when my friend opted for bun-less. I felt upset when a friend commented that I looked "heavier" than when she saw me last (a few months after my son was born). Yeah, that last comment was rude, but...

It's a good thing to think back and see if we can identify how we feel when it comes to weight issues. I really think the reason we're so obsessed is because media has presented skinny as being equal to pretty. And who doesn't want to feel pretty?

One thing I personally have quit doing is weighing. Again, health is super important – that's not the issue here. It's self-image and preconceived notions. I know when I feel a bit bloated or when I've over eaten. But for me, back when I weighed daily, I did let it bother me ALL DAY if the scales climbed a few pounds. I also ask to not be weighed when I visit the doctor. They have said okay every time.

Maybe there's one thing you can do this year to love your image as you are. We are all made differently. I've had cellulite since I was 16 and I envied the girls that had none (which are few, by the way). I don't like the spaces between my teeth, but that's the teeth I have! And I'm not as thin as I'd like to be and probably won't ever be.

Let's be part of a group, or start a group, that doesn't obsess about weight on our own bodies or other women, but we only look at the eyes and see the heart – and speak love and feel loved.

Weight. Don't let it be an issue that shouldn't be one. Make one step toward walking lighter this year, without shedding a pound.

Life Right Now - Under the Mask – by Hanna Bouck

Do you ever get nervous to share your faith?

If you do, you are in good company. You see, I have moved all over the globe for the cause of the gospel. Parents are pastors, lived multiple summers in Latin America to share Jesus, traveled to the Middle East, and Europe for the same reasons... But gosh dang it, I get SO nervous to share my faith here at home. It's not even those who don't believe that cause the stress (I don't have expectations on those who don't know.) Even though I do want to walk in humility around those that don't believe, but no... It's honestly the Christian community that oftentimes puts me on edge. We put SO much pressure on the body of believers to believe a certain theology (yes theology is important), fellowship a certain way (yes, community is important), attend every event, be the one with your hands held high, but alas -- you have anxiety? How dare you even think of taking a medication? Jesus heals and I am believing that for you today! (Is it bad to say thank you and I am believing that too, but this is helping me until healing happens?)

What about just *being*?

What about those of us who Jesus meets in the quiet places?

I find myself nervous to share my faith because I have received so much criticism over how I should do better, that fear and shame creep in and I would rather walk with my head down than have to smile at the non-believer in the aisle across from me. And I HATE that. So what is one to-do? What about faith over fear? What about mercy over judgement?

Honestly, there are so many questions I have and am still walking out. Wearing these masks have given me something else to hide behind; an easy out because 'the world sucks right now so I have an excuse to let my attitude as well!' Until, I am laughing in the aisle with my husband and a woman looks over at me and says, 'I can see that smile in your eyes. No need to hide it!' (True story) and I stand in shock and suddenly realize that the gateway to my soul is the most visible part of my face now.

So here is what I'm attempting to do to share my faith. I smile under the mask, A LOT. I wave to strangers and humbly tell them to have a blessed day. I talk to my neighbors and acquaintances and let them know that they are in my prayers and if they ever need a hand to hold or person to talk to, my table is always open. I also love my family and do my best to hear their hopes, fears, and dreams about the world and pray for them in their day-to-days often.

Honestly, I am still working out what fully and boldly sharing my faith looks like wholly. And I will be for a while. But know that if you need to take off whatever physical or conspired mask you're wearing, leave a message below. Know you're in my prayers, I'll hold your hand through it as long as you let me, and you always have a seat to ask questions at my table.

Holding you close...

Hey Hey!

My name is Hannah Bouck

I am a believer, newlywed, and mama of 2 cutie pups!

I am from a little bit of everywhere, but currently reside in the great state of Texas.
Want to connect?

You can find me on instagram at @hannah_bouck
or on my business account @youre_apeachco

Hope to hear from you soon!

-holding you close: HB

Healthy Habits – Before – by Marcy Lytle

I was sharing some of my before bedtime skin care products on Instagram, and someone asked me to share the morning skin routine as well, before my day begins. That question made me realize that there are a lot of healthy routines we do “before” we do something else, that are so important! Before bedtime and before our day starts are just two examples! I’m sharing them below:

Before bedtime – Of course, we wash our faces, like our moms told us to! I just use a Neutrogena face wash for removing makeup, and Almay eye pads for taking off mascara, but then before bed – I have a few products I feel help me so much. I love the night cream by Nuskin, as well as the eye cream. Neither is scented, which is important to me. I don’t want to go to bed with an aroma of perfume - not my thing. In the winter, I love JR Watkins peppermint lotion on my dry hands, and I include lip balm of some sort, as well. That’s it! Before bedtime routines allow our faces and skin to soak in, relax, and become a part of what makes us sleep well!

Before the day starts – Of course, we wash our face again! But the morning is so different than the night! I use a threesome from Gruene Witch Apothecary – their coffee facial soap bar, the hazelwitch toner, and the anti-aging moisturizing. I’ve seen all three of these products make a difference in my skin – from softening, to fading age spots, to tightening and awakening so well! So that’s before the day...before I put on my makeup...before I face the world.

Before I speak – Thinking is the healthy habit of choice, here. It’s so hard to stop and think before our mouths engage. We hear him say something and we assume he meant this, so we say that, and sparks fly – not the romantic kind, either! So many unhealthy arguments and wounds and pains in the heart can be avoided if we just stop and think that perhaps we misunderstood, maybe we are being too sensitive, or does it really matter – that flippant thing they said? Are we really going to let it ruin our relationship?

Before dinner – Maybe this sounds silly, but prepping ourselves before we eat is a good healthy habit as well. Drinking a tall glass of water curbs those hunger pains and might just keep us from overeating. Choosing to only make one plate with sensible servings and no seconds is another good healthy habit, once we begin it and keep it going. Saying thanks before we eat is another healthy thing to do, to remind us of his good provision which calms our souls and makes our food digest so much better!

Before leaving the house – We all know that the new routine is to make sure our bags have hand sanitizer, as well as masks. But it’s a good thing to have a “covid” bag in the car as well, in case we forget – one with those same things inside – as well as wipes! Another healthy habit is to consider our shoes. Will they be comfortable and safe for the activities where we’re going? We can leave an extra pair in the car at all times!

Before we begin our to-do list – I don’t know about you, but my to-do list can sometimes stress me out before my day begins! It’s a good practice to write down all that’s in our head, so that it’s there and we can then look at it. It’s also good to delegate to others, some of the things we

need help with. YES. Ask for help. And then it's good to prioritize. If we can't wash and vacuum the car today, it can wait. It won't destroy our day if we continue with a little extra leaves and grass on the floorboard, if doing so enables us to lay our heads back against the pillow for a quick nap.

Before saying yes – Some of us are better at saying no than others, but we all need to take up the healthy habit of knowing when to say each answer. Maybe we need to say yes to more things, instead of hibernating because we've become used to not dealing with people. Maybe we need to say no more often, because too many people know we're available and don't leave us alone. Wisdom, ask for wisdom, then give the answer that brings peace.

What other "before" habits can we think of that are healthy and wise? I can think of lots more, but I'll stop with these seven...before you grow tired of reading...

Strategic Women - Mary of Bethany and the First Alabaster Box – by Debbie Haynes

Back in the day, Jewish women were barred from public speaking. They couldn't even read the Torah out loud, worship in the synagogue was segregated, and the law was explicit: "He who talks with a woman in public brings evil upon himself," and "One is not so much as to even greet a woman." I can't imagine living among such oppression.

However, Jesus treated women very differently and in doing so, encountered criticism. He valued women, even in an anti-women culture, and he treated them with love, dignity and respect. And there were two women that not only talked to Jesus, but actually touched him, the first one being the topic of this story in this New Year.

This first woman poured out costly oil from a most treasured alabaster box. Alabaster is semi-translucent and comes in several shades, from pure white to a dark creamy color, with veins running through. The stone was precious and represented purity and transparency. Alabaster was given to daughters as they approached marrying age, sort of like a dowry. It could be a box, a bottle or a jar or vase. The oil inside was called spikenard, what we might know as lavender today. The more ornate the vessel and the more costly the oil inside, the better chance a daughter had of marrying well! So it wasn't uncommon for Mary to have this box, *but the way she chose to use it* certainly was.

Mary of Bethany was a bit of a rebel but also the quintessential worshipper. She seated herself at the feet of Jesus instead of helping Martha in the kitchen, and Jesus said she had chosen "the better thing." It was also this Mary that Jesus asked to see when heard that his friend Lazarus had died. Some say the reason Jesus wept was because Mary hadn't quite recognized Jesus as the Son of God, yet. However, when she heard Jesus pray and saw her brother alive again, she knew.

In John 12, Mary took her own alabaster box and broke it and anointed Jesus' feet in worship of full recognition of who He was. She anointed Jesus' head and his feet! When the disciples saw this, they chastised her for wasting the ointment, when it could have been used for the poor. Judas, who later betrayed Jesus, scolded Mary. But Jesus rose to Mary's defense stating, "Leave her alone; against the day of my burying she has done this. The poor you will have with you always, but not me." And, helping the poor probably wasn't even on the minds of the disciples, but rather just chastising her in front of Jesus.

Mary was brave in her encounters with Jesus, but she was also pure and transparent. It may have taken her a little time to recognize fully just who He was, but when she did – she did it with gusto! She GAVE out of her treasure.

In the books of Matthew and Mark, Jesus said she did "what she could" and that what she did will be memorialized for all time. And she has been. Her story reminds us that even when we are slow to recognize who Jesus is, He always knows who we are and accepts our lavish gifts that we lay at his feet. He's approachable...always.

You and I don't have alabaster boxes or expensive ointment, or the opportunity to physically sit at Jesus' feet. But we can sit in His presence and reach out and touch Him. We can recognize

who He is and also choose to give him our all, trusting that He will receive it with joy, just because He loves us that much and values his most prized possession – those he's created for worship and relationship with Him.

Women, of all races, shapes and background – none is excluded from – but all are welcome to see Him, recognize Him, and experience His great love and acceptance.

Life in a Nutshell – One Resolution – by Jill Montz

I rarely make New Year's Resolutions anymore. Mainly because I tend to break them in less than two months, two weeks, or once it was even less than two hours. I'm not the most disciplined when it comes to upholding bargains with myself. Now if I were to make a commitment to you, my *obliger* tendencies (check out the book by Gretchen Rubin called *The Four Tendencies*. It's amazing!) would kick in and there is more than a good chance I would follow through. However, when it comes to me and making commitments to myself, I tend to let things slide. Do you do that, as well? Are you more apt to let yourself down before you let others down? According to Rubin, *obligers* are the largest category so I can't be alone here!

This New Year's Eve, when the clock strikes midnight, I plan to make ONE New Year's Resolution - and I have a feeling I can keep this one.

For all of 2021...I resolve to be more grateful.

After 2020 and all its ups and downs, I still have so much to be grateful for! The fact alone that I survived this crazy year when so many didn't is a good starting point. I know of many that passed from this world over to the next from either Covid-19, cancer, car wrecks, or a myriad of other reasons. My heart literally ached daily from news I heard about the struggles people endured. It seemed like an even greater number suffered losses and heartbreaks in just the last few months. It was all so painful and so tragic that I couldn't help but grieve with them.

However, I do have so much to be grateful for even in these hard days. As I write, in these moments, I am putting in close to 70 hours per week at my job. We are busy, and for that I am grateful. It means my business is surviving the economic crisis we have seen affect so many. I am grateful for the customers who choose to shop at my stores or order online. I am so grateful for the staff that works right along beside me for all those extra hours to make sure our products go out on time and our stores are stocked the next day. I am so grateful I have a job to go to in 2021, and I pray I that I still do for many years to come.

So many others are faced with much more than physical weariness. They are facing financial, emotional, and spiritual hardships that might not end any time soon. So every night I am grateful for tired feet, aching legs, and a sore back. That just means I am fortunate enough to work hard each day.

I am grateful for the hectic schedule I have with my daughter, Dotty. Everything in the month of April was cancelled (I still have the blank calendar to prove it) and it was so sad to have nothing to look forward to. So this year, when our weekends consist of games, practices, parties, sleepovers, shopping trips, and more I will be grateful that my calendar is full because that means my life is full of friends and memory-making opportunities. I am always grateful for those things! And even on the days when we have nothing planned, I will be grateful for the pause in life.

If 2020 taught me anything, it taught me how to pause better; how to appreciate white space in my calendar more than I used to. It is definitely fun to go and do and see and be with our people but I know my body, mind, and soul needs rest, too. The ability to enjoy the rest helps me to also enjoy the busy times. Without appropriate rest, we all burn out! God knows that, and so we have this gift of the Sabbath. I am grateful to have the downtime to reflect, revive, and reenergize all aspects of my life. I just hope I don't ever have a whole month again to do so like we did this past year!

Finally, I am so grateful for the tribe that surrounds me daily. My family, friends, staff, church family, Dotty's friends and their families, and a whole host of others are present. These people make my life more colorful just by being in it. They give my life joy and peace; hope and perseverance; love and laughter; strength and courage; and just enough sass and sarcasm to keep things interesting. These are my people. They stand with me, they stand for me, and they stand when I can't stand anymore. They make the days better just by being a part of them, and I am so very, very grateful for each and every one of them.

While I know all the problems, troubles, and trials of 2020 did not magically disappear like Cinderella's dress and stagecoach at the strike of midnight in December, I do know that I will hold on tightly to that glass slipper of gratitude that remains, regardless of the circumstances. Most of all, no matter what I face, I am never alone. I have a Father in Heaven who loves me and who never leaves or forsakes me, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Hopefully, when I write my January article for 2022 I can tell you all how I did with my one resolution to be more grateful. I am sure I will have better days than others, but I pray that overall I keep a grateful spirit from the beginning of the New Year on January 1st until the last seconds of December, and beyond. But let's get real. We all know I fell asleep on New Year's Eve long before midnight...and let me just say I am so grateful for that, too.



MARRIAGE

Date Night Fun – January Advent – by Marcy Lytle

What if...we continue the theme of Christmas and the holidays and make date night all about little niceties and treats and sweets and lovelies every night of the month – with an advent of sorts – for date night! Why not? Perhaps money is tight, you're sad the holidays are over, you're not really in the mood to go out or decide on something creative at home. But you DO have a few minutes each day to remind each other of the love you have and the fun you both are!

31 days of romantic "date night" moments:

1. Leave a mint on his pillow
2. Write a note and place it by his coffee mug
3. Tell him the most attractive physical quality you love
4. Do one of his chores
5. Make a dessert for two
6. Wear each other's socks
7. Send him a song that reminds you of him
8. Rub his back
9. Write a note in lipstick on his mirror
10. Compliment his outfit
11. Hold his hand
12. Ask how his work is going
13. Send him a card in the mail (yes, to your house)
14. Watch his pick for movie night
15. Take out the trash
16. Dress up and invite him to a candlelit dinner
17. Purchase a coffee and surprise him
18. Prepare a hot bath/shower for him with new soap
19. Go out for fast food dessert
20. Pray for him and offer him a verbal blessing
21. Indulge in chocolate with him
22. Sit by the firepit and look into his eyes
23. Encourage him with a verse for the year
24. Ask him outside to stargaze one night, cider in hand
25. Have breakfast together at night
26. Buy him a surprise after-Christmas gift
27. Text him something sweet
28. Write a poem and place by his sink
29. Purchase and give him a magazine he'd like (Family Handyman, i.e.)
30. Surprise hug him five times today.
31. Wink at him across the room

In This Together – Maybe Today – by Bekah Holland

I took a break from writing for a while. Mostly because life was just coming at me so fast and so hard that I couldn't keep up with even one more thing. But I think I also hoped that maybe, if I took a step back, I could come back with things figured out. Or at least a step above hot mess. But, as I sit here, well past my deadline because I completely forgot, I may actually be less hot but more mess. I don't have the first clue about marriage, other than I happen to be married, and we haven't killed each other yet.

Some days, I feel like I may just have finally gotten a handle on how to balance the wife, person, mother, daughter roles I find myself juggling. But most of the time, I feel like I've had the wind knocked out of me. I find myself failing at some or all of those things. I'm too lenient with my kids and then I'm too strict. I don't take time to take care of myself and then I take too much and my family feels neglected. I run around trying to keep things clean and managed and then I look at the mess that's built when I ignore it for a while, and then realize I have no idea how to find the middle ground.

Life is hard, y'all. It can be ugly and messy, chaotic and heartbreaking and sometimes it just doesn't feel like it's worth it. Most of the time, I run around, trying to control things and people, protect everyone from everything, keep the peace and some semblance of calm. And then, when I stop for just a bit, thinking, maybe everything is going to be okay, it isn't okay again and I start all over.

I do know that my desperation to control things and keep people happy is ridiculous. I know it in my head. I'm pretty sure I might even know it in my heart. But I'm realizing that while most of it is coming from a place of love, wanting to protect the people I love, a good bit of it is coming from a place of fear. Fear over someone getting hurt or angry. Fear that someone will say or do something that can't be taken back. Fear of pain and heartbreak. Fear that everyone that I love will spontaneously combust. Not literally, but that's how it feels when I make myself sit with it instead of running from one thing to the next.

How do we stop operating out of fear? No idea. I don't have any answers. I'm just trying to doggie paddle through this life I'm in without drowning. But I believe that...

while I don't have any answers, God does.

while I can't see a way out, God does, and...

while I'm busy running around making more of a mess of things, God's just waiting.

He's waiting for me to turn to Him to find my rest. Waiting to replace my fear with peace.

For someone who desperately craves peace, I stubbornly hang on to my chaos. I run from conflict but it's only temporary. What God has for me isn't a Bandaid. It's not triage. But I walk in and out of His plan for me like it's a local Starbucks with a quick fix pick me up. I want to stay. Okay, I want to want to stay. I want to learn from my mistakes and never forget the peace I have when I feel safe despite the storm. But I don't always remember. I take it back and try to control it and we start this whole mess all over again.

Someday, I hope to be able to write and tell you I've figured it all out, or learned to stop pretending like I can take everything on myself and trying to feign calm. Today isn't that day, but maybe today I'll take a step toward doing just one thing a little better. In recovery programs,

they stress the importance of taking everything just one day, one hour, one minute at a time. So that's where I'm going to start. Just taking the next step. Even if it's just a shuffle, at least I'll be shuffling toward a place where I can walk in confidence as a wife, a mother, a friend and a person, closing the gap between where I am and my purpose.

"Just do the next right thing. One thing at a time. That'll take you home." Glennon Doyle

For Better or Worse - What I Love About You – by Kaelin Scott

I still remember the things that initially attracted me to my husband. He was funny most of all – he could always make me laugh! He was also confident and secure in himself, and he had a strong relationship with God. Obviously, I thought he was cute, too. And okay, as a girl from Colorado, I was captivated by his strong Texas accent. He was everything I wanted, and I knew I wanted to spend forever with him.

A lot of life has happened since we said, “I do.” But when I stop and look at my husband, he is still all of the things I loved about him in the beginning. We were young when we got married, and we’ve both done a lot of growing up since then. But the essential ingredients that make up my husband are absolutely still there. He still makes me laugh more than anybody else, especially with dumb jokes that nobody else would understand. He’s still confident in himself, and even more so in his relationship with God. I don’t really notice his accent anymore, but that’s because I’ve now developed one of my own. I’m a certified Texan now, no doubt about it!

It is so easy to get caught up in difficulties and see only the negatives, especially when you spend a lot of time with somebody. I often get tempted to focus on my husband’s faults or shortcomings, while seemingly forgetting that I have plenty of my own. And I also sometimes forget what originally drew me to him. But the truth is that those things are still there, and I can still choose to cherish them. The rose-colored glasses may have worn off a long time ago, but he’s still the same amazing person I fell in love with. Just because we’ve gotten older and been through hardships added more members to our family, that doesn’t mean he’s stopped being my person. Sometimes I just have to sort through lots of other junk in my mind in order to remember that.

Here’s one thing I did a couple years ago to remind myself how awesome my husband is: I wrote a list of things I love about him and taped it to my bathroom mirror. That way, when life gets hard or we start to bicker and fight, I can look at that list and remember how much I love him. It’s good to refresh my memory every once in a while, and it helps me not to blame life’s issues and challenges on him. Plus, he can see the list too and get a boost of confidence from it whenever he reads it. That’s a win-win if you ask me!

If you’re having a hard time liking your spouse at the moment, I encourage you to make a list of things you love about them. If that’s too difficult right now, then start with the things you initially fell in love with. I’m betting if you really look, you’ll discover that those things are still there. It might look different now than it used to, but those qualities have most likely remained. Reminding yourself of those things can help you keep a positive and loving perspective toward your spouse.

We can all use a refresher every now and then. Why not start at the beginning and remember all the good times? Cheers to a happy new year, full of love and laughter, with the one God has given you!

After 40 Years – Those Gifts – by Marcy Lytle

Christmas just passed. And I know SO MANY couples that don't even get each other any gifts. I don't know what they do. Maybe they spend funds on a project in the house, or opt to just give the kids gifts. But I enjoy my husband buying me gifts, and I love buying for him. He's not good at gift buying on his own, and I'm super picky, so I hand him my list way back in September. I include links, and specifics, and I try to make it easy for him. I know it's a labor of love for him to shop, because it's just not his thing.

However, I really like opening gifts on Christmas that are from him! So we both continue to give gifts year after year. Some say that when they get older they no longer "need" or "want" anything, but somehow I always do! And he always acquiesces. Even though it's hard for him to do, he does it. He knows I love that he actually buys the gifts (and doesn't have my kids do it – that's just wrong!), he also wraps them, and he even includes stocking gifts, too!

Early in our marriage, he gave me a frying pan for Christmas. That was impersonal.

Another Christmas, I got a shirt I detested. And I just couldn't make myself wear it.

One Christmas, he gave me a small kitchen appliance (that was expensive) that I didn't want and wouldn't use!

I've given him grill accessories, only to find them in the garage a year later, unopened.

I've thought he needed a certain tool, or gadget as well, but he didn't really care for it.

So one might think, "Why do you keep giving each other gifts?"

For us, there's something about the process of sacrificing our time and taxing our brains and hearts to give. I don't want to end up around a Christmas tree one year where it's all about the kids, and we adults just sit and watch. I want to always be amazed at how meticulous he is at wrapping (seriously, I've never seen tape applied any straighter!). I like it that he's willing to buy me things that are fun and maybe just whimsical and then sign his name, so that my heart flutters when I untie the bow. It still does! I also want to grow in my appreciation of the gifts he does include, ones not on my list (and I am growing, although ever so slowly!) And I want us to continue practicing this art of giving, as long as we can.

For years, my dad used to ask me 2-3 days before Christmas what Mom might want, and then he asked me to purchase it. This hurt my heart, every time. And I could tell it hurt Mom's heart as well, because she knew he did that. And I'm guessing they never had a conversation about giving, and expectations, and all of that...or maybe they did...and neither listened. But that observation made me purpose to be different in our marriage.

What was Christmas like for you? Maybe you're okay with how you gave or didn't give gifts, or maybe you weren't. But I'd say it's worth a conversation about those kinds of things. Maybe he doesn't know, and maybe you don't realize. I've been a real butt on Christmas, and I've had to work on my attitude of gratitude. And I hope that no matter how many years we live together, we always find something under the tree with our name on it that we've bought and wrapped

especially for each other. Even if it's not perfect, it's there, and it's so fun to get and to give gifts to each other...always...because we're ever learning and ever growing and I hope...ever giving.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Firmly Planted – Fire – by Dina Cavazos

Whether by necessity, happenstance, or design, I've had a wood burning stove of some kind in all but one house I've lived in over the last forty years. Over time, experience has taught me a few things about fire. Building a fire from scratch, tending it, and keeping it going 24/7 is an exercise in observation; couple that with a wise, softly speaking teacher...I would say fire can speak mysteries.

My very first wood stove came as a gift. This was early on in “the second twenty years” of my life. (Read my story **The Next Twenty Years** in the February 2020 Thyme archives.) We had “upgraded” from a school bus to a mobile home on two acres. Someone in the wonderful church I belonged to at the time had a store that sold wood burning stoves and accessories. As a house-warming gift (no pun intended!), they gave us a choice of a \$500 gift certificate or a wood stove. We chose the wood stove (one made for mobile homes)—one of the few wise choices we made during that time. That stove witnessed and participated in many stories I could tell, but that's for another time.

The second and third stoves came with the two historic houses I lived in several years later. If you've ever lived in an old house that hasn't been sufficiently renovated, you know they're drafty. Wood is a welcome supplement to any kind of heat—it gives you something warm to back up to.

My current house has a heat pump—efficient for cooling, but, when temperatures are in the 30's, it doesn't heat well unless you switch on the (expensive) electric heat strips. I bought the house in December 2006 (without a wood stove) and I was cold all winter. It seemed the heater ran continually but I didn't feel warm, ever. I determined not to go through another winter like that, and the next Fall I bought my Homestead soapstone stove. I've had it now for fourteen years—it's by far the best of all and I consider it one of the best investments I've made.

That's my wood stove history--but what about Fire? That's the real substance of my story. Fire is a fascinating natural phenomenon. I can't begin to explain it—scientific minds can do that—I can only experience it, appreciate it, and learn from it. There are very real dangers with fire—I've had a couple of scary moments—but those aren't the moments I'm talking about. It's the moments fire speaks to my soul...when I'm staring into the depths and suddenly, or sometimes slowly, I begin to see...

A fire begins small. A layer of balled up newspaper, next, kindling placed crosswise, then two or three bigger sticks crossing on top, then a little bigger piece on top...the key is air flow between them all and graduating sizes. Air feeds the fire and each layer provides fuel for the next. Once it's burning, I carefully lay bigger pieces of wood on top until it catches, progressing to logs that keep the fire going. Too big a piece on top too soon will smother the fire. *Some friendships are like that...probably most of them, says Fire. Start small, be patient, build trust, give room to breathe. Don't smother with too much too soon—heavy burdens of expectations, unnecessary opinions, or unsolicited advice.*

Once the fire is going strong, I have to keep feeding it and adjusting the airflow--sometimes by poking it a bit. A bigger log can last awhile, but it will go out if I wait too long before adding more wood. I can build it back up if there are still coals, but if it goes out I have to start from scratch again. Fire lovingly reminds me: *a strong friendship can handle the big stuff, but don't just drop it and leave it. Adjust the “airflow” by communicating and have that difficult conversation to clear the air. Don't ignore signs of tension or distance, and be kind, sensitive, and attentive. A good friendship, like a good fire, needs to be fed and tended.*

One of the clearest messages I remember was during a time of isolation from my Christian brothers and sisters. Going through a period of “I can connect with God on my own, thank you,” I wasn’t plugged in anywhere with others who could encourage and support my walk in the Way. I stared at the fire burning just one log—mostly black, glowing red on the edges, about to go out with not enough coals to bolster it—and I knew that was me. *A log alone can’t sustain itself. There has to be a solid bed of coals underneath to keep a log going, and it’s best to have at least two pieces of wood burning together to keep the fire going.* I don’t think that needs any explanation, and I can testify it’s a FIRE FACT and a LIFE FACT—all upper case in my book.

Is this just common sense, or do think that Fire can speak mysteries through the voice of its Creator? In my humble opinion, a personal message is both profound and a mystery. I love that, and I also love the toasty dry warmth of wood heat. I guess I’ll keep using my wood stove as long as I can lift a log.

The king said to Daniel,

“Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries.”

(Daniel 2:47)

Rooted in Love - Hand-Me-Downs – by Kaelin Scott

I think it's so fun getting hand-me-down clothes for my kids. There's something really special about having them wear clothes that were worn by our friends and family before us. I also enjoy passing old clothes on to others' kids when mine outgrow them. It's like passing love along to share for a little while. And it can be expensive buying clothes for kids who outgrow them at hyperspeed, so it's nice to bless someone with a gift to save them money.

Kind of like clothes, I love having wisdom and encouragement passed down from older and more experienced mamas, and passing it on to others too. Motherhood is such a challenging and ever-changing experience that it's nice to support and hold each other up. Having other moms around you in all walks of life is such a blessing and a unique way of spreading love. Helping each other through hard times and tiresome days is what community is all about, and the community of mothers is a really special one. Even if you don't have advice for a fellow mama, praying for each other does wonders. Just being there and saying, "I'm with you" is a huge gift of love.

There is so much "mom shaming" going around on the internet today, and it kind of makes me sick. Instead of supporting and encouraging others, women are bashing and judging each other publicly. All that does is create an atmosphere of fear and self-loathing. It's hard enough being a mom without people criticizing our every move. We're all doing the best we can for our kids, and maybe that looks different for some than it does for others. It isn't our right to condemn another mom's choices or tell her she's wrong. Instead, we should make it our mission to encourage every mama we meet and make her feel like she's the best mother in the world.

The more we encourage someone, the more confident they will be. And I think confidence goes a long way toward finding success. If we want to raise a bright and happy generation of children, then we need to have bright and happy mothers. And one way we can help make that happen is by being kind to each other. If we're an older mama and we see a younger one in need, we don't have to be afraid to offer help. She might just be too afraid to ask. And if we're that younger mama and we don't know what to do, we can find someone who's been there before and seek her advice.

Don't ever be ashamed of yourself as a mother. We're all learning and we all make mistakes, but we keep growing and improving just like we do in other areas of life. Be a friend and encourage your fellow mothers. The buddy system is highly effective, you know. Walking through the challenges of motherhood together is much easier than facing them alone.

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Romans 15:5-6

Simple Truths - False Expectations – by Erica Simmons

I love telling a story using songs because there are so many ways God speaks to me through music. Sometimes, it is through the title like Tasha Cobb-Leonard's "Gracefully Broken." This title represents an amazing image of who our God is and what He does with us. It starts with the magnificent image of our God's love for us and His grace, and ends with the hard truth that as a Christian I do not want to deal with: being broken.

I'm not in a state of brokenness, but the unpleasant truth is that I have stuff in me that I hold onto so hard that God has to break me in order for me to turn it loose. Over the last year, I have found myself in this very situation. It's a situation that was caused by my false expectations and my unwillingness to let them go. This has caused me to struggle in a way that I never have before. I quite honestly had my foundation shaken in a way that caused me to struggle with my faith, but God spoke to me through music. He helped me to see the grace in the brokenness. These song lyrics are beautiful and you will be blessed as you listen to them. [Gracefully Broken](#)

You may be wondering what in the world could have shaken my foundation to the point that my faith was put to the greatest test it has ever faced. I have discovered that the answer lies not in the situation, but in my heart. Simply put,

I had a crisis of faith, because I did not have faith.

I know that sounds like I am talking in circles but I am not. The only way our faith can be shaken is when we have a lack of faith. Faith is a choice, and we choose to believe the Word and promises of God or we do not. I was caught up in looking at the current situation and completely lost sight of the promises and the truth of God's word.

A good example of this can be seen in the Cookie situation...

Almost two years ago when my son Jordan was dealing with the loss of a friend in a tragic accident, he fell into such well of grief that I gave in and allowed him and his brother Jeremiah to adopt a dog. Jordan soon realized that what he expected it to be like to have a dog and the reality of what it was really like to have a dog were two vastly different things. In the end, we rehomed her with a friend of his. A few weeks ago, he was asked to dog sit while his friend went hunting. We were blown away by how different Cookie was. She was behaving in a way that we all wanted/expected when we adopted her. We all had our false expectations when we first adopted her, as we all had this vision of what it was going to be like to have a dog. We could/would not look beyond the current situation, and therefore gave up.

That is what I had done, as well. I carried around these false expectations...and when reality hit, I chose to focus on the now and not the promise. [Dara Maclean's Nobody but You](#) song is a perfect example of this point. Listen, if you can, to the lyrics. What an AWESOME song and message. Did you honestly expect that song to be what it was after hearing the beginning? What a wonderful surprise this song was for me. However, if I had just focused on the now as I started listening or not moved past the beginning music, I would have missed the beauty.

Don't let your now keep you from the promise. Don't give up on God.

Hanging onto and focusing on the promise does not always take away the pain in the brokenness. He never promises there will be no pain, but He does promise He will always be

with us. This next song beautifully captures this promise to me, [Another in the Fire Hillsong United](#).

These songs do not take away the hurt, they don't speed up the journey, but they do help me along the way. They encourage, they provide another avenue for God to speak to me and not just in difficult seasons. I will say that there are days I think I am almost to at the end of this season in my life and other days when I feel I right back at the beginning of it. What I can definitely say with 100% certainty is that I am not in this season alone. And neither are you.

Unearthly Thing - Healthy Soul = Blessing Dispenser A New Resolution – by Angela Dolbear

It goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway because it's so true.

2020 was a harsh year.

But God prevails. Always. His loving kindness is everlasting and is pandemic-proof. That's for sure.

I learned a lot wading through the muck and the mire of 2020. I have finally learned to be less controlled by fear and anxiety. This has been a long, hard-fought lesson of which I have only gained victory over through mass amount of prayer and really good Biblical teaching.

I got some of that excellent teaching last Sunday, which I am still reflecting on and applying five days later, so I thought I would share it with you.

[Pastor Lyle spoke](#) about turning anxiety into acceptance, and then turning that acceptance into adoration for God, all through looking at Mary's response to the angel Gabriel's message about the virgin birth. Pastor explained how in [Luke 1](#), we can see Mary's mindset over her unexpected pregnancy progress through her responses. So beautiful! Mary could have been stoned to death for being an unwed pregnant girl, and she knew that. But she showed no fear. And not only does she trust God and accept His calling for her, but she praised and adored Him for it. There's so much more in the teaching, and I encourage you to give it a listen.

So I learned it's how I respond to circumstances that reveals the health of my soul. Mary had a healthy soul. Being full of God's grace (and not fear or anxiety) makes it so I can do what God wants me to do.

"A healthy soul is a soul at peace and at rest. It isn't upset, worried, angry, ashamed, or fearful. It is strong and steady, full of love, joy, hope, compassion toward others, and confidence in God. It can handle the ups and downs of life graciously and go through everyday life with ease," Joyce Meyer wrote in her October 7, 2020 [devotional](#). "Any situation might cause you to think you really cannot have a healthy soul, but they don't have the power to keep you from becoming whole again. Actually, the fact that you're going through these things is not a hindrance to a healthy soul; it's the reason you need one! The healthier your soul is, the stronger you will be, and the better you'll be able to handle your most challenging circumstances."

Meyer goes on to explain that we can't control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond to our circumstances, and that God gave us the fruit of self-control. I love the Amplified Bible translation of Galatians 5:22–23:

"But the fruit of the Spirit [the result of His presence within us] is love [unselfish concern for others], joy, [inner] peace, patience [not the ability to wait, but how we act while waiting], kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law."

The part about "how we act while waiting" stings me more than a little, I must admit.

I need to remember that I can ask God for help with anything. There are so many holy words describing His love for me and His unending willingness to help me.

I am just beginning to learn that it's much better to face challenges with a healthy soul than with a weak or wounded one. When it is well with my soul, I am optimally suited to be used by God, standing ready to be a blessing to someone else. I am open to hear His prompting to give a word of encouragement to others whenever it is needed, or lend a helping hand.

Or to share the Gospel, which is my ultimate goal, which I make sure is written into the stories in all my novels.

Becoming a Blessing Dispenser

God put His love in our hearts when we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, and this love is dispensed through us to help others. A good place to see a picture of this idea is in Genesis 12:2, where God told Abraham He would bless him and make him a person who dispensed blessings to others:

“And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you [abundantly],
And make your name great (exalted, distinguished);
And you shall be a blessing [a source of great good to others]...”

The thing that really struck me in that portion of Scripture is that it is God who does the making of the blessing dispenser. He does it. I don't have to try to do it myself, or expect myself to see and act on the needs of others. God does it. That is a huge relief to me, and something to bow my head in gratitude and praise for.

Out of the store of grace and blessings God has placed in us, we get to bestow blessings on others. That's enough to get me excited to get out of bed every day. It is my prayer that God helps me see and seize opportunities to love people whenever He wills it.

A healthy soul is a worthy goal for all of us. It sometimes seems impossible to achieve, let alone maintain a soul that is healthy, but all things are possible with Him (please see [Matthew 19:26](#)).

Prayer Prompt: Father, please show me how to attain and maintain a healthy soul. I know that all things are possible with You, and thank You in advance for helping me heal, and in turn become Your blessing dispenser. In Jesus' name, amen.

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series, and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, all 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 inspiring readers to laugh, cry, and crave certain varieties of food. She loves reading, writing and leading worship music with her husband Tim at their church in Nashville, Tennessee. Please drop by and sing-up for news and free goodies at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>. Blessings to you!

Moving Forward – God’s Rest – by Pam Charro

We all know that Jesus came to restore our relationship with the Father and that understanding offers us peace and rest. But did you know that refusing that rest is considered disobedience by God?

So what does obedience look like?

When the Israelites left Egypt and were wandering in the desert, God promised them that they would inherit a land of milk and honey. What he didn't tell them was that giants were living there at the time, and it didn't appear that it would be easy to get them to leave. Wouldn't you think that God would understand their dismay and difficulty in believing? Why was he so hard on them? Surely facing reality is not a sin?

But the bible clearly states that God has no problem with us facing reality. All of the great heroes of the faith also had adversity and acknowledged it. The problem was that God had already parted the Red Sea, given water from a rock, and fed his people with manna and meat. They had received multiple opportunities to see God perform miracles on their behalf and to grow in their confidence in his provision for them. Yet they stubbornly refused to view their difficulties as small in comparison to their great God. And so Hebrews states that because they did not add faith in God's finished work to their knowledge, they were disobedient.

What about us today? When we have problems, and I'm pretty sure we do from time to time, do we call to mind all that God has already done to prove himself trustworthy? Or do we immediately panic and wish for earlier times? Our God is the same today and is ready to provide miracles when we remember who he is and rest in that knowledge. He loves to show up when we have a seemingly impossible situation, so that he can be our solution.

I do not want God to consider me to be disobedient. I want to enter his rest!

Lord, during these challenging times, remind my heart of your constant faithfulness to me so that I will respond by putting my trust in you. You have already proven your love for me and you deserve every bit of my confidence in your finished work.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Lead Them

I've written about this before, I think. Or maybe it's just been in my head and never put to words. It's the thought that as much as kindness is important and necessary, kindness alone won't save our nation or world. Kindness might lead people to a pool of still water to drink, but unless there's water in that tank, they'll wander elsewhere.

What am I referring to? It's the amazing rise and fall of kindness and Jesus.

On the one hand, kindness is everywhere if we look for it, even among the unrest. I saw acts of kindness, especially at Christmas time, where amazing gifts were given to the needy. I believe people know the beauty and return on giving to others, because there are lots of non-profits, lots of folks that volunteer, and so many that are so kind to animals – taking them in as family. And this is completely awesome, and biblical. In fact, in Romans 2:4 it says kindness leads us to repentance. So kindness is HUGE!

What troubles me is how Jesus and the ultimate act of kindness offered on the cross for all mankind is not being shared hand in hand with our kindness. Don't get me wrong. I'm not sure how to do this effectively. We all know that fear is not a good motivator for relationship, especially those of us that were raised with a stern religious teaching. We have also seen that just talking about Jesus and then slandering our neighbor or hating and lying and cheating complete negates anything we've said, and it misrepresents who Jesus is, altogether.

So, back to kindness. Isn't showing kindness toward others showing them Jesus? I would say it is. BUT there's this thing at the end of that sentence above – repentance. That's the water in the still pond that we all need to drink, once the kindness of God has been revealed to us. Once we are the recipient of kindness, we need to see further into the kindness of God that loved the world so much that he GAVE his Son.

I can pay it forward in Starbucks drive-thru, and the person behind me will feel special. I can smile because I gave selflessly at Christmas to help others have plenty, and that kindness will warm the hearts of those that receive. I can smile and listen to a clerk in the store and tell her to "Have a nice day," and it might make her day actually feel nice. And I can be kind to my neighbor by pulling up his trash can, and it might result in a wave next time I see him.

And all of that kindness is SO GOOD. It's leading people, modeling Christ, showing them unconditional love, and putting their needs above ours. It's completely and totally a wonderful thing to teach our children – to be kind – no matter what. Kindness breaks down walls and produces thankful hearts.

But that kindness, when those who have received it follow us to the still clear water to drink, has to be coupled with the story of Jesus and our need for him, our need to repent. And repentance is just the simple act of admitting our faults and our needs, asking forgiveness, believing in Jesus and his GREAT LOVE, and then accepting that freedom that comes from the amazing love offered to every single person on the earth.

That's the message that HAS to be coupled with our kindness. How do we do this? I suppose we look for more opportunities to speak, to represent Him well, and to know that story ourselves. If we have been given and shown kindness, we have received mercy and experienced forgiveness, and we live at peace and not in fear for our future, we need to be ready and willing to speak up say why and how.

It's His kindness that leads us to repentance. And kind acts alone aren't enough. We have to be forgiven, offer forgiveness, believe and then live.

It's taken me decades of living and growing and laying aside fear and untruths, in favor of knowing and growing and loving the God who loves me, for me to realize this. And I'm not good at sharing His story when I'm kind to others. Just saying, "Jesus loves you," doesn't seem to be the answer. Neither does the answer seem to be shaking an accusing finger.

However, maybe if I show my own repentant heart by the way I treat others, ask forgiveness, live at peace with my family and neighbors, speak the truth and never gossip, love my husband well and soak in the goodness of his Word daily...then perhaps they'll ask why and I can tell them. Or better yet, I can hope I find boldness to be kind and represent Him well, and pray for open doors I actually see – to be kind AND fill my tank with something amazing they will want to drink when led to the water's edge.

Jesus, the name above all names, the name by which we can all be saved. Saved from what, you might ask? From death, fear, effects of sin, our own foul attitudes, and everything else that kills us in this world. Because He first loved us, offered the supreme sacrificial act of kindness, and all we have to do is believe.

Strengthening Your Core – Signs Everywhere – by Marcy Lytle

This past Sunday our pastor shared a funny story. He moved here from Wisconsin several years ago, and he and his wife often saw our signs in Central Texas that say, “Turn around. Don’t drown.” They chuckled and thought how silly...because they didn’t know about flash floods in our area! However, we that have lived here know all about them and we heed those signs!

He continued his story of how one day they were on their way back from the coast and it started raining and within minutes, they had to pull over and wait, as water rose up the tires of their car. Needless to say, they learned really quickly about the meaning behind the sign, and that it wasn’t silly at all. It was the truth!

I thought that story was interesting, because I too have traveled to other parts of the country and noted their signs that we don’t have here. “Moose Crossing” is one in particular. We even went on a hunt for moose in that area, but we didn’t see any. “Snow plows ahead” is another sign that is just not seen in my town AT ALL...ever.

I remember when I was teaching my kids how to drive, there was an entire section devoted to learning to read the highway signs and heeding what they say. “Construction zone ahead” warns us to slow down and look for workers. “Yield” signs, unheeded, can cause a wreck for sure! And when driving in uncharted territory, like new cities or states or countries, signs have to be heeded!! There are signs on a stretch of highway here that say it’s a dangerous road with lots of wrecks – that’s a sign that brings fear and sobriety!

Back to our pastor’s story...

The reason the sign seemed silly and funny to our pastor was because it was unfamiliar, he had never experienced a flash flood, and the message seemed irrelevant.

This made me think about sayings and directives in the bible that we sometimes never read or heed, until we’re in danger and need...or until we are in a season of life when rains come down hard, or the sun beats too hot.

God told Lot’s wife “Don’t look back”

He told Samson “Don’t cut your hair”

He directed Noah and said “Rain is coming”

He tells us “Acknowledge me and I will make straight paths”

He says “If you lack wisdom, ask me”

He encourages “Run with perseverance”

He instructs “Make every effort to live at peace”

He enlightens “All things work together for good”

He speaks truth "All scripture is God-breathed"

There are literally "signs" or directives or instruction throughout the bible that offer us safety if we become familiar with them. Sometimes, it takes living life to become familiar, because that particular directive isn't something we look for, until we turn that corner or experience that curve.

Signs like "Turn around. Don't Drown." are placed around our town as reminders of what our weather can do in a moment's time.

It's the same with his Word, but we have to read it, notice it, believe it, and heed it.

If he says all things work together for good, then when life is bad – we can follow that truth. When we have no idea what road or path to take, we can remember that directive to ask him for wisdom – and we can know that he will grant it. If he's warned us to forget our past and move on, we need to obey that and not look back.

It's a new year, 2021. Hopefully, we will be able to travel again. And when we do, there will be new signs to notice and obey when we cross every state line. And there are new signs and directives He's placed in our paths as well, to follow the way of peace, joy and love as we walk with him through dark valleys and sunlit hills, skipping along or resting beside still waters.

What sign is on your path today? Not seeing any? Open his Word and learn about his character and direction and love, and ask him to illuminate the sign you need to see...today. And if there's no sign on your path today, then follow him to still waters and drink and stay awhile until you move on again...

Have you ever seen the sign pictured above? Me either...

FRESH THYME - Uncheerable – by Marcy Lytle

Is the title of this article even a word? I know it's a feeling, because I've been there, and I'm guess you have been there as well. It's one of those feelings that we feel on a day when nothing anyone says will cheer us up, because frankly – we don't want to be cheery! There are some days when we just feel down, either for very good reasons, or for no identifiable reason at all and we feel UNCHEERABLE!

It could be a day when we feel lonely, especially in these past months, when friends' calls and hugs and attention are all but none. We feel sad, but we don't want clichés or our husbands to try and cheer us up. We just want to be alone and wallow in our *uncheeriness*. Is that a word? Probably not, but it is today.

My grandmother had a sign in her kitchen that said something like, *One day I was sad and melancholy and I heard a voice say – Cheer up – things could be worse. So I cheered up, and sure enough – things got worse.* I used to laugh at that sign, and what it said has stuck with me all these years!

So...I'm not going to include scripture verses here (because we can look them up, if we want them), I'm not going to give us practical exercises or ways to change our stinking thinking (we probably already know those, as well.) What I want to do is say,

It's Okay!

Maybe that's what we need to hear in uncheerable moments, or on uncheerable days. None of us wants to live an uncheerable life, as that would be most miserable. But to feel uncheerable, wanting to be left alone and not spoken to for a few moments or hours is pretty darn normal.

Seasons come and go, and it's interesting to note that one of those four seasons is where everything is dormant and life is hidden beneath the ground, and animals hibernate, and the skies are bleak. It's called winter...the season we're in right now. It's part of the year that we encounter over and over again, and it's part of the cycle. There's a reason for winter.

The ground rests. The animals sleep. And there's nothing we can do to awaken the plants or stir the animals, because it's part of what happens in the cycle of life.

However, we all know that temperatures rise, the ice thaws, the green reappears and blooms start showing. And it's not because they were coerced to awaken or stimulated or prodded. Their roots were deep, the fall rains prepared the ground for dormancy, and spring just knew when to show up.

So if you're having an uncheerable moment or day, just take a nap, chill, hide away, or do nothing. You're not a terrible person if you don't want to be awakened to cheer and shout. Tomorrow's another day, and spring will come for sure, so it might just be your time to rest and dig deep and wait...

Whether “things” get worse or better doesn’t really matter when you’re planted by the river, because the seasons don’t stay...they give way to the next one...to that cheery season of blossoms and aromas and sunshine.

It will come. And it’s okay to not want to hear that right now...

FRESH THYME - We Say We Will...

I've been so guilty of saying I'll do something and then not doing it. And I've also been guilty of being upset at others for doing the same thing. For example, when we run into an old friend while out shopping and it just blurts out of our mouth as we're leaving,

"It was so good to see you. Let's get together very soon."

And yet, we don't really mean it, and we never call that friend, and she never calls us, and that encounter is gone and forgotten.

Another example is finding out a friend has a new business or has written a new book, and we are so excited (or seem to be) and we tell them we will check it out. But as time goes by, we've forgotten about their newness because our life is busy, and we never even visit their website or read their book. We said we would. And we didn't.

What about those friends that say, "Let's get together for a date," or "Why don't we have lunch?" and then they never call. And we don't call them because they said they'd call us, and we are tired of being the initiator. Or...we wait for them to call and they don't, so we assume they were lying and don't really like us.

Haven't you found yourself in one of those thought streams above, or have you too been guilty of spurting out sentiments you don't really mean, or verbalizing intentions but then never following through? Is it a bad thing? I think it's hurtful, to those we talk to and to ourselves when we hear those words of hope, only to never see that friend again.

The pandemic hasn't done friendships any favors. Some folks we used to see on a regular basis, ones we thought really enjoyed our company, have just disappeared into their homes or behind their four walls or somewhere...and we haven't heard from them. Or maybe it's we who have just grown tired of the effort that has to be made to connect with others, so we just don't do it. After all, we have our jobs, our routines and our own families, and we don't have any emotional energy left to spend.

I'm there. In all of those thoughts and rationales and sentiments.

I am hoping, however, that I will be more careful about my words that I speak to others.

- If I say I want to meet up, I hope I really mean it and follow through.
- If she says she's wants to have lunch, I hope she will call me. And if she doesn't, I can call her.
- If I feel everyone is slipping away, I hope I can offer grace and reach out, anyway.
- If I feel myself hibernating and pitying life, I hope I give thanks and look up and reach out for the joy...

of relationship.

I've been disappointed in how we've all reacted to the pandemic, although we all should offer ourselves grace, because we've not lived in a world like this before. Who knew a year ago that

we'd all be told to stay indoors, avoid others, don't touch or hug, and certainly don't sit and linger for visits indoors over an extended period of time. Pretty soon, that became our norm and we forgot the importance of connections because they were too difficult and risky to make.

I don't know the answer going forward, or how much longer we will have to avoid others. It's getting old. But I do know that we have to be intentional this year to watch our words, guard our hearts, and continue to love.

We all need connection. And if it can't happen in person as much as we'd like, we have to text, call, meet at a distance, and care. And our words have to count for something, or we just need to stop saying them.

I hope I am cautious, thoughtful, and intentional on committing myself to notice and care about a friend, and then follow up. And I hope others will do the same with me. At the very least, it's something for us all to think about, as we gather together in different ways and by different means and with different mask-covered faces.

We can't stop loving and sharing, it's how we will thrive and bless others, and be blessed. And we must listen to what we say and then when we say it...do it.



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

February 2021



TIPS

The Dressing – A Touch of Red – by Marcy Lytle

We all need a boost in the clothing department, would you agree? I, for one, am not interested in buying more loungewear. I'm so tired of my walking shoes, even though I'm incredibly thankful for them these past many months! And it's time now to quit buying more sweaters and coats, unless they're on clearance and we need them for next year! So...since it's the month we celebrate Valentine's Day and all things romantic (or not), we thought it would be fun to focus on the color red – in accessories, that is. No big splurges on fancy dresses or outfits (unless YOU want to), but just a touch of red to make us smile as we prepare for a date, invite a friend, or stay in and enjoy all things fancy and fun because we need it! And red is a color you can wear in every season. Would you agree?

Red Sneakers – I love these. And they look so comfy for the long walks, now that the snow is maybe thawing (in some spots!) Think of these as a staple for now and spring. They're cute with denim, skirts, or all sorts of options – as a pop of color to brighten your step! From JCPenney!

https://www.google.com/search?q=red+sneakers&source=lnms&tbm=shop&sa=X&ved=2ahUK Ewin-uWi8JPuAhVDrVkKHWBfAwMQ_AUoAXoECBsQAw&biw=1600&bih=757#spd=7775992143523213047

Red Glasses – The blue light glasses are great, so I hear, for tired eyes that stare at the screen all day! So why not wear red? This pair from Amazon is so cute! I love colored glasses. Maybe you will, as well.

https://www.amazon.com/LAURA-FAIRY-Lightweight-Protection-Eyestrain/dp/B07Z1LGVWR/ref=sr_1_9?dchild=1&keywords=red+reading+glasses&qid=1610368550&sr=8-9

Red ring – why not? Sometimes, a new ring makes us smile and feel like we're dressed up – just because we have something new on our finger! Check out this unique style for a ring you purchase all for yourself. It's affordable and so cool – and will add such a fun touch to any outfit!

https://www.amazon.com/Created-Coral-Plated-Sterling-Silver/dp/B01M4S5ZNO/ref=sr_1_22?dchild=1&keywords=red+ring&qid=1610368724&sr=8-22

Red pillow – What about a bold statement on your bed or sofa or porch chair, or somewhere – in a pillow! How fun would a pop of red be in your home décor with these fun pom-pom pillow covers. Amazon sells the pillows and these covers. I recently purchased a couple and enjoy switching out the covers instead of buying more pillows – so fun!

<https://www.amazon.com/DEZENE-Throw-Pillow-Covers-18x18/dp/B07Y7XNRCM>

https://www.amazon.com/Premium-Hypoallergenic-Stuffer-Polyester-Standard/dp/B01LBMPWVC/ref=sr_1_1_sspa?crd=1ZSAVB57W1PPQ&dchild=1&keywords=18+x+18+pillows&qid=1610369824&srefix=18+x+18%2Cgarden%2C233&sr=8-1-

[spons&pssc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUEzRjRYTk8yTkswMDIxJmVuY3J5cHRIZEikPUEwMzi3MjI0MTJJRDBKTKFYVENKOSZlbnNyeXB0ZWRBZEikPUEwNzIxNjgzMkVSN1ZSM0I2UjVYQyZ3aWRnZXROYW1IPXNwX2F0ZiZhY3Rpb249Y2xpY2tSZWRpcmVjdCZkb05vdExvZ0NsaWNrPXRydWU=](https://www.amazon.com/spons&pssc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUEzRjRYTk8yTkswMDIxJmVuY3J5cHRIZEikPUEwMzi3MjI0MTJJRDBKTKFYVENKOSZlbnNyeXB0ZWRBZEikPUEwNzIxNjgzMkVSN1ZSM0I2UjVYQyZ3aWRnZXROYW1IPXNwX2F0ZiZhY3Rpb249Y2xpY2tSZWRpcmVjdCZkb05vdExvZ0NsaWNrPXRydWU=)

Red candle – Paddywax is one of my favorite brands of candles and they come in such pretty elegant containers, like this one in the Cranberry Rose scent. Just add a touch of red and an aroma that's pleasant, on your desk or in your bathroom, for a fun February scent of something red.

<https://www.amazon.com/Paddywax-Candles-Collection-Soy-Blend-Cranberry/dp/B07GFHQ6C>

Red pajama pants – After all, pajama pants are the comfiest, and why not treat yourself to some love with these whimsical heart ones that will make you feel loved? Add any t-shirt, your cozy slippers, and settle in for a romantic comedy this month for two, or for you!

<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?pid=650213012&pcid=999&vid=1&&searchText=women%20red%20pajamas#pdp-page-content>

Red watch – I want this one! Isn't this Anne Klein red leather strap watch the most beautiful? On your arm, a new watch will make you feel like a million bucks. When's the last time you bought yourself a colorful watch?

https://www.amazon.com/Anne-Klein-109443WTRD-Silver-Tone-Leather/dp/B004X4Y9MO/ref=sr_1_11?dchild=1&keywords=red+watch+women&qid=1610371410&sr=8-11

If you don't like red but prefer pink, then go for that. Or whatever hue makes you feel cheery and loved. We often dress on the outside how we feel on the inside. So dress in color and look forward to spring...while the month of February is here right now.

Seven for You – Chocolate!

It's February, and that means chocolate. Whether he hands you a heart shaped box or not (I don't prefer one, at all), you do deserve a bit of indulgence this month of your favorite chocolate treat! That's why we asked our panel of women to share theirs, so that we can all try something new! After you read, leave a comment and tell us your favorite chocolate!

I spent the first five years of my life in England, with my extended family. I was able to go back to England many times after this. Chocolate to me is Cadbury chocolate! Not the Hershey version of Cadbury, but the Cadbury that was started in 1920 in Birmingham, England. It is a milk chocolate dream....just the right balance of cream and cocoa. One of my favorites is the Flake bar. It lives up to the name...flaky and a bit messy. The goal is to eat every flake and not have it wasted.

My granddad and family took me to Brighton beach and it was there I had my first "99." A soft vanilla ice cream cone with a chilled half-flake bar stuck in it. Walking on the magical pier eating this lovely confection was a child's dream. A wonderful memory of being with my grandparents in a country I will always call home. You can buy Flake bars on Amazon.

If you want to make a "99", you can chill the chocolate, break the bars in half and then find the best soft-served cone you can.

https://www.amazon.com/Original-Cadbury-Flake-Pack-England/dp/B004AQO72W/ref=sr_1_4?dchild=1&keywords=original+cadbury+flake&qid=1609684474&refinements=p_85%3A2470955011&mid=2470954011&rps=1&sr=8-4

There is nothing better than a chocolate covered cherry! These have always been my favorite. When my husband and I married I told him our first Christmas together all I wanted was a box of chocolate covered cherries. 35 Christmases later and I still get a box. He gets highly creative wrapping it. He forgot once, but then never forgot again. I was not too happy that year. And occasionally, I even get a box on Valentine's Day. They say, chocolate is a girl's best friend...or is that diamonds? You can see that these cherries didn't last too long!

If you haven't been to Cheddar's Scratch Kitchen and tried their chocolate cake, then you're really missing out. It's a tradition in my household that we go there to indulge in their chocolaty goodness for every birthday. I'm not sure if their cake would be considered famous but we like to think of it as our own little hidden gem.

I LOVE CHOCOLATE. Ghirardelli squares (especially the ones filled with caramel) and Lindt truffles are at the top of my list. I prefer dark chocolate, but also love milk chocolate. And, it's very hard for me to resist a handful of plain ole M&M's. If you give me a Whitman Sampler, I always hope to get the one filled with orange cream.

When I was a young girl, 10 years old or so, I came across “The Chocolate Song” by the Smothers Brothers. I listened to it over and over and laughed hysterically. I hope you enjoy it as well.

<https://g.co/kgs/n5mJvc>

We recently purchased chocolate sauce from Caramel Kitchen at a holiday market (as well as their salted caramel sauce.) And a friend recently gave me a peppermint dark chocolate bar from Trader Joe’s. I used both of those with vanilla bean ice cream in a blender, and oh my - that shake was delicious!

<https://caramelkitchen.com/>

My favorite chocolate in a box of chocolates is the caramel. And I didn’t know until I was way into adulthood that the squares are always the caramels!

I grew up loving milk chocolate; I was the one how would take a bite out of each chocolate in the box. As I grew older, I found myself thinking milk chocolate was too sweet and sometimes gritty. I learned the benefits of dark chocolate and tried it. It seems creamier and richer in taste. Now I am hooked on dark chocolate. My go-to dark chocolate treats are chocolate-covered strawberries. We make ours with Godiva dark chocolate.

Lindt Dark Chocolate Truffle - I keep these in the refrigerator. They remind me of a dipped cone with the crunchy chocolate on the outside and creamy inside. When you break the delicate chocolate shell, the irresistibly smooth filling starts to melt.

https://www.target.com/p/lindt-lindor-dark-chocolate-truffles-6oz/-/A-12943083?ref=tgt_adv_XS000000&AFID=google_pla_df&fndsrc=tgtao&DFA=71700000012732781&CPNG=PLA_Grocery%2BShopping_Local&adgroup=SC_Grocery&LID=700000001170770pgs&LNM=PRODUCT_GROUP&network=g&device=c&location=9028263&targetid=pla-702295848632&ds_rl=1246978&ds_rl=1248099&gclid=CjwKCAiAi_D_BRApEiwASslbJ3juJtTxbSBEFIkE53qR5ouRN9CwZQZ90K_V_S7dWmEd5HnJiueAkRoCqu8QAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds

For a real all-out-there treat, the high protein hemp brownie from Bella Green is awesome. This dark, dense brownie is crunchy on the outside and fudgy on the inside, with a chocolate glaze and berry sauce drizzled over the top. Served with vanilla bean ice-cream. This is one you want to eat slowly and savor every bite...for sure.

<https://bellagreeen.com/>

Hands down, it's dark chocolate all the way. I do put the cocoa limit around 65%. Go any high and you lose the velvety mouth feel that makes chocolate so irresistible. And by far my favorite chocolate product is Miles of Chocolate. Here's what the website says, "Made with simple and fresh ingredients, Miles of Chocolate's baked dessert is the excellent after meal treat or cheat day snack. Our **baked chocolate dessert** is best described as a cross between a brownie and a truffle. With a decadent truffle-like center surrounded by a crisp, brownie casing, each bite is like a perfect harmony of flavors and textures bursting with flavor." AND it's made in Austin. Their site is miles-of-chocolate.com.

In the Kitchen – Better Homemade – by Marcy Lytle

I quit buying boxed items (for the most part) a while back and even processed or readymade items. Of course, if time is short, I still do. But mostly, homemade dishes of certain foods taste SO MUCH better than store bought, so I thought I'd share a few recipes of my favorites! Sometimes, there's no time for homemade, but if there is...you'll want to continue the process and find time...seriously.

Hummus

Some store bought hummus is delicious, but nothing beats making your own in a processor. It just takes a few ingredients, then some pulses, and you're done. And hummus is a great dip for enjoying all week, with veggies and pita chips (those are good homemade, as well!)

There are SO MANY hummus recipes to try, so you can google your fave. But try some of these toppings for a variety, and serve all the fun on a pretty tray!

- Pistachios and pomegranate seeds
- Mixed olives, feta cheese and sun-dried tomatoes
- Pesto
- Toasted sesame seeds
- Everything but the Bagel seasoning
- Chopped veggies and olives

Granola

I've made so many different recipes of granola over the past couple of years, and I love the freshness and tastes of the fresh nuts and oats and raisins, etc. It's not hard to make at all...and you'll have a jar full for a couple of weeks!

Here's a recent recipe (It's good in a parfait, too, with strawberries and whipped cream!)

- 6 c rolled oats
- 1 cup pecan halves
- 1 c flour
- 1/3 c sugar
- 1 t salt
- 1 t cinnamon
- 1 cup oil
- 1/2 cup honey

Preheat oven to 320 degrees. Mix first six ingredients together. Whisk the oil and honey together and then add to the oats. Spread on a rimmed baking sheet and bake 35 minutes, stirring a few times during baking. Bake longer for more crunch, but don't burn! Allow to cool after baking.

Cookies

I do not like store bought cookies, but homemade ones are so good. I bet most probably agree with this! We don't make them often, because they're hard to resist, but homemade cookies are SO GOOD and also easy to pack up and share with friends!

These are my husband's favorite ever cookie that I have made:

Chewy Chocolate Cookies

- 1 ¼ c margarine softened
- 2 c sugar
- 2 eggs
- 2 t vanilla
- 2 c flour
- ¾ c cocoa
- 1 t baking soda
- ½ t salt
- 1 cup chopped pecans

Cream margarine and sugar then add in eggs and vanilla. Blend well. Combine flour, cocoa, salt, baking soda – blend into creamed mixture. Stir in nuts. Drop by tablespoons full onto an ungreased cookie sheet. Bake 8-9 minutes at 350 degrees. They will be soft and flatten during cooling. Cool until set!

Salad dressing

NEVER made homemade salad dressing until a couple of years ago, and now I know...it tastes so good and fresh...and it's so easy to make – all different kinds. Great for keeping on hand for salads and such...

Easy Mustard Vinaigrette

- ¼ c white wine vinegar
- 1 T Dijon mustard
- ½ t kosher salt
- Pepper
- 2/3 c olive oil

Whisk first four ingredients together in a bowl, then drizzle in the olive oil, whisking until thick and smooth. Add more salt and pepper to taste. (makes about a cup).

Guacamole

We just enjoyed a new recipe for guacamole last night. But standard fare is always great, as well – with just lemon juice, salt and pepper!

- 1 large avocado
- ¼ c chopped walnuts
- ¼ c pomegranate seeds
- 1 cup fresh chopped spinach

Combine all ingredients in a bowl and serve with sliced cucumbers, peppers and chips!

Muffins

Coffee shop muffins are pretty darn good. But homemade ones can be just as good, or better, and you can customize and make those flavors you can't find in shops around town.

Banana Muffins

- 2 c biscuit/baking mix
- 1 egg lightly beaten
- 1 1/3 c mashed ripe banana
- ½ c packed brown sugar
- 3 T milk
- 2 T vegetable oil
- 1 t vanilla extract

Place biscuit mix in large bowl. Combine the egg, bananas, brown sugar, milk and oil and vanilla, then stir into mix. Fill paper lined muffin cups 2/3 full. Bake at 400 degrees for 15-20 minutes til a toothpick comes out clean. Cool for five minutes before removing from pan.

Pizza

Frozen pizza is okay. But fresh pizza is the bomb. You can vary up your crust, you can add the toppings you want, and you can keep it fresh – all things that make homemade pizza the absolute tastiest!

One idea is to use small Kaiser rolls as your base, and pile on whatever you have in your fridge!

Just spread on marinara sauce (or not), and mozzarella cheese (or not) and then add fresh veggies, onions, tomatoes, pepperoni or sausage, spinach, peppers, or whatever you like!

If you'd rather have pizza dough, make or purchase your own and be creative with your toppings, always using fresh ingredients and then bake them and enjoy.

Three Moms – Organized...or Not!

We are into the second month after the holidays, and we thought it would be fun to ask our three moms about putting away all the toys and stuff from Christmas. How they do it, do they do it, and how did it go? After all, it's fun to hear what other moms do, and especially to note that they're all different! And that's a good thing! Every mom has different ways of keeping her kids "together" or not...and it's okay! So hopefully, you can get an idea or two, or share your own after you read!

Mom of four:

Life is very busy right now, so there is definitely tension to organize and clean –but so little time!

- I write down one goal a day. Yesterday I gave the kids a bag and asked them to fill it with things they don't play with to give away. They put in one stuffed animal!

Slowly, we are getting back in order. WE are not in any rush. Just a little a day – one box, one room.

- We also fill out our calendar goals – like "take down Christmas" or "clean up the yard" (we actually asked for help with that – and the kids will help!). "Haircuts" are on the schedule. Yesterday was to purge, but at least the kids tried!

The main thing is that we write down things that need to be done, and slowly schedule them. Pressure to do it all in one day is not good. Over several weeks is fine! Weekends are sometimes the only days to organize! And get the kids to participate, even if they don't make "progress."

- And have lots of grace – that you're making progress – and that's all that matters.

Mom of two:

Probably the top three things I do to organize are:

1. One in, one out – If the girls get a new toy, they need to give away something as well. This helps minimize clutter after all the holidays! Especially things that are similar to something they already have, we try to explain how blessed it is to receive and have. But there are lots of kids that could be blessed by their gift!
2. Declutter before birthdays and Christmas: If we haven't seen them playing with it for a long time, it goes in a pile to give away.
3. I love baskets. All different sizes, shapes and colors are great! We have a bookcase in the girls' playroom and we have labeled baskets and a couple of chests for dress-up clothes with fun stickers. This way they have categorized toys, so they can choose easily. And they know where to put them after playing!

Mom of three:

Even though it's tempting to be lazy during the holidays, it was so nice to put things away before school started back up. Nothing left in bags or hallways or the garage! I actually had a day planned on the calendar for organizing!

1. Before Christmas (or a holiday) have the kids clean their rooms. Take a day to do it.
2. Give them a bag or box, one for broken or trash. One bag is for giving away. And one is a sale box – like a Barbie dream house we were able to sell on Facebook Marketplace! This was helpful for replenishing our own funds!
3. Whatever storage system is in the kids' rooms, make sure there are a few empty, before going into holidays or birthdays. That way there's a place for new toys. The boys have hot wheels and tracks, so we invested in two big bins for them that stack in his closet. All the tracks go in there!
4. Know your kids. This is the most important! I love things labeled and behind closed doors, where it's easy to open and read and put things away. But...my kids are not necessarily like me. Cute photos or labels weren't read or paid attention to! Then I ended up putting away toys for them. Making it easy for them individually helps. My oldest likes to play and put away, so bins are great. And he has shelves for display of his Lego creations. My daughter has dolls and a millions accessories. I want to put in boxes and label, but she does better with a cubby system and three or four wheeled bins under the bed. She rolls out and rolls under. And she needs floor space for doll houses to spread out. The littlest, Augie, just likes a giant bin for throwing it all in. And he loves figures. He has a big toy box, and everything is in it, except books – which are on shelves.

My kids can now clean their own room, because it's organized for them, and it makes me happy.

Side note: If there are big bins under the bed, there's less space to throw junk under there!

Tried and True – A Place for Everything

By now, you're either still staring at all the stuff from the holidays, or it's all in its place and put away. Or maybe a little of both. Maybe you're super organized and have everything labeled in boxes and stacked on shelves in straight rows. Or maybe you've stuffed everything in sacks and will pull it out, say in July, to see if you have the energy and mojo to deal with the clutter then.

I recently watched an Instastory of a mom of three that "seems" to have it all together. Her kids make their beds every morning, her house is cleaned only twice a week and when she shows pictures, it looks pretty darn put together. But then on one slide, she admitted to messes that happen. After all, Instastories are not real life. They're staged photos.

So...with just a few pictures of some new ideas, here are some simple and not fancy ideas of how to organize just the kitchen. These are just fun and inexpensive ways to store things or display things or set things in order...at least on the days when you feel like doing so! And if you don't...there's always July.

These things are mostly from Lakeside Collections.

For your plates: If you're tired of your plates stacking, you can try these organizers for turning the plates on their sides. My dinner plates didn't fit in my tiny cabinet, but maybe yours will!

For your lids and storage containers: I've loved the rolling bins for cabinets underneath, as they store lids, storage containers and more odds and ends. And they roll out SO easily, so they can be moved from cabinet to cabinet, depending on your need.

For your spices: I've had these a while and they've been the most effective at keeping my spices recognizable and grouped by kind. Salts, Mexican, Italian...you get the picture.

For your baking stuff: Do you still have canisters taking up space on your counter tops? I suppose these would be okay there, too, but they fit nicely in my pantry! I do need to restock flour and sugar, for sure!

For your cutting boards: Perhaps you have a built-in for these, but I didn't. So on their side, in this metal frame, they go. And I'm happy.

For your snacks: I have lots of these little containers, mostly for picnics and the movies. I can carry in nuts and dark chocolate to the theater. Or I can tote sauces and dips for picnics. I need lots of these!

For your eggs: I just thought this was too genius to pass up – an egg pullout tray for the fridge. I LOVE IT! Doesn't it look so nice?

So there you go...not fancy...not expensive...but just fun treats for me after the holidays were over, to help corral and reorganize and make the kitchen smile.



HOME

I Don't Do Teens – Be Sticky – by Marcy Lytle

A trail of sticky notes throughout the house doesn't sound appealing. Of course, not. But little love notes tucked in odd places for your teens to find, although they won't admit it, might make their day. You know, those little sticky notepads that you can buy as simple as plain squares from the dollar store, or cutesy ones with sayings or jokes on them, online. They're great for leaving your spouse a note, or for jotting something down to remember, but what about for your teenagers in the house?

Here are a few ideas for sticky note messages for them, this month, just to share your love...even if they don't want to receive it. It will be a memory they look back on with a smile...I promise. Do it for a full month, and drive them crazy...

"When I see your face I'm so amazed that God gave you to me" – tucked under his pillow.

"You can do all things through Christ – He strengthens you." – in the backpack.

"Thank you for helping out the other night with the dishes." – on his/her mirror.

"I love your smile." – on her closet door.

"He knows the plans He has for you – a future and a hope – trust Him." – on the steering wheel.

"There is no greater friend than Jesus." – on the bedroom door.

"He will never leave you or forsake you...ever." – on top of a book.

"I love you fiercely because you're mine." – in a shoe.

"The Lord is your Shepherd – there is no fear." – on the headboard

"Goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life." – on front door.

You get the idea. Think of messages that will encourage, or even just draw a picture if you're artistic like that. Attach some bucks, if you want. Offer a coupon or invite them to an outing. Be creative. Be sticky. And love on those teens.

An Adage A Day - A Special Gift – by Carole Gilbert

It's February! The *loove* month. It's the time people are head over heels and to the moon and back in love. It's the time when they feel they must express their feelings and share how they will love someone "to the ends of the earth." My husband gave me a card many years ago and wrote this expression of endearment inside. Do you have someone you need to give endearment to? Maybe it's a spouse, a child, or a friend. This might be a good way to convey that love. So, what does this phrase truly mean and how is it mostly used?

The idiom "to the ends of the earth" means to go to great lengths to accomplish or fulfill something or having no end or limit. It is thought to have started from the verse Zechariah 9:10,

"I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations;
his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth."

This verse is prophesying the coming of a ruler, Jesus, that will do away with traditional war instruments and replace them with universal peace, for the whole earth. This phrase is found in twenty-eight other verses in the Bible with many more times in similar forms.

This expression has also been a popular title of TV dramas, movies, and books. The last time it was used in this way was as the title of a 2019 Japanese television drama. In 2005 it was the title of a TV Mini-Series drama that came from a nautical themed trilogy of novels by William Golding. In 1948 it was the title of a crime thriller movie. This movie was directed by an American director, Robert Stevenson, who later went on to direct some all-time classics like *Mary Poppins*. It sounds like this phrase has been to the ends of the earth and back and it doesn't stop there.

One of my personal favorite uses of this phrase is the title of a book published in 1992 about an event that happened in 1492, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth*. I have always had a fascination with Christopher Columbus. Do you think he thought about this phrase as he set out to prove that there wasn't an end to the earth? I love the statement made in this book's description, "For colonized peoples that live today at the 'ends of the earth,' the age of exploitation may be no different from the age of exploration," meaning some people are still set on searching and seeking to conquer their own ideas and desires. I guess you could say this expression has been around the world and then some.

Putting all history of this phrase aside and getting back to that card from my husband, never underestimate the power of something as simple as a card. We are older now, so I don't need anything. I don't really need gifts (definitely not candy) and flowers mess with my allergies. But a card is different. It tells me he went and spent the time to look and read for just the right one to say what was in his heart. And then he took the time to write a comforting, loving, endearment on top of that inside, like the card he wrote in all those years ago when he said he would love me to the ends of the earth. That was a special gift.

And for this phrase to have its origin from the Bible, and be included so many times, tells me God has His endearment toward us "to the ends of the earth." I looked for a verse to share and it was hard to pick just one but this one gets right to the point and it includes comforting, special, words from God to us. He is definitely the greatest special gift!

It's Isaiah 45:22,

"Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other."

Chipped China - Oh, How He Loves Us – by Jennifer Lytle

When is the last time you listened to [How He Loves](#)? This is the month our culture celebrates love, but our Papa lavishes his affections on us continually. Oh, that we would have an ability to see, discern, and experience all of His goodness He purposefully, relentlessly pours out (please see [Psalm 34:8](#)) in a pursuit to: chase after our hearts, heal our wounds, and restore us to our legal, rightful position of sons and daughters of The King.

When is the last time you witnessed His love in a unique and significant way?

His desire is to H E A L all of our being. He wants to heal our intellect. Did someone shut down the stretching of your brain as a young child through criticism over academics? He wants to heal our heart. Did anyone make a promise to you and walk away, abandoning the plan to bring you treasures, joy, or beauty? He wants to heal our body. Have you experienced physical pain, deformity, or disease? He wants to heal our soul. Have you experienced darkness and the loss of communion with Holy Spirit?

I have found that many of God's [pursuits of my heart involve a long tapestry](#)-stretching through years and even decades. May I share one such story with you? Honestly, it is difficult for me to choose just one because I have so many stories I have intently stored as a heart journal of all the good things (at least all of the times when I have taken a moment to take stock) He has done as a generous gesture of His deep, unending love. This month, I will share a wedding gift He gave my husband and me.

Michael and I discovered a love for one another as we discovered a deep love for God. Our youth group became alive in one particular season (or, at least alive with a new depth). That season, we began to date. As our youth group disintegrated, our relationship did as well. One of the gifts Michael gave me during that time was a wind chime. He braided friendship bracelet yarn in place of the string for the chime to hang. The yarn and the birds were colorful and vibrant.

Ten years later, I still had that chime and it hung in my home. Unexpectedly, our friendship was rekindled despite living 300 miles apart. At some point during this re-budding friendship, I grew angry. I was frustrated. I was exasperated. I had always loved Michael. He had been in my heart for all of those years. I was upset with God for allowing this relationship to resurface. My life was predictable and steady. In a fit, or in desperation, or in a moment of devotion to God, I grabbed that chime down from my ceiling and promptly handed it to a friend. I told her about my predicament and gave her the item as if it was an old pair of shoes I could no longer fit. "God, I give you this relationship as I hand over this chime." I had enjoyed that chime, but I felt I could no longer hold onto it.

It was between two and three years after I offered the chime up that I was in Michael's grandmother's home. God had given marriage as a gift to Michael and me. In Grandma Jerry's home, I found myself staring at a replica of the chime that had been given to me more than a decade earlier. This bird chime did not have hand-braided friendship yarn or the colors of my previous one. It was completely white and beautiful. That wind chime was given to me and today it lovingly adorns a prominent spot in our living room.

How has God woven [His reckless love](#) story through your adventures? Through your everyday experiences? In this season, will you allow God's love to wash over you and lavish you with His goodness, His kindness, and His gentle mercies? Will you accept and embrace His forgiveness? Will you rejoice in His offer of freedom?

Photos of my wind chime

[Close up Horizontal](#)

[Vertical](#) (my preferred)

A Night to Remember – Unshaken – by Marcy Lytle

What if this month, the whole family gathers round and enjoys a chocolate peppermint shake, while learning the value of “not being shaken?” This entire lesson is from Psalm 15, a great chapter with visuals and lessons and the “how-tos” of staying calm in a shakable world.

Preparation: You’ll need vanilla ice cream, a chocolate bar (dark chocolate peppermint bar from Trader Joe’s is awesome), milk, and chocolate sauce. Oh, and a blender!

Let’s read Psalm 15 slowly and surely, as we prepare to make our shakes!

The writer asks a question about who can live next to the Lord and on his holy mountain, and then he gives the answers:

Verse 2 - **The blameless and truthful** – Do you like to be blamed for something you didn’t do, or even for something you did? How does it feel? What about when we get caught in a lie? How does that feel? We all make mistakes, but because of Jesus we can ask forgiveness, and then we are seen as perfect in his eyes. – Break the chocolate bar into chunks.

Verse 3 – **The ones that do no wrong and only talk well of their neighbor.** When’s the last time you talked bad about someone else, or heard someone talk badly of you? It’s not nice, but it happens sometimes. We can ask Jesus to give us clean hearts that love instead of hate. – Ask one child to set up the blender for mixing.

Verse 4 – **The ones that honor and fear the Lord and keeps their promises.** Isn’t it hard to keep promises? We promise we’ll obey, but we mess up. God gives us strength to obey him and obey our parents. – Ask someone to open the chocolate sauce.

Verse 5 – **The ones that lend to the poor and protect the innocent.** Giving and sharing and caring for others is pleasing to God. And it starts with sharing and giving to each other in our family. – Get out the spoons and the glasses.

The last verse says if we do all these things we will never be shaken. *Shaken* means to be moved back and forth, often because of fear or trembling or in a jerky way so as to harm. We’re about to make shakes with a blender. We are going to insert the ingredients and then push a button and watch them blend together. That’s a good kind of shaking. It will result in a tasty shake. But look at the blades in the bottom of the blender. They will cut and chop and mix and shake.

We don't want to be shaken like that. But if we talk bad about others, cheat, disobey, don't share what we have and tell lies, we may end up shaken and hurt. Doing wrong when we know to do right is hurtful to us, and to others. But thankfully, Jesus forgives and invites us to live right next to him, so that he can lead us and guide us so that...we will never be shaken!

Let's enjoy these shakes!

Put ice cream in the blender, along with a little milk, the broken bars, and the chocolate sauce – and blend. Pour into glasses and offer spoons or straws, as you give thanks to the Lord for his unshakeable love that keeps us and lead us into life everlasting!



YOU

Strengthening Your Core – Escapism – by Marcy Lytle

In January, I started a new series of topics we women all deal with. Last month, it was weight. And this month it's the feeling that we want to escape.

I've felt it.

You've felt it.

We've all felt it, or said it, or thought it, or wished it.

We'd like to, on a particularly hard or disappointing day, escape to another planet for good, because this one is full of crazy people that are driving us nuts. But we aren't able to, because there's no Mother Ship awaiting our presence for departure. Right?

Escapism is not a good solution in many areas.

Facebook – There will always be those that post controversial comments, those who annoy the heck out of us with their slander, and those that we ourselves annoy. However, Facebook and other social media sites are intended for us to connect. And as long as we stay the course and continue to post the "light" – like family, nature, food, and fun – we will enjoy our connections. Just skip over the bad, and enjoy the good. But don't escape...

School – There are lots of reasons that parents homeschool, many of them being such good and right reasons. Convictions, needs of specific children, bad neighborhood schools, and all sorts of things make homeschool a great and a best option. But not sending our kids just so they can escape "the world" isn't a good one. Our kids need to be around other kids that look different, act different, and come from different backgrounds. It helps them love others.

Church – I'm not talking about a building, but rather a community. Escaping by leaving a congregation or fellowship of believers because someone irritated us is not helpful or healing. In fact, going to church (virtually or in a small home group or wherever we can still gather) is good for us, ESPECIALLY if others annoy us. Getting annoyed and dealing with those annoyances through love is one of the best ways to mature, as a Christian! (Jesus offered bread to Judas, his betrayer!)

Relationships – Again, there are good and healthy reasons to exit relationships in the case of abuse and neglect and unfaithfulness. However, to escape from relationships altogether because loving others is too hard is so sad! I've done it! And isolation, holding out an arm to keep others away, only hurts ourselves. Love hurts, like the song says. But love covers a multitude of sin, like the Good Book says. And we cannot continue in relationships and love without his help, his Spirit and his leading. Just follow Him.

Healthy habits – I get it. Eating is comforting, sitting around is easy, and being lazy feels so good when the world is spinning so fast. If you're a lover of exercise, then you probably don't have an issue with this. But for others, exercise is seen as a chore. So when life is hard, scary and crazy, it's easy to succumb to giving up on good habits. We want to escape in a good book

or movie, all day, chips in hand, while we feel sick afterwards. Engage in activity, mental and physical, instead of escaping.

There are lots of ways we escape, and it's probably a good thing to escape for a while...to rest and heal. However, living a life of escapism every time we run into obstacles or people that don't think like we do is no way to live, no way to enjoy life, and no way to grow.

The only time escaping is the best choice for good, is escaping from a life full of darkness and sorrow, and He's offered that escape to us by just following his lead to green pastures, still waters, and a full table with empty seats for the taking...and enjoying.

Healthy Habits - A Better Listener – by Marcy Lytle

Are you good at listening, or are you the one always talking? Maybe you're a good mix of both. Or maybe you'd rather not listen or talk! Wherever we find ourselves, we can always improve on being a better listener which will in turn result in better health. It may be odd to include listening in our health column, but I know firsthand that too much listening, or not enough, can damage our relationships! So here's to being better listeners this year...

1. Do pause in your own thoughts and listen to your spouse, before you reply by cutting him off. Same with kiddos. It's important to fully hear what the other person is saying before assuming and thinking of a response. This just hurts them, and in turn hurts us!
2. Do be careful what you listen to. Listening to a friend constantly bash her husband isn't healthy for her or you. Sitting in silence while another friend complains about other Christians isn't wise, either. Point these people to unload their complaints onto someone's shoulder – that someone is Jesus. He is the only one who can do something about the frustration.
3. Do care about friends by asking them how they're doing, and then really listen to their answers. Ask specific questions so that a load of concrete doesn't spill out. For example, ask, "How's your mom doing? I heard she was ill." Or you could say, "Are you still enjoying your job?" When they answer, listen and even take notes if you want, so you can catch up again later.
4. Do put down your phone. Having our phones in our hands when someone is talking is just plain rude, and it's not healthy for anyone to look at a phone constantly, instead of into the eyes of a friend or family member.
5. Do consider the other person's viewpoint. If you're an employer, listen to your employees, so that the work environment is healthy for all. If you're in a relationship, sometimes problems occur simply due to misunderstandings. So repeating back what you've heard helps so much. Not everyone thinks like we do, although we might wish they would!
6. Do offer prayer and resources, but save your opinions and judgments and then dismiss them when you walk away. Carrying around judgments after listening to someone in need doesn't do either of us any good at all. Maybe what you've just heard her say seems absurd, but pray for her anyway. It's not wise to listen to others and their marital woes, if we aren't counselors. We will just end up losing friends.
7. Do feel free to stop the conversation so that your ears don't receive the vomit, as well. If it's obvious that the conversation is pure gossip, you are not obligated to listen to any of it. Just politely and patiently remove yourself from the group or say you'd rather not listen. It's okay, and good, to close your ears to gossip.

Maybe you're on the other end and need someone to listen to you, because you're hurting and it would greatly improve your health if someone would really listen. We all need to listen, and to be listened to. I've found that the best and first choice is to pour out our hearts to HIM, and often that alleviates our pain. Talking to a good friend who can be trusted is awesome. And having a spouse that hears and validates our feelings is so wonderful. But everyone fails at

being a good listener at some time, often because of their own issues or shortcomings, or maybe they're tired or don't know what to say.

Listening is an art. It really is. Listening too much can cause us to feel heavy and depressed. Not listening enough can create isolation and results in a lack of close friendships. And always being the needy one with a story to relay can bring us all down.

I'm praying that I become a better and wiser listener for my health, and the health of others. And I hope that when I need to be listened to, I find a friend in Jesus the most. After all, we want solutions and affirmation when we spill...and he's the best one to give both!

Life in a Nutshell - Labor of Love – by Jill Montz

Have you ever thought about what life will be like eight years from now? In eight years it will be 2029. I will be 49 years old. My daughter, Dotty, will be 21. Wow. I need to read that again!

In eight years (if all goes as planned) I will have experienced my child leaving middle school for high school, graduating high school, going off to college, and quite possibly getting close to being finished with her college degree. I have no doubts that during those eight years she will go on dates, go to proms, go to parties and go to anything that sounds like fun. Dotty likes to go! Knowing her, she will play in lots of sporting events where we will celebrate the victories and endure the defeats. If life goes as she hopes, she will be playing college softball somewhere eight years from now and I too hope I am driving to stadiums to watch her!

In eight years, I am sure I will meet many new friends and quite possibly lose a few as well. My heart can't bear to think what eight years will bring to me in terms of my family. I have grandparents who are 86 years old now and it is hard to imagine a time when they might not be around, but then again I also think they might outlive us all just to prove a point. I may still live in Iowa Park or I may do what I have threatened to do, and sell my house to follow Dotty off to college. (She is less than thrilled about that long term plan even now at 13 years old.) I will probably have had a few different hair styles in the span of eight years, maybe a few different hair colors as well, and quite possibly lived through cutting bangs at least once. I may even be remarried at that point but only God knows if there is a man out there who can live with me and my cat, Rae.

Eight years can seem like a very long time in many ways, but in some it can feel too short. A lot can happen in eight years, eight months, eight days, or even eight seconds. Lives change in an instant but they also change over time. You might be wondering why I picked eight years and not five, ten, or twenty.

Eight is a significant number for my family. It takes roughly eight years from the time we plant a pecan tree until it begins to produce pecans we can commercially harvest for our stores. Very soon our orchard crew will begin the planting process. Orchards will be laid out, irrigation systems will be put in place, holes will be dug and the trees will arrive. Depending on how many we decide to plant each year, this determines how long the planting process takes. Some years we only replace dead trees, but some years we plant new orchards that can be several thousand trees in size.

Once the tree is planted we don't just walk away and come back eight years later. We water, fertilize, and manage the trees just like we do the other 25,000 that are in production now. For eight years we pour money, time, and resources into a tree that doesn't have the ability yet to give back. It's a long term investment for sure. In fact, even my dad at 68 years of age says he isn't sure he will see the trees we plant this year ever make a crop. He is planting something for a future, but quite possibly not his own. He is planting for his family...for my brother and me, our families, and for future generations.

The trees we originally planted back in 1986 are now 35 years old. They are healthy and produce great crops of pecans for us and they have many good years left in them. So as pecan farmers, we know that what a tree eventually gives back to us is more than we put into each one. For eight years we do all the giving but for possibly 50 or more years after that the trees bear the fruits (or in our case the nuts) of our labor of love.

Some people may ask why would we continue to plant trees; isn't 25,000 a good round number? Yes...and no. My family loves what we do. We love our orchards, our stores, our staff, and our customers. We have big goals and big dreams and they all usually have about an eight-year plan.

Lots can happen in eight years or sixteen or twenty-four. Twenty-four years from now I will be close to my dad's current age, if the good Lord is willing. And I too will be making plans for a future I might not be a part of, but one in which I still want to invest.

Life Right Now - The "Curse" – by Hannah Bouck

Here's a family anecdote. When I was growing up my Grandpa referred often to the "Hirsch curse" (my maiden name.) And here it is. The Hirsch's seem to have a tendency of saying "I'll never do *that!*" Whatever *that* may be! However, sometime or another - whether it be months or decades later - *that* always seems to come to fruition. And well, we do it.

One example for me is when I was taking Spanish in high school and not doing so well. My mom kindly urged me to study more and try harder. To which I responded, "Mom it's pointless. I never plan on leaving the U.S. or speaking another language so it really doesn't matter." Not even a year later, I found myself living in Latin America wishing I had been more consistent with my language studies. With that... I give you the "curse!"

As silly as it may sound, what I've learned is that many times my "I'll never do that" is not because I don't want to; but because of fear. Specifically, it's a fear of failure or not being good enough. When I was in high school, it was because I'm dyslexic and English can be hard enough to comprehend. And for many of my family members I dare to say their "nos" have been equal to their fears as well. Even as I am writing right now, I'm laughing at myself as I navigate the strangeness of technology. I just started creating a website for my small business, (something I told myself I'd never do.) I said I'd never do it because I don't feel confident in my technological abilities (fear of failure.) But hey, I finally said yes. Navigation aside; my point is that I think the "curse" (not a curse, really) has been in our family so long because fear took root and it's easy to get comfortable living and saying, "no" more than, "I'll give it a go."

When I finally said yes to leaving and learning another language it wasn't easy; just like navigating a new thing like tech isn't easy, either. But I never want to stop growing or learning. I want to continue to understand more and carry the *posture of a learner* because if I'm here there's something to do and live for. And really, it isn't a curse as much as it should be a blessing (sorry, Grandpa!) What a blessing it is to have an opportunity to do the things we never thought we could do.

As a final thought, I was also inspired by a 93 year old lady for whom I was a caretaker that was taking online classes through the local community college to "keep fresh" on what is happening in marketing (she was an author and wanted to market herself well.) I stood in awe of her pep and wit and asked her why she thought it necessary?

She said, "If you're livin you need to be learnin! I've lived this long because I never want to stop."

So there you go. In the words of Dolly Parton, we all "better get to livin."

Holding you near,

HB

Strategic Women - The Unnamed Woman – by Debbie Haynes

Last month, we looked at Mary of Bethany. This month, Jesus has traveled about 20 miles away to Nain, where he was teaching and performing many miracles. This story is from the book of Luke, and it's quite different from the account of Mary of Bethany, as she was a fairly well-to-do woman, cultured, and from a good family. The woman in this story is not named, has no recorded relatives and no mention of an occupation – nothing really remarkable about her – except she was sinner.

In Luke 7:36-50 Jesus asks a man named Simon a question, something like this:

“Oh, Simon. Do you see this woman? If you could just love like this unnamed, sinful woman. You didn't sacrifice your time or precious ointment to anoint my feet, and I'm in your house. You didn't think about me...but this sinful woman, whose sins are many, she washed my feet with her tears.”

Even though this woman's sins were many, she loved according to the degree of her need for a Savior – and Jesus' mercy was MORE than her sin.

The grace of Jesus, that he recognized this “nobody” woman – one that had done many wrongs – is important to note. She poured out her heart in worship to Jesus, and he then vigorously defended her to Simon. Don't you love that? He also loved Simon enough to educate him! I'm thinking Simon's relationship with women must have changed in that moment.

I'm so thankful to God that:

Even when we don't measure up,

Even when we're disobedient,

Even when no one knows our name,

Even when all we can do is cry and pour out our heavy heart,

He still loves us.

He still defends us.

He still leads us.

He still keeps his hand in ours, and...

He still accepts our worship.

I am so thankful and humbled by this story and the story of Mary of Bethany. One had plenty but was slow to recognize who Jesus was – but when she did – she gave her most treasured possession. This unnamed woman had nothing to give – but recognized her need of a Savior – and offered her heart – her only treasured possession.

Maybe this woman had blown a marriage opportunity, or perhaps she was unworthy of a good husband. We aren't told what her sin was. But she offered her heart and her worship to the Worthy One, and He accepted and defended her.

Women can learn and serve at the feet of Jesus. And just like this woman, we can all find acceptance, hope and salvation. Jesus said that she "did what she could."

We don't have an alabaster box (at least I don't!) or expensive ointment, but we can sit at His feet and touch His heart. We can be prepared and obedient, love much (because we've all been forgiven much) and we can worship.

And Jesus is pleased when we do...



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Some Days... - by Bekah Holland

Oh good! It's February.

Last year about this time, I was writing (whining) about my disdain of Valentine's Day and blissfully ignorant of the terrible, horrible, no good very bad year that we were about to embark on. I still thought that griping about a commercialized and highly marketed "holiday," hell bent on guilting people into spending money on overpriced and overrated gifts (okay, maybe I still have some feelings about it,) was the biggest problem I had that day. Little did any of us know how completely upside down our world was about to turn.

And while I'm not at all superstitious, I think I'm going to go ahead and try to look hopefully toward this February, just in case. Because this time last year, I had no idea that it was going to be my last time to hug my parents or be held by my momma for months! I had no idea that driving my daughter back and forth from youth group would be the last time she was able to be connected to her friends for going on a year. I had no idea that the last time I had breakfast with my friend at the office, encouraging each other and pushing each other would be the last in person visit we would have for ages. And now that we've made it this far, through fear and frustration and loneliness and heartbreak, into the beginning of a new year, I see how much I took for granted.

Now please don't get me wrong. I have been a hot mess for the last 337 days, 14 hours and 11 minutes since we first began quarantine. And when I say hot mess, I mean no hot, all mess. So obviously I haven't completely changed into someone who skips merrily through the chaos without missing a beat. If I appear that way, please feel free to call in reinforcements, because I've been replaced by a pod person. However, now that I'm not melting down in the kitchen every single day (and if you do, I totally support the crying, no judgement, carry on) I can see a sliver of hope. Hope that maybe, somehow, my kids and husband and I won't snap and kill each other (yet). Hope that while my kids won't come out of this unscathed, maybe they will still be okay. Hope in humanity, that many people do care enough about the welfare of others to be all right with being inconvenienced. And maybe that means that I can begin to focus on the beauty in my relationships and my marriage.

Because it's really easy to get caught up in the never-ending merry-go-round of issues and hurts and fears. Especially when we've gone from leaving home to go to work and dinners and get-togethers with friends to staying home, 24/7, working together, sharing an office, and a kitchen and a bed and a bathroom - *every.single.minute.of.every.single.day*. It's been, um, challenging. And I am very aware that we are incredibly privileged to have jobs that allow us to work from home, and space to do so, and access to the internet and a million other reasons it's much easier for us than so many others. I also try to keep reminding myself of these things.

However good we have it, some days it's just plain dang ugly. Like this completely hypothetical situation: someone didn't sleep well, on top of the fact that same someone went to bed without doing the dishes in protest because NO ONE ELSE DOES THE DISHES and not a soul in this house noticed or cared. They did, however, continue to pile new ones on top until I (I mean this hypothetical person) completely lost my ever loving mind. Or when someone has run up and down the stairs 40 bazillion times that day bouncing between work, meetings, kids' zooms, kids not on zooms when they're supposed to be, more meetings, letting the dogs out, then back in, breakfast, lunch, dinner, with no end in sight. This level of crazy can cause a lot of backyard screaming and rage, hitting the punching bag...*hypothetically, I mean.*

In spite of the real struggles, I want to move into and through this month and each one after that with more grace and mercy than I think I'm capable of. I want to stop feeling responsible for the hurt, frustration and anger of others. I want to rest in the knowledge that each new day, I get to try again to offer forgiveness and a safe place to land while taking refuge in my Savior.

Some days I'll win, some days I'll lose, some days will probably be a toss-up. And then I'll get a chance to do it again, hopefully a little better than yesterday.

"Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Samuel Beckett

Date Night Fun – Something Sweet – by Marcy Lytle

February dates out are always so tricky, because it can still be very cold. And staying home for so many months now, we may be weary of thinking of things to do. And besides all that, maybe Valentine's Day isn't even on our radar! However, date night should always be on our radar...because it keeps us healthy and happy and in love. Would you agree? I think date night is way up on there on that important list of how to strengthen a marriage!

Here are some date night ideas for 2021 for you and him, or you and the kids, or you and a friend!

A Sweet Picnic – Grab the tablecloth, move the furniture, and spread out a picnic on the floor. Add candles. Fill your picnic basket with rotisserie chicken sandwiches (see *In the Kitchen* on the TIPS page) and pretzels, and chocolate covered strawberries. Use super cute plates and napkins (grab from Dollar Tree), and settle in for a sweet picnic in front of the TV or not...with a fun game to play or a sweet puzzle to put together.

Sweet Times in the Kitchen – Peruse the internet or your cookbooks and find three sweets to make. Go shopping together for the ingredients and bake them. Portion them out on a tray, along with some veggies and hummus (for balance, ha!) and play nice music while you enjoy your sweet treats.

Bar of Sweets – Set up a long bar on your table with five different types of plates all in a row. You can include some chips and dips as well on another row! Purchase readymade dip mixes for ease from Mad Dash Mixes! Also, purchase favorite candy bars – five. Place one on each plate, and snap a few pictures – after you've created light, texture, height and color on your table! Then fill your plates and eat, while you watch a romantic comedy.

Sweet Photos – Think of at least 10 stops in your town where you can go out on an afternoon and pause for pictures. Print them out, put in a photo album, and enjoy for years to come. Then get fast food, and talk about your favorite sweet times together.

Just a Sweet Evening - Sweet nothings – whisper in each other's ears. Sweet notes – leave them around the house. Sweet sounds – play your favorite tunes for each other. Sweet blessings – share your favorite scriptures. And finally, sweet kisses – be sure to end the night with these! Or think of your own sweet "somethings" and add to this list!

For Better or Worse - P.S. I Love You – by Kaelin Scott

I know we're probably weird, but my husband and I don't really make a big deal out of Valentine's Day. We buy or make each other a card, and that's about it. I did get my husband one of those heart boxes one year, only it was filled with beef jerky instead of chocolate. Pretty sure that was his favorite Valentine ever! I'm not against the idea of the holiday; I just don't care about all the commercialized romance. I do enjoy an extra chance to tell my husband how much he means to me, and Valentine's Day is the perfect opportunity to do that.

I really am so grateful for my husband. He is hardworking, honest, dependable, humble, and funny. What I love most is that he knows exactly what he believes and he sticks to his convictions, even when it makes him unpopular. Personally, that's something I could use a little more of. He is absolutely my best friend, and I'm so blessed to spend life with him. We got married at a very young age, and I've loved how we've grown and learned and been through so much together. Marriage is difficult, of course, but it's so wonderful having someone by my side. God knew what He was doing when He created Eve for Adam. Life is better together for sure. And beef jerky definitely makes it even better!

Valentine's Day might look a little different for you this year than it usually does...thanks a lot, Covid. But you don't have to go on a fancy date or trip to tell your loved one how special they are to you. Seize the opportunity to remind them how wonderful they are. A simple note or card can go a long way if your words come from the heart. And there are lots of creative things you can do at home too:

Decorate the dining room for a candlelight dinner.
Hang paper hearts.
Wear red and pink.
Make a scavenger hunt for your sweetie to find his/her card.

Whatever it is, have fun and spread the love!

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.
But the greatest of these is love.”
1 Corinthians 13:13

After 40 Years – Champion – by Marcy Lytle

I prayed for the New Year, not necessarily for resolutions, but for a word to my heart from His heart about something new to work towards. And this is what I heard, specifically in regards to how I treat my husband:

Be a champion, not a critic.

Especially during this long season of staying home together more often, we see each other a lot more, and it's easy for me to slide into criticism. Noticing every movement, every way he cleans or does a chore, everything he leaves out or puts away, everything he says or does on the phone, how he paces while he talks, or any number of things! And I realize that I have become more of a critic than a champion.

Honestly, my husband is the best at being a champion for me. He has encouraged me to write, to be, to do, and always believes in me. But I haven't been the best at championing him.

And so, I purpose to do just that, and here it is February. I've realized a few things I can do in order to change from a critic to a champion:

Compliment him more

Help him fulfill his dreams

Appreciate the ways he's different from me

Make time to listen to his heart, just like I enjoy him listening to mine

Practice kindness in my words and my looks

Instigate hugs, intimacy and fun that he enjoys

Open up my heart to him in areas that maybe have been shut off over time

Nag less (I hate that word) and trust HIM more if I'm annoyed

It's not going to be easy, because I'm a person that spouts off what I'm thinking before I stop to pause and look at my attitude. But I really feel like I heard that word from HIM, so I want to obey and I know he will enable me to do so! The best part is that I can apologize when I miss the mark, and that's okay!

I also want to do the same in my relationship with others, not just my husband. But...that word begins here with us two, and then it can seep out to others. If I'm not a champion of my husband first, it makes no good sense to champion others and leave him out.

My husband is a gift. And over time, wear and tear on both of us can cause us to have loosened edges and tattered bows. But it only takes a bit of adjustment and less criticism to have that gift back to all its glory. He's so worth loving and championing. And HE's so faithful to love me enough to remind me of that truth for my marriage, and for him.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Firmly Planted – Wordless – by Dina Cavazos

If I had to choose one word to describe my frame of mind right now, it would be “wordless.” Even as I sit typing this out, I have no idea what to write. Tomorrow is the inauguration of the 46th President of the United States, in the midst of extraordinary circumstances. 2020 was an extraordinary year, and 2021 may not disappoint those who love turmoil and drama. Is it any wonder I’m wordless?

I could reach back into my memorable history and tell a story, or write about the recent beautiful snow that, sadly, took down my beloved Arizona Cypress, but somehow those things seem small and trite compared to the magnitude of what’s going on in the world. I’m not a historian, an intellectual, an activist, politically inclined, or particularly well-informed; but, I do try to keep an ear to the ground, and the hoof beats are pounding.

While I’m concerned and prayerful about things near and far, it’s the things I see within my small circles that impact me the most, and it’s these things that have taken away my words most effectively. *“How? Why? But, what about, don’t you see?”* I ask in silence...because right now words stir things up in an unproductive and toxic way; because words are often opinions that breed more opinions that clamor to be heard. Human words are the expression of ideas that can have value—intellectual, moral, with some truth mixed in—but they only express in part and are often misguided, misdirected, misunderstood, and mistaken. Human words, heartfelt as they may be, most often serve the “sayer” and are powerless to change anything.

Are there any words that can make a difference at all? Right now, within my small circles, some conversations have stopped. Relationships are hovering over a whirling sea of dissent stirred up by fear. Fear has twisted the perception of truth and, contorted words are twisted into spears of hate and criticism posing as righteousness. It hurts my heart and soul. My mind can’t comprehend it and I’m left wordless in the wreckage of disappointment and dismay. The tree shows its fruit! Is it sweet and juicy, giving life to those who eat it; or is it bitter and contaminated, bringing devastation and confusion? It’s pretty clear to me, and it’s painfully hard to fathom the distortion that prevails beyond evidence and reason.

The few words I’ve said in an effort to speak “loving truth” haven’t made a difference. The only words that really matter and have power to change anything are God’s words, and I’ve learned that if anything like that comes out of my mouth it’s purely by accident/God’s intervention. Maybe I can make a difference with love, not words--love shown in kindness and tolerance, love shown by deference and not having to have the last word. Maybe, if I look for opportunities to love, God’s words will be heard, without a sound. Could love manifested in wordless actions be the most powerful kind of prayer? Right now I have no words, but I believe the unspoken cries in my heart are received as prayers, and the One in whom I trust knows exactly what I’m not able to say.

Rooted in Love - Carpe Diem – by Kaelin Scott

I have a confession to make.

My husband and I don't have any relatives close by, and sometimes I get jealous of people who live near family. I wonder what it might be like to be able to drop the kids off at their grandparents' house so we could go on a date. Or send them for a sleepover and enjoy a quiet night at home. Heck, maybe even just grocery shopping alone. I have wished many times to have family closer to help us out with the kids.

But the more I think about it, I realize that I'm actually glad I don't have that convenience. I'm glad I am with my kids all the time, even if I do nearly lose my sanity sometimes. I think about having the luxury of built-in babysitting, and I see how easy it would be to abuse that privilege or take it for granted. It might sound odd, but I'm grateful for our situation.

I am basically never away from my children, except for when I take them to the nursery at church. And call me crazy, but I'm perfectly happy with that. Since we don't have a readily available person to babysit, we figure out ways to make everything family friendly. We're forced to make everything fun, and we make lots of sweet memories too. Family time is all the time; and I think that's really special.

Obviously, there are days where I just wish I could have a break. And I'm not knocking you if you do drop your kids off with their grandparents or aunt or whomever. By all means, if you have that resource, use it! There's nothing wrong with that. I'm simply sharing my own thoughts.

When my kids are grown, I'll have plenty of solo trips to the grocery store. I'll have all the time in the world to go on a girls' trip with my friends. My husband and I will be able to have date night whenever we want. But I will never get these years and days and moments back. I'll never be able to go back and spend more time with my kids. I've only got today, right now, and I want to make the most of it.

Parenting can definitely be burdensome at times, but it's also the biggest blessing.

Simple Truths – That Crock of Lies – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever been sitting in a meeting and listening to a speech or a sermon or a talk, and then you start feeling anxious because of what that person is talking about? For example, we were recently sitting in a church service and the pastor mentioned that his wife was doing a sugar fast. That was it. It was just a reference and a note in his sermon, but I heard it and began to judge and think and wonder, until when I left the service I felt this sense of shame or guilt about eating sugar!

Where in the world did that come from?

I think we all do that. We read an article about how this couple or that family or that woman lost 50 pounds, or got rid of all debt in six months, or reorganized her entire pantry on a budget of \$50 or any number of amazing stories. And if those accomplishments are in areas where we want to succeed, we close the magazine, turn off the laptop or walk away from the gathering feeling this burden or weight of not meeting up to some sort of standard...

A standard that is not ours to meet!

When I first had my kids and I met with other moms, they talked of what their babies were learning, how their nurseries were so bright and cheerful, and how they were moving into houses with big playrooms, and more. And I felt it then – that sense of being “less than.” Yet no one made me feel that way. It was my own stinking thinking. It was my own sense of hearing and then valuing someone’s achievements above my own, and then carrying guilt for not measuring up.

What a crock of lies!

We know better, but we still do it, and we still exit a group or hang up from a call or return back home from a visit, and feel depressed because her house is all new and fresh, and we have cracks in our walls. We see her new wardrobe and all of a sudden our closet seems out of date, and we feel ugly and old. And we hear a talk about someone not eating sugar and all of a sudden we see a little devil on our shoulder shaking his finger at us, because we’re not performing the same resolutions as she is.

It’s time to stop the nonsense...

It’s always good to hear and consider what others are doing, and try new things IF they apply to our lives, and IF it’s a good fit for us. But it’s never good to feel guilt or take on the burden of trying to be like others just because some sort of guilt creeps over us like the blob (did you ever see that old movie?) The blob, in the old black and white film *The Blob*, slowly crept over the town...from who knows where?

I believe we women are attacked the most in our identity, and it stifles us from being who we really are and from shining in the light where we’re supposed to stand! I’m not addicted to sugar, not even a fan of cake and pie, and sugar hasn’t ever been an issue for me. So for me to

hear that reference, and leave feeling badly, was purely just a blob of craziness that I easily discarded in a few minutes flat.

Learn to recognize what's yours to ponder and what's yours to kick aside. Most of the time, if our burden is guilt fueling our thoughts – it's a burden we can gladly lay aside.

What have you been listening to or observing or hearing that has caused you feelings of depression, anxiety and not feeling your best? Quit listening to that. And lean in to who YOU are, in all of your uniqueness. Listen to HIM for changes this year. He won't heap on guilt, but rather offer you a drink of what He pours for you, and not what's left over on the table by the person before you...

Unearthly Thing - Declaration of His Loveliness – by Angela Dolbear

February brings St. Valentine's Day, a holiday that is best known for celebrating love. There are many different kinds of love. We love our spouses, our families, our friends, and our four-legged fur-babies. Of all these, which is your greatest love? My chief desire, my number one love is Jesus. I love my husband with my whole being, and even that love flows out of my love for Jesus.

I started a close relationship with God on August 15, 1991, at a Harvest Festival, held at the Pacific Amphitheater in Costa Mesa, California. I was 22 years old and searching for meaning in my young life. When the invitation was given to ask Jesus into to your heart and life as your personal Lord and Savior, I heard God say to me, "I know you have been looking for Me. Come on." And I said yes to the invitation.

I have been cultivating this relationship ever since, well, to be honest, with short periods of running and hiding. I have never known such satisfying sweetness as I do walking with God. In the Bible, Moses prayed for a deeper relationship with God. This is my desire, too:

"Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You [progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with You, perceiving and recognizing and understanding more strongly and clearly] and that I may find favor in Your sight."

– Exodus 33:13 (Amplified)

Yes, to be more deeply acquainted with my Lord is my goal each and every day. Everything in my life is born from that love - all my work as an author, songwriter, singer, worship leader, wife, stepmom, daughter and auto-immune disease survivor/thriver. My relationship with God is the bedrock and home base for everything in my life. And I love it. It allows me to live with a supernatural confidence that no matter happens, God has got me. *No matter what*. I still get scared, but ultimately, my Lord loves me and wants His best for me.

Having a close relationship with God also gives me insuppressible hope. I mess up a lot. I struggle with thoughts of inadequacy, that I'm not where I should or would like to be in my life. I grieve over things that I have thought, said, and did, which I know were wrong. But always, there is grace. God's unmerited favor and blessing on me that is in no way diminished by my bad behavior.

Such mind-blowing hope.

I will no longer be tormented by negative thoughts about how sinful I am, because I am a new creature with a close-relationship with Jesus. Guilt and condemnation don't get to live in my brain for any more than a few breaths, before I cry out, "Oh Lord."

"Think about how you've been made the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus," Joyce Meyer wrote in one of her recent devotionals. "Thoughts turn into actions. If you want to enjoy the life Jesus died to give you, it is important to align your thinking with God's Word. Every time a

negative, condemning thought comes to your mind, remind yourself that God loves you, and that you've been made right with Him through Christ."

Yes, and amen.

I know that as I walk with God, He is changing me for the better all the time. He will never give up on me. How great is that? I also know His plan for me is more amazing than I could ever imagine. And He will work those plans to completion. How super-cool is that?

I pray that God will help me stay more aware and focused on the fact that I've been made right with Him, than on the lingering memories of my mistakes. I am so grateful for His gift of righteousness.

God's great gifts inspire/motivate/strengthen/encourage me, and they give me life every day, so it's imperative that I keep Jesus and His kingdom first. So how do I do that? (I'm glad you asked...)

Whenever I wonder whether something is acceptable to God, or whether something is right for me to do, I ask myself (and God) two questions:

1. Does it glorify God?
2. Does it expand His kingdom?

If the answer is "no" to either of these, then it's a big NO to whatever it is I'm wondering about. It always shocks me when I have asked God about something I thought was small and insignificant and seemingly barely worth asking Him about, how He shows me how that thing will tear me down spiritually, bring me under its power, caused me to have an uneasy conscience, and/or cause someone else to stumble in their faith. I am so grateful for His wisdom, guidance, and protection. So very, very grateful.

I will close out my declaration of my greatest Love, my Lord Jesus, with one of my favorite verses in the Bible. Treat yourself by reading it out loud slowly, three times:

"One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek, inquire for, and [insistently] require:

that I may dwell in the house of the Lord [in His presence] all the days of my life, to

behold and gaze upon the beauty [the sweet attractiveness and the delightful

loveliness] of the Lord and to meditate, consider, and inquire in His temple."

— Psalm27:4 (Amplified)

So lovely, right? He sure is.

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series, and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, all 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 inspiring readers to laugh, cry, and crave certain varieties of food. She loves reading, writing and leading worship music with her husband Tim at their church in Nashville, Tennessee. Please drop by and sing-up for news and free goodies at <http://www.angeladobear.com/subscribe.htm>. Blessings to you!

Moving Forward – Faithful Love – by Pam Charro

At this time last year, I wrote about love. Some of it had to do with Valentine's Day and how fun a holiday I consider it to be. I shared that, even though I didn't have a special someone to share the holiday with, I enjoyed watching other people celebrate all of the fun aspects of love on February 14.

Well, here we are a year later, and I still don't have that special relationship. If you had told me a year ago that I wouldn't even have a significant other to share the holiday with AGAIN in 2021, I probably wouldn't have liked you very much. Who could have predicted 2020? A worldwide pandemic definitely isn't conducive to finding the love of your life. I've been laid off from my job since last March, and meeting and hanging around with new people hasn't been the safest thing to do. So, yet again, my life doesn't look the way I hoped it would by now.

The funny thing is, though: I'm okay with it.

Why? It's because God has been so faithful to me through all of it. He has completely taken care of me financially, even at times when there didn't seem to be a way I could pay my rent. He found ways to introduce me to amazing people who helped me to better know Him and myself. He came and sat with me right here in my apartment, through some of my darkest and loneliest moments. We have gotten so close this past year. And I believe He is teaching me the value of waiting on Him, for the very best that He has for me.

I wouldn't want to have what I want any sooner than what is best.

I am proud of the person I'm becoming! I used to think I wouldn't really be happy until I found a man who would be faithful and true. And I do look forward to life with him one day when he and I are both ready. But I've also come to truly appreciate how perfectly loved I already am by the most amazing Person in the universe.

So, yes, I have the same Valentine this year that I had last year, only I know and appreciate Him and myself better now. He has taught me to be still and secure in His care and to be content without a romantic relationship. And, even if I'm still unattached next year on Valentine's Day, I will be living a full and enriching life because He is my faithful Love.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Swing Your Bag

I was in a store recently and was headed to the bathroom, when an older woman with white hair caught my eye. She was walking toward me, not slowly, not shuffling, not with her eyes to the ground, but...she was swinging her bag of goodies. It wasn't just a little swing, either. That Target bag was flying back and forth and there was a determination in her step, and a joy in each swing, as that bag went back and forth. Seriously, she looked so pleased and happy with her purchases, or whatever she was thinking, or with life itself!

I thought as I continued to walk on, *How cool is that?* Who knew swinging a grocery bag could bring another person (me) so much joy? I wish I had stopped that lady and told her what a joy it was to watch her swing her bag, but I had to get to the bathroom. However, I thought about her for a long while.

How we walk and carry ourselves makes a statement!

- If we're in line for groceries and our heads are bent toward our phone, we're saying – don't bother me – I'm busy.
- If we're walking to our cars deep in worry about life and don't make eye contact with the lady walking the other way and smile (yes, you can "see" smiles above the mask), then we're missing a blessing.
- If we're carrying so many "burdens" that our feet are shuffling or our shoulders are hunched, we get lost in the crowd.
- If we are pushing our cart through the store, irritated that the aisle is blocked and let out a big audible sigh, we're in effect frowning at a neighbor.
- If we stay silent and never say a word while the clerk is checking our groceries, we miss out on offering a gift of a kind word of encouragement.

That single lady, swinging her bag, brightened my mood that evening. I still have the image (I wish I had a picture) of her head held high and that white bag going back and forth in rhythm to her steps as she exited the store.

I wonder what was in that bag? Was the purchase causing her to swing back and forth? Maybe. Perhaps she got the deal of the year and had the money to pay for it. Or maybe inside that bag was a gift she got for someone else, and the thought of that person made her happy.

However, that swinging bag and its contents may have had nothing to do with the way the lady moved it back and forth. She may have just had a spring in her step and joy in her heart. And maybe she heard whatever was in that bag singing lightly as she moved it back and forth, "Life is fun, life is good, and oh what joy is mine!"

What's singing in our bags, what's swinging in our hands, and what's making us walk as if life is grand?

I'm thinking about it enough to write about it, so I hope I do something about it...the next time I shop and exit the store with a bag in hand.

FRESH THYME – Happy About It – by Marcy Lytle

Way back when I was a young mom, we had lost our home and were starting over, I remember this store that I frequented. It was called One Price Clothing and everything in it was \$7. One could shop there with a certain amount of funds and know exactly how much they would spend, because each item of clothing (and shoes!) was seven bucks. And at a time when we were struggling financially, if I just had about \$30 I knew I could step inside and look and then exit with four new pieces of clothing!

Being a fashion lover, this was a treat for me and I went to this store often. No, it wasn't high quality clothing (although I did purchase a pair of pants I'd also seen in a department store), but it was trendy, cute, and something I could afford. I absolutely loved going there and facing the challenge of putting together an outfit with the little bit of money I had to spend. It really was fun! One Easter, my entire outfit was purchased there!

And then one day, I was with a group of women and one of them started talking about shopping. She made a comment about that particular store that I loved and stated how it was trash and not worth shopping. I didn't speak up and say, "Well, I shop there and love it!" Instead, I said nothing and left that meeting and went home feeling "less than." And it was all because of a comment someone else said about something I had loved.

I think back on that situation now, and I remember noting that I needed to be careful about what I said about places, people, experiences, needs, etc. because other ears that are listening might be offended if I put down what they place up high. For example, talking down about neighborhoods, or people groups, or fatty foods, or any subject where I think I know something about it – there might be a friend nearby that's living and loving the very thing I despise! *Something to note, for sure.*

But also, I now think back and wish I had spoken up. I think my 60-something old self would speak up and say, "Well, I shop in that store and quite enjoy it!" But my 30-something young self stayed quiet. I have fond memories of that store, and now – instead of feeling ashamed at my economic situation and embarrassed to confess – I feel happy about that experience. I learned so many lessons during that stage of my life. I could find pretty outfits for less. I could still enjoy shopping with little. I could still dress up and save money.

I still prefer discount stores. I still scan the clearance aisles first, and I don't feel the need to have the latest and the greatest. And I feel like I learned those lessons in a time of want. I also feel that over the years I've become more grateful and aware that what I have is a blessing, and what I have not – it's not a curse. Some have more than I do, in material stuff. And some have less. We are neither one better than the other.

So if you find yourself in a time of luxury, give thanks. But be careful what you say when you're around other women. And if you're living in a time of lack at the moment, give thanks and find a cute little place to shop that you can afford and enjoy every minute.

And if you're standing in a group, chatting with some friends, and you hear someone put down what you've put up, just smile and stand up straight, amazed at the great deals you've found and experiences you're "getting" even though it might be hard.

Right now, some have lost their jobs or certainly had to cut back. We're all learning to be creative with time and space and activities and connections. And we can all sit and compare and whine and wonder why, or we can take what's in our hands and enjoy it, whether it's a little or a lot, and end the day smiling at the treasures we've found along the way...

(By the way, one of my favorite purchases lately was this set of votive holders from Target in the Dollar Spot for \$3 each – pictured above.)

If You Don't Have a Valentine

by Debbie Haynes

If you don't have a valentine, it's really not the end of the world.

There are still lots of things you can do, without a special boy or a girl.

For instance, you can binge watch TV shows like *Seinfeld*, *Lucy* or *Gilligan's Island*,

Or, do something therapeutic, like clean up your closet, your fridge and your oven!

You could be a hermit or be daring and learn a brand new hobby

There's always calligraphy, sky diving or meteorology.

See, there are lots of things you can do if you don't have a valentine,

But as for me, I'll just walk down to the Dairy Queen, and be in bed by nine.

FRESH THYME – Simply Because – by Marcy Lytle

If you have grandchildren, children, friends, nieces and nephews, or actually any people that you love, I'd say you love spending time with them. Unless, of course they're annoying! But if you truly love someone, you just enjoy being in their presence and near them. There's comfort in sitting next to him, when you just need to feel safe. Or watching your kiddos play in the backyard makes you want to smile (as long as they're not fighting!). Hanging with a sister, just watching a show, is heartwarming and cozy.

However, when it comes to hanging out with HIM, we suddenly have this need to perform:

We think we need to give more

We feel guilty that we're not pleasing to Him

We never think we measure up

And this makes our time with Him at his feet, sitting in His presence, a bit of a tense situation. We sit down to pray or read our Bible or meditate on his goodness, and our minds become cluttered with thoughts of not being good enough or purposing to perform better at our jobs or relationships...and we often end up more exhausted than rested...after quiet time with Him!

If you've ever just sat near a playground and watched children at play, you'll understand what I'm trying to share. It's so fun to just hear their little voices pretend, watch their chubby hands run through sand, or smile at their happy faces as they come down the slide. You don't stand there with a stick, prodding the children to perform on the playground equipment. You just sit and enjoy their presence.

Our world is a world of performance. If we meet these certain criteria, we measure up and get a raise. If we surpass what is expected of us, we might be given a bonus! And if we work overtime, run the extra mile, or come up with something super creative, we may get recognized among our colleagues and feel SO GOOD about ourselves.

However, there are times when we need to chill with all of that performance, climbing, achieving and doing and just realize that God enjoys hanging out with us. He enjoys our presence in His room (sitting at his feet listening and gazing into his smiling face) and I think He's rather sad when we're constantly churning and thinking and planning and doing...instead of sitting.

Sitting at his feet means we're still, we're listening, we're laying our heads on his lap, we're leaning against his strong arms, and we're singing quietly or not at all. It means he's sitting there with us, comforting and holding and healing and blessing us...just because he loves us.

I have trouble with this concept, and I find it hard to sit still in his presence. I often feel I need for a pen and a notebook, a list of prayer needs of others, or constant words of adoration to Him, when sometimes I realize I need to lay all of that aside in favor of the realization that...

He enjoys me. Period.

Our Father delights in what he has created, he relishes time with us, and he enjoys just observing us go about our day as we look and acknowledge his loving eyes.

There are times on the playground when a child looks at his parent and says, "Look at me, Mom!" Or she might say, "Come swing with me!" He might run and grab our hand to show us a little pillbug in the pebbly surface beneath his feet.

It's the same with God. He loves it when we pause and say wow at his sunrise, or we linger as that same sun sets, or we play in the snow that falls from his sky, or open our umbrellas and dance in the rain that he sends every season. He DELIGHTS in our enjoyment of his vast playground, and he enjoys it when we invite him to enjoy it with us.

If you've had harsh parents, absentee parents, or you yourself are a busy person with phone in hand all the time, to-do lists always in front of you...lay aside all of the disappointments and busyness...and just sit.

Swing. Slide. Scream with delight.

Pause. Lay back. Lean in and rest.

Realize. Look. See his eyes of kindness.

Know. Recognize. The One that loves you most.

This month, start sitting with Him, invite Him to sit with you, and see if you finally get it. He enjoys His creation simply because we belong to Him.



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

March 2021



TIPS

In the Kitchen – Tortillas, Anyone? – by Marcy Lytle

I love tortillas, especially the ones that are freshly made in the deli area – not found over on the aisles. There's a world of difference in the taste! I mean, who doesn't love a warm tortilla either loaded, rolled up, or on the side of a tasty dish? This month of March, we are sharing some ways to use tortillas in serving up meals for you and yours...

On the side

We recently had this warm potato salad and served a rolled tortilla on the side, and it was delish. In fact, we recently had a BBQ plate to-go with tortillas on the side, as well. Rolled tortillas instead of classic dinner rolls or bread – a winner!

Warm Potato Salad with Sausage

- 2 lbs Baby potatoes, halved
- 12 oz. Kielbasa cut into ½ inch chunks
- 1 large Red onion, thickly sliced
- ¼ c apple cider vinegar
- 2 T whole grain mustard
- 4 stalks chopped celery plus ½ cup of the leaves
- ½ c chopped fresh parsley
- ¼ c chopped fresh dill

Boil potatoes in salted water til tender, and drain. Heat olive oil in large skillet and cook sausage til well browned. Add the red onion and cook still just wilted but still crunchy, reduce heat and whisk in vinegar and mustard. Whisk in a bit more olive oil and season with salt and pepper.

Transfer to serving dish the potatoes – season with salt, then pour sausage mixture over top and toss gently. Add in celery, leaves, parsley and dill. Toss. And serve warm. Serve rolled warm tortillas on the side.

Lunch Rolls

I had lots of tortillas left over, along with other items that needed to be eaten, so this recipe evolved, was easy, and we took it on the road in tiffins, from World Market!

- Tortillas
- Turkey, sliced very thin
- Grated pepper and Colby jack cheeses
- Cilantro lime dressing (or your choice of Mexican dressing)
- Avocado

Spread the dressing on the tortilla. Lay out the turkey, too. Add the cheese and avocado and then roll up tightly, and slice. Stack them on their sides on a plate, or pack them in a to-go container for eating on the run.

Taco Salad Bar

This is a great family meal and was really pretty simple to put together. All of the items can be prepared ahead of time and then just lined up on the table for serving and creating. But the most fun was preparing our salads in tortilla bowls!

For the bowls:

- Large burrito sized tortillas
- Grated cheese

Spray a small bowl with Pam and drape the tortilla over the bowl (about two will fit in my oven). Bake at 375 until just starting to brown, then remove. Sprinkle cheese in bottom and return to oven to melt. Remove bowls and set aside until serving time!

For the bar:

- Meat and chicken (I just made a basic taco meat mixture, and roasted some chicken seasoned with Mexican spices)
- Grated cheese and/or queso
- Black beans
- Sliced black olives
- Grape tomatoes
- Romaine lettuce, chopped
- Red onion, sliced
- Avocado
- Grilled corn
- Sour cream
- Chopped cilantro
- Salsa
- Dressings
- Tortilla bowls

Quesadillas

With your leftover taco meat from your taco salad bar, you've got another meal! This was so easy and tasty!

- Tortillas
- Leftover taco meat or seasoned chicken
- Grated cheese
- Dressing (Mexican flavored)

Place meat and cheese between two tortillas. Melt butter in large skillet and place the quesadilla down, grilling on both sides til browned, and cheese is melted. Slice into fourths. Serve with one of your Mexican dressings for dipping. That's it – so easy!

Chicken Tacos

I had a few chicken breasts, random veggies and seeds, and a few tortillas left in the fridge, so this is the meal we ate for lunch. His comment was, "This is good!"

- Chicken breasts
- Taco seasoning (I used chile lime seasoning, Cumin, and a Taco blend)
- Veggies (I had kale, carrots, onion, and grape tomatoes)
- Seeds (I had sunflower seeds) - toasted
- Avocado

Season the chicken breast and drizzle olive oil on the top, and bake until tender, or cook in a pan, or a slow cooker, however you wish! Shred the chicken when done.

Cut up the veggies and toss with olive oil, and more taco seasoning. Roast at 375 until tender and charred. (The grape tomatoes will easily burst open.)

Slice up the avocado and heat up the tortillas.

Assemble the tacos with the chicken, veggies and avocado, then sprinkle the seeds on top. You can add a squeeze of lime if you like!

Seven 4 You – All Things Green

It's March, and green will be worn for sure, by some, come St. Patrick's Day. But this article isn't about wearing green. It's more about adding green to our yards, homes, porches, etc.! And sometimes, that's hard to do if we don't have a green thumb, no idea of what plants to buy, where to place greenery in our homes, or all the things! So we asked our panel of women to share all things green, the plants and pretties they love, so we can grab a few ideas for our own spaces!

My favorite greens are in two spots at home. One on my front porch – a stair stepped array of succulents – easy to grow – and they add so much happiness as we come and go! Another is my new little herb box indoors, and my herb box outdoors. Rosemary, mint, parsley and more...grow all year with no effort.

My favorite plants in my yard are my hibiscus. They got off to a rocky start but once they settled in, they were gorgeous. They need sun and space, neither of which I have given them, but I prayed for them and they bloomed beautifully!

I have a small outdoor space. My collection of vintage tin children's watering cans and the addition of color brighten my day. The plant on the top left is my favorite but I have no idea what it is called, maybe Plumbago? The color is periwinkle blue. Once a week watering. It's in a pot and not in the ground. It might do better in a bed but I don't have the space.

I have what I call "my babies." They are sweet little grapefruit plants that I have grown from seeds. What is amazing to me about my babies is that these three seedlings sprouted inside the grapefruits. I have never seen that before. One day when I cut open my grapefruit there was the seed inside with a root attached where it had already started to grow. How could I not plant these to see what happens? I would love to, one day, have grapefruits trees with grapefruits. Looks like it might be a while.

I don't have much of a green thumb, so I like plants that don't have to be watered. My favorite is my succulent pot which just seems to take care of itself. My other favorite part of spring is watching all the trees bloom. We have Mountain Laurels and some Red Bud trees and they just make me happy. It makes me think that the Lord takes something that looks dead but is really alive and then makes it come to life. Like He did for me and continues to do in my life. I planted some Irises this past fall so those will be fun to watch bloom along with some daffodils. They are already coming up, but not blooming. I think our weather confuses them...

One of my most rewarding green adventures is my lovely avocado tree. From the time I was a kid, I tried to grow an avocado tree. I did the toothpick in the sides and set it in a cup of water. Never could I get one to grow. I don't know why, but one day I took an avocado seed and put it in a baggie with a paper towel at the bottom. I filled the baggie with water about halfway up the side of the seed, and left it on the counter. About two weeks later I noticed a crack in the side of the seed and before I knew it, a little sprig popped out. Once the sprig popped out, it did not take long for the tree to take off. I have grown three trees since. I'm now waiting to see the fruit of my labor.

I love our 'green little garden' we had last year. It's made of three 10' x 10' raised garden beds. We planted tomatoes, yellow squash, and cantaloupe last year which turned out great. March is when we will plant this year and possibly add a few green bean plants as well as a few pepper plants!

This herb pot overflowing with oregano delivers joy. When it warms up I will add basil and thyme. The plants stay healthy and growing throughout the hot summer months because of an olla pot that is submerged in the center. An olla is an unglazed clay pot that, when filled with water, leached out the water as the plant requires it. In August I will fill the olla every three days and never worry about it being too hot or dry. Bringing joy and being low maintenance is a great combo.

The Dressing – Spring Trends – by Marcy Lytle

Rattan and straw bag – Isn't this a cute bag? And it will go with everything! Perfect for those spring road trips, vintage market shopping, and more... I want this!

https://www.amazon.com/Handbag-JOSEKO-Weaving-Bucket-Outdoor/dp/B07CS5TCYF/ref=sr_1_5?dchild=1&keywords=raffia+handbag&qid=1612219964&sr=8-5

Rich tie-dye – I love that there are so many choices with this top. And it's long, has the split sides, so what's not to love? The rich colors are so fun for the spring season!

https://www.amazon.com/Womens-Casual-Tunics-Blouses-Tshirts/dp/B088R65HVW/ref=sr_1_52_sspa?crd=1TZW6CM7PG8N&dchild=1&keywords=tie+dye+tops+for+women&qid=1612219309&s=apparel&srefix=tie+dye+top%2Cfashion%2C251&sr=1-52-spons&psc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUEyR1I4MkNPQIIBVkJFJmVuY3J5cHRlZEIkPUEwMjg4MzZkZ2V0TmFtZT1zcF9idGYmYWN0aW9uPWNsaWNrUmVkaXJlY3QmZG9Ob3RMb2dDbGljaz10cnVl

Contrast piping – I remember liking this style a long time ago. To me, it's a classic look, and I'm glad it's in style this next season. Check out this pretty one from Amazon. It's great for dressing up or just with jeans, or wherever you want to wear it!

https://www.amazon.com/Allegra-Womens-Office-Contrast-Piping/dp/B083NPKPMF/ref=sr_1_5?dchild=1&keywords=contrast+piping+blouse&qid=1612219180&s=apparel&sr=1-5

Knit dresses – Okay, I didn't see this as a spring trend, but I'm adding it in. Last year, I purchased a few knit dresses from Amazon and wore them ALL the time, they washed up nicely, and they were faves! So I just ordered a few more...

https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0829YRR22/ref=ppx_yo_dt_b_asin_image_o00_s00?ie=UTF8&psc=1

Face Masks – Yeah, they're still around, unfortunately, so why not stock up on some cute and "cool" ones that let your face breathe, now that temps are warming up slightly... We found some really pretty ones at the Loft Outlet, and they fit snugly and feel great.

<https://outlet.loft.com/general-purpose-mask-set/557687?skuld=30765382&defaultColor=9998&catid=cat3950062&selectedColor=9998>

Released Hems – I have a couple of these style jeans and love them. The released hem and the fit of the jeans from the Outlet is so nice...not restrictive...and they're well made.

<https://outlet.loft.com/released-hem-boyfriend-jeans-in-storm-blue-wash/555487?skuld=30814080&defaultColor=1992&catid=cat3950035&selectedColor=1992>

Loungewear – I suppose this is still around, although I'm not a fan...but most of you are! And florals will be showing up for spring, so a lounging outfit in a floral print has to be a win!

<https://charmingcharlie.com/collections/loungewear/products/18777>

Three Moms – Does Planning Help?

Mom of Three

I'm definitely a planner, especially with three kids! I love to have visuals that I can see, and it's taken a few years to find the best way for me. I have three different ways!

First, I have a printed custom planner from Plum Paper, customized to my business. I can keep track of it and separate it from my family life.

<https://www.plumpaper.com/>

Second, I have a meal planner book, for just meals. There is a grocery category, which I love. It has a place for meals – and any notes. I love this to have in ONE BOOK that I can take to the store. It has all of my meals listed, and it's kept me organized, now that the kids are all in school. It's helped me budget, and not waste food, and I also am more creative with meals! In fact, I've even started planning out lunches.

Third, we have a wall calendar, a family command center that we can all see. It has a chalkboard calendar, and we all have a different color pen. I can see my husband's work schedule, kids' events are on it, and it's on a wall we all walk by frequently. I also write the weekly meals on there, because the kids can see what we're having. They love that. There's also a square with a to-do list – like buy a birthday gift, or clean out our car. I quit tracking every day chores, and just write down the big stuff. And finally, it has a chore list for the kids! It's up there as a reminder for them. Other reminders go up there, as well – like wear your masks, do your homework!

Three ways may seem like a lot, but it's so helpful. We used to use a google shared calendar, and we may use that again. But now that we're both home, we don't need digital. Our wall works! Digital would work, though, to share if we are apart.

My biggest tip is to really think about how you process. I've wasted so much money on other planners, over the years. Some are by the hour, overview, etc. Some like a straight to-do list, but I needed to keep business separate from family. Now, I can put my business planner away when work is over. And the visual reminders are the best for me!

(All my recipes are usually pulled from Pinterest and I move them to a new board called Family Favorites, and then I also use *Magnolia Cookbook!* I even write down if we're eating out on the calendar, so we can budget!)

Mom of Two

I love this topic. Growing up, I was not much of a planner, but rather a go-with-the-flow person. Becoming a mom has challenged me to be a planner, because it helps with my stress level. Planning can be great! I still like to leave room for spontaneity and surprises, but I do like to plan for days and weeks as a family!

I did start planning out our meals, because it stressed me daily about what to cook for dinner. And with working full time, I needed order. We have a *google.doc* where we keep a running list for groceries. It's categorized with groceries, home items, work supplies, and more, so that we can both access it if we're out. I usually plan four meals a week, and that leaves me room for being able to eat out some. Within those four meals I have one additional "easy" meal. I always have ground turkey, black beans and taco seasoning for a taco salad as a go-to meal.

We also like to keep up with birthdays with a *physical calendar* on the fridge, because we have a large family. We want to be able to remember and call or give to each one! We also have a *google calendar* for events. We are big "google" people! We like to always know what's going on each day!

For vacation, we have had to plan our weeks off, as we own our own business. We always book the place and lodging and flights, but we only book one or two events ahead. We like to go away and do things we want to do, not necessarily all planned out...

Mom of Four

Our family calendar goes all in *my phone* – everything – for kids, sports, church, etc. My husband and I share that calendar. We also have a calendar on the refrigerator, mostly for the kids to see. We also have all the kids' school items/papers on the same wall as the calendar.

For meal planning, we do a grocery pickup once a week, as we drive about 30 miles to the store! We don't really have a set meal per day, and we just stay flexible based on what we have.

For budgeting, we do have a weekly budget for groceries, gas, and miscellaneous and kid stuff. We take out cash weekly for our budget, and we use envelopes. A certain amount is for groceries, kids, home, personal care, gifts, and fun! This helps us stay on budget!

As far as planning fun events, unless it's a big vacation, we just plan weekly based on what's coming up. If we see a free night on the calendar, we think of something fun to do. But mostly, right now our nights are full with sports for the kids and stock show season, and church! If we do plan an outing for the day, which is rare right now, we sort of want to be home and relax!

Tried and True – Bathroom Re-do- by Marcy Lytle

I have had the same bones of décor in my bathroom for years, now. A white-themed bathroom shower curtain with touches of brown thread, so that I could then change out the counter and shelf décor from season to season. I have loved doing that, and it wasn't very costly. However, over the past few years, I've collected a fall shower curtain and a Christmas one, and now I have a spring one!

I'll share how you too can *switcheroo* your guest bath to reflect the season of all things new, bright and colorful!

Start with the shower curtain. That sets the tone and the color palette for the room. I found one on clearance at World Market for half off, mostly white, but then the bottom half is pretty spring flowers. I was hooked!

Right next to that shelf were some pretty colorful succulents that matched the curtain. I was thrilled and picked up a few. You could go with real plants, or fake ones, whatever fits your fancy. And I knew I had another plant or two at home, that might look good in a group! **Plants are awesome.**

I walked over to the bath area of the store and their **round rugs** were on sale as well! And there happened to be one in a pale turquoise that matched the curtain, so I snagged it.

I was all set to begin my bathroom transformation to spring...

Before buying any more items, I decided to **shop my house**. I had a vase in that same turquoise hue of glass and opted to set it in the corner of the counter. And I had a dried twig/flower in my stash that fit right in with the décor, so the corner of the counter was done!

On the wall above the toilet sits a triangular shelf I like to change out, and I did look and shop the house and a few stores to find something to set there, for prettiness! **Groups of three** are great to see (I've heard that, for home décor, and it works!)

Finally, we **removed our cabinet doors** years ago, and I previously had folded towels on one shelf and a large basket of hand towels on the top. I left the top basket, but I removed all the towels and placed them in a hidden cabinet underneath the sink. Then I curated that bottom shelf, and it's my favorite area of all:

I found a large **round tray** in the outdoor section at Target, and that was the base. Then in the Dollar Spot there were two small wooden pieces I bought to add some height, and one more tiny plant, for the group of three. One of the succulents I had purchased was a hanging one, so it was tacked up in the corner. This shelf **needed light** (it's deep and dark) so I opted for a stickup light. And finally, this **sign** at Target that said "Be our Guest" was the last piece that brought this shelf together!

Now, just step back and look at the entire room and see if it speaks spring to you! If so, you've accomplished your goal of a bathroom re-do.

Enjoy your switcheroo, however you choose to do it. Hope something here inspires you to start with the curtain...and go from there.



HOME

A Night to Remember – Winners! – by Marcy Lytle

Easter is in the first weekend of April this year, and I remember last year thinking how weird of an Easter it was, with a drive-by egg hunt for our kiddos. Who knew a year later, we'd still be social distancing? So, whether or not your kids are participating in egg hunts or not, you can participate as a family in a delightful minute-to-win-it Easter celebration about the art of losing...because you know you've won.

Preparation: You'll need plastic straws, goldfish crackers, paper plates, potatoes, cookies, and streamers!

Jesus knew from the get-go that he had come to earth to die. He kept trying to convey this message to his followers, but they wouldn't hear of it. He also kept telling them that he was Messiah, God in the flesh, come to be the Savior of the World, but they wanted a winner, a king, a leader that exalted himself and rode on a chariot. Instead, Jesus rode into the city on a humble donkey, and exalted his Father, instead.

Some looked at Jesus as a loser, but Jesus knew that he was a winner, because he was about to conquer death!

Let's play some *Minute to Win It* games as a family. You can either play individually or divide into teams. The object is to play each of the five games and see who can do the most of the task in a minute's time. Let's talk about this game, first.

What does it feel like to lose? (let kids answer). We might feel embarrassed, less than, angry at the winner. Those feelings come when we lose, but it's what we do with them that matters.

As we play, we're going to talk about Jesus and his death and resurrection, as it relates to our games!

Straws and fish: Place goldfish crackers on a paper plate and give each participant a paper straw. The object is to move as many goldfish off the plate by sucking it on the end of the straw and moving it, as possible. (Make sure they are whole goldfish)

Remember the story of Jesus feeding all those people with just bread and fish that a little boy gave? I bet he felt like a loser, handing that tiny bit of food to Jesus. But Jesus gave thanks and blessed it, and it fed 5000! What a winner!

Nose roll: You'll need a potato and an area rug or hall, to play this game. Each participant has to roll the potato down the rug to a designated line, to see who wins the race. Remind participants to keep their nose down and focused, not looking at the other players.

Remember how Jesus died and there was a big stone at the mouth of the cave where his body was placed? It may have seemed to some of his followers that Jesus was a big loser, because he died! But what happened on Easter morning? God rolled that stone away, maybe with his nose! And Jesus was alive! What a winner!

Cookie slide: You'll need a cookie for each participant. Have them place it on their forehead and when the clock starts, they have to wiggle it into their mouths, no hands. If it drops, they start over.

When Jesus was hanging on the cross, he became thirsty and wanted a drink in his mouth, but he was unable to get a drink and had to ask the guards for it. What a loser, he must have felt like. No, he didn't! He wanted a drink so that he could speak loudly and say, "It is finished!" so that all nearby could hear that he had completed the work his Father sent him to do – die on the cross! What a winner!

Mummy wrap: You'll need two rolls of streamers, and each one will need a partner. The goal is to wrap the other person in as much of the paper rolls as possible, in a minute.

Remember someone else that was wrapped up like a mummy? Jesus! His followers probably felt so sad to see their Lord, the one they followed, wrapped up in grave clothes and left in a grave. But, wait! Jesus told them on the third day he would rise again – and he did. What a winner!

Because of Jesus obeying his Father and loving all of us, he came to die and overcome death so we could live. He was and always will be the winner of all winners!

When we played these games, some of us won and some lost. And even though we don't like to lose, we aren't losers. We must always remember that. Because of what Jesus did for us, when we believe and receive Him into our hearts, and follow him, we are always winner with Him...forever and ever.

Read John 3:16 and pray and believe, together as a family.

An Adage a Day - A Quite Contrary Garden – by Carole Gilbert

When my children were little, I did a lot of gardening and canning. I look back and wonder how I ever had the time to do that with three small children. I loved to garden, and I could sit for hours and weed, while they played, if they allowed me to have the time. Sometimes my children wanted to help with the gardening and they especially loved picking the veggies off the vines or bushes. I did have to teach them to not pick them when they first saw them but to wait until the veggies were big and ripe.

I always felt like we were “sowing the seeds,” by letting them help. This phrase has been around for a long time and dates to Biblical times. It simply refers to doing something that reaps responses or rewards in the future, either good or bad. I knew from my own childhood that learning to garden was a good seed to sow.

Gardening with three children was never a “tough row to hoe.” We all loved watching the seeds sprout and grow and we especially loved seeing the veggies appear.

One year I decided I would try growing watermelons. It was something new and “between you, me, and the gatepost,” it was quite the experience. We had watermelons everywhere. They grow on vines and these vines got so big you could hardly see the rest of the garden. As the watermelons grew, they were so plentiful we could not see them all.

One day our daughter was walking around the outside of our garden and she started calling to me, “Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom!” I went to investigate what she was exclaiming about and saw quite the phenomenon. To my wonderment there was a watermelon growing right beside our six-foot wooden fence. The amazing part was that the other half of this watermelon was growing on the other side of the fence! This one watermelon was growing on both sides of the fence! It was so skinny, only about an inch wide, in the middle!

Luckily, we had great neighbors and never had “to mend fences” before but now we were going to in a different way. I did not beat around the bush but went right to them offering up an olive branch. They had a daughter the same age as my children and watching the watermelon grow on both sides of the fence became an exciting daily event.

We all felt like we had a green thumb watching it grow. When it came time to pick it off the vine, my husband and the neighbor removed the cross boards from the fence so we could lift it up safely in one piece. We thought it would be fun for the kids, and for us, to see this phenomenal watermelon in the shape of a figure eight. And it was!

After marveling at the watermelon, we all laughed, celebrated, and then ate it together. You could say we made a grand mountain out of a molehill over this one watermelon. And I am not beating around the bush, that experience sowed so many seeds.

2 Corinthians 9:6 says,

“The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly,
and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”

This is such an encouraging verse. We felt the bountiful reap that day and many more days after. From there 2 Corinthians goes on to speak of our hearts. What we give from the heart is what God returns to us plus so much more. And if we think about sowing and reaping, it brings to mind a question that comes from that wise ole gardener, Mary, Mary, quite contrary. A question we should all completely and simply ask ourselves,

“How does your garden grow?”

Chipped China - Gifting Go – by Jennifer Lytle

Our big plans to celebrate Michael's graduation with a double master's from Fuller Theological Seminary had been disrupted with no hope of any recompense. Everything that could have gone wrong, did. There would be no traditional ceremony. During the virtual ceremony, Michael's most prestigious degree, a Master's of Divinity, was not "awarded." We decided **not** to travel halfway across the country on a plane and stay for a week in three different areas along the West coast to discover one theme park, the southern beaches, and the northern forests. Worse than canceling our summer vacation plans, we realized the reality of the limited agreements marked off in tiny print for almost every aspect of our trip. Only our flight had insurance that allowed for a refund. It was a disappointing situation.

However, much like [last month's story](#), Papa gets to write His version of events. He has the last say (please see [Proverbs 16:1](#)). And this, my friends, always results in [triumph that I too get to enjoy](#).

God kept urging Michael to say yes to a new travel plan. Since we had lost so much on our canceled plans, Michael was hesitant to sign up for more adventures. But God insisted on a particular time frame and He wanted to answer our desire for Legoland. We went ahead, slowly saying yes to lining up the reservations. Michael asked God to confirm that we were to go when a specific prayer for finances came in the form of a text. A proposal for work had been accepted and a check was in the mail.

Next, we discovered that God lined up a rental vehicle for our travels. Our reservations were for a small vehicle. When we went to pick up our reserved sedan, a customer jumped in line ahead of us. He was a member of the rental company and this privilege allowed him to come in and have a car available to him of his choosing. He pushed his way into the parking lot and selected the basic sedan. Michael had patiently been waiting for the customer representatives to work out a solution for the increased deposit that was not in the original agreement Michael had made reservations under; though it was now being required. A different representative ended up helping Michael and charged him only for the rental, forgetting to charge any deposit. The customer service representatives could not figure out how to undo their mistake, so they asked him simply not to let their manager know about it. Was he ready for the keys? There were no other basic sedans available. Would he like the luxury SUV? Our family would be much more comfortable in a larger vehicle and the three rows offered everyone a bit of space to enjoy during the long drive. That was the second gift we were granted.

Michael kept trying to consider scheduling to go later in the year, but God kept confirming to Michael to go, now. As we started our trip, I received a phone call to offer me a position I had interviewed for seven weeks prior. They wanted me to start right away. We hadn't expected that, but God did. That was the third gift we were granted.

As we finally pulled into the parking lot to our grand getaway, the two of us looked at one another with concerned eyes. I could see the entrance to the theme park directly across from the hotel. Neither sights were appealing. Michael spoke quietly so the children wouldn't overhear.

"We're going to have to lower our expectations."

My mind wouldn't accept this disappointment.

"Hmm?" I asked just as quietly.

"I'm not sure this place is going to be what we expect," he nearly whispered as he got out of the car to go inside the lobby to check in.

We had pulled under the overhanging second story and sat in its shadow. I looked around at the sad looking potted plants. This was not what I hoped for when we agreed to swap out one theme park for another. It was colorful. The colors were traditional Lego colors, but the resemblance stopped there. This was . . . well . . . it was unacceptable.

Michael got back in the car and exhaled in relief. This was not Legoland. That was our fourth gift! We had pulled into a hotel built near the worker's entrance of Legoland.

We promptly drove away and said goodbye to Pretend Land.

I'm not sure why we doubted Jehovah Jireh who had already been recognized to have carefully set out every detail of this trip. The gifts of provision, the gift of time, the gift of space, and the gift of our desire had been set out for our family to partake.

I wonder, in this season, is there a place you know you are to go but have yet come to? Have you arrived in a place that you know is not where you are to go? May our loving Way Maker make your steps clear.

I Don't Do Teens – Fact or Fiction – by Marcy Lytle

By now, your teens know that the Easter Bunny is not real, Santa is just an old man in a suit, and Cupid is a drawing on a paper. They're realizing that there is so much fiction in the world around them. If they watched the news with you during the election, they saw and heard slander, mistruths, and realized that even leaders fail at presenting facts and a faultless campaign. They may have been disappointed in the truths they felt as a little kids, where Mom and Dad were together, but they're now apart, and they don't know if that love was ever true, or not.

So how do we help our teens distinguish between fact and fiction? Of course, we tell them that fictionalized characters are ones that are not true in books and on the movie screens. But, of course, there are non-fiction stories that are told of heroes and those that have lived lives that inspire and strengthen our own lives, if we read.

And then...there's the case of the Bible. Every person, teen or adult, has to decide for themselves what to believe. And so will your teens. Here are some pointers to remember:

If we pick up the Bible like we do a Bandaid, just to bandage our wounds when we're hurt, they'll see the Word as an occasional fixer upper, and won't ever realize the truth of the story told inside.

If we use the Bible as a weapon to shape up our unruly kids, quoting verses in discipline, they will see the Word as harsh and unkind, and that will relate to the giver of the Word – God. And it will damage their relationship with Him. They might even reject the truth of who God really is.

If they see us only open our app or our Bible occasionally when we attend church or listen to a sermon on line, they may look at it like they do a movie – a story to read for entertainment or when bored.

However...

If we read the Bible together as a family to learn about the character of God and his love towards us, they will see and know God and want to follow him. (Start with the book of John – it's a fantastic one – as Jesus interacts with all those who question who he is).

If we have come to know the Jesus of the pages in the bible as our own personal savior, and we love him so much that we want to sit in his presence and digest his words because they are life, and those words actually evoke change in our lives for the better, our kids will see those words as life – true life!

If we listen to the questions our teens ask about God, their wonderings and their frustrations, and offer to pray with them, search with them, and then allow God to speak to them, they'll soon realize the truth...

And just what is fact?

It's a fact that the Word of God is alive and active (Hebrews 4:12). We don't have to use it as a weapon, ever. It rather should be seen as an extension of who God is to us, personally. Just like we read a non-fiction book about the life of a great person and feel as though we know them when we close the book, we should train our teens that getting to know God and the power of his Word is what will carry us through life.

And we can't do this, if we don't know it ourselves.

Consider reading the synopses of the books of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation to be once again renewed in your own faith of the facts of the geography, the people, the places, the stories and the power of the God, the Creator, the Savior. Talk about these things with your teens over dinner, not as something laborious or boring, but as life giving and amazing.

The way for our kids to know the truth about God's word is to immerse our families in it, so much that when they step out into the world on their own and see anything that doesn't align with "Love God and love others" they immediately recognize it and turn away from those untruths that destroy and kill.

Practical Parenting – Date Them – by Marcy Lytle

Dating our kids is a great thing. Whether or not we celebrated Valentine's Day traditionally or not last month, our kids noted all of the chocolate hearts and roses everywhere...and they need to know what it's like to be cherished. Yes, taking care of our kids' needs for food and shelter is necessary, but treating them as they should expect to be treated when they start relationships is fun and a blessing!

If your own marriage suffers in this area, it's a good time to sit and talk about dating. Why don't you and he go out on dates? If you're a single parent, it's a great month to show your kids some extra love. And if you are parents that do go on dates but never include your kids, it's time to share the love! Don't wait until they're teens to do this...show them now.

Here are a few ideas on dating your littles, so that they feel like the prince or princess that they are:

1. First of all, date your spouse. Let them see you plan a date, dress up, prefer one another, and show the love. It doesn't matter if we're still at home, a fancy dress-up occasion or a bit of creative romance is awesome. Even a simple thing like adding candlelight can speak volumes.
2. Next, every once in a while plan a date with your kids. Dad can invite his daughter to breakfast on the patio, and prepare it, let her mark it on her calendar, and tell her he'll "pick her up" at a certain time. Single or married moms can share a dessert with their little boys, and demonstrate good conversation and fun.
3. Have a family dress-up night with candles and fancy foods at the table. Instruct on table manners and how to ask questions and have pleasant conversation, and politeness and manners. Do this, instead of eating on the sofa in front of the TV or all at separate times.
4. During movie or show time, actually have a talk afterwards about relationships depicted in the movie or show. If revealing clothing or smack talk or manipulation occurs (even in cartoons!) talk about how that's one way...but there's a better way...to relate to the opposite sex.
5. Have a family night in the car! Pretend it's an actual date. Get fast food, play I SPY in the parking of the restaurant, and then drive to another drive-through for dessert. Show what proper behavior looks like in the car.
6. Let the littles plan the date and ask YOU out! Give them instructions: plan food, conversation, a treat (can be a flower picked from the yard!) and ambience (music). This can be SO FUN for them to plan and carry out, with you as the date!
7. Dance. Let dancing be some part of the date. Twirling for little girls is like being at a Cinderella ball. Letting boys groove and move while you try to copy makes him enjoy your company. And slow dancing impromptu in front of the kids – well – it's priceless gold being planted in their minds for years to come.

If you need more ideas on how to date your children, search for them. Notice their likes and cater to those. Make them feel special by paying attention to, lavishing love on, and inviting

them out to intimate time...all by example. This way, they'll be better equipped as young adults when they start noticing someone other than Mom or Dad...

Tiny Living – Home Hacks – by Leyanne Enterline

Last month I shared funny “trailerisms” that I hope made you smile. And this month, I thought it would add some more fun to share hacks we’ve discovered while living tiny. Humor gets us through many days, and makes our life quite interesting! Maybe you’ll want to try some of these home hacks, no matter where you live...tiny or big.

- Free foil wrapping containers from Whole Foods curbside behind the blinds in bedrooms to make it darker and insulate.
- Long mirror on glass window on kids’ bedroom door to make it darker in their room and it adds a nice long reflection for them!
- Foil used as lining on all pans when cooking so not to wash ANOTHER dish!
- Crockpot or one pan meal makes for less clean up, since we are hand washing.
- Make extras often, to have leftovers, so we don’t have to “dirty up” more pots.
- Plastic bins for everything to “appear” more organized.
- Live minimal! One bowl, plate, cup for every person and clean up your own stuff.
- Invest in a slightly better shower head, the original is super tiny and barely sprays out.
- Roll clothes tightly in drawers. Looks nice and “sparks joy.”
- Command strips everywhere. Provides a place to hang up keys, pictures, calendars...
- Use a pool noodle on bunk beds to prevent kids from falling off.
- Do not put food items in the outer cabinets, they will overheat.
- Put ice cream at the very back of the freezer; otherwise, we have shakes instead.
- Use a pool noodle to cover outdoor pipes in case of a freeze.
- Make sure to put outdoor awning back in, during a wind storm.
- Change out air filters regularly.
- Buy wrinkle free clothes, because there’s no room to iron!

Invention is the mother of necessity...haven’t I heard that somewhere? And humor for sure is the best thing for keeping our family sane and smiling.

Remember...love grows best in tiny spaces.



YOU

Healthy Habits - Portioned Eating – by Marcy Lytle

During all these months at home, it's been easy to sit in front of the TV, spread out a huge array of food, and eat for an hour...nibbling on this and that...because it's fun while chilling with a movie. Am I right? This started me thinking about portions, and how that seems to be so important with maintaining a good habit of eating in a healthy manner. After all, it's not fun to eat and eat, and then an hour later feel bloated and stuffed. Not fun, at all!

Here are a few ideas on portioned eating and keeping our stomachs and bodies a bit happier and healthier this month...and maybe these habits will stick with us!

One plate rule – There's this deli we frequent and you can get a one plate salad bar (well, when the salad bar was open) or a return trip salad plate. Opting for one plate rule when eating at home can help so much. Keep the food in the kitchen, fill your plate one time, put away the rest in the fridge, and retire to the sofa and enjoy.

Slowly chew – Instead of wolfing down the meal you've just prepared, take a bite, put your fork down, and chew. These rules aren't new, but they help to remind us to enjoy and savor, not gulp and gag.

Small snacks help – I've found that if I eat a few nuts or trail mix in the mid-morning hours, it curbs my appetite and I'm not so likely to overeat when lunchtime comes. But when I'm starving? Forget it. I'm so hungry, all the above rules go out the window!

A big bottle of water – It's true that drinking a big glass of water staves off hunger and fills your belly, so then hopefully you won't overeat when dinner is served. In fact, a good drink of water during your meal, to pause between bites, is helpful as well.

Sectioned plates or bentos – I love bento boxes and have mentioned them before. They have little squares, and they're so cute. I think filling those squares and making the food so pretty helps to enjoy each bite and not eat so much.

Share – If you make a big batch of chocolate walnut bars (we recently did!) then share the love. Portion out a few in bags and give to your kids...or someone...so that you only have say a half dozen at home. Portion one into a snack bag, and only allow yourself one a day.

Don't do it – Don't order huge meals any more, when you're getting takeout or eating on patios. Whomever you are with, ask if they want to share maybe an appetizer and a plate. You'll be SO GLAD when you're finished, that you didn't eat that huge pile of food by yourself. And your stomach will smile, as well.

Of course, we all need to move and exercise and walk and all the things. But even that won't help, if we're piling up food and eating without stopping, during a 2-hour movie. Go ahead and enjoy your meal. But make the portions small, make it cute and pretty, and fill in your stomach growls with a tiny healthy snack or a huge drink of water.

We are trying to do this...and some days we do...and some days we don't. But trying is good. Right?

Life in a Nutshell – Hydrangeas Love Me – by Jill Montz

I love plants, but I kill cactus.

I need this declaration printed on a t-shirt, water bottle, bumper sticker, and perhaps even as a black and white framed print I can hang in my bathroom, bedroom, or office. Because of my love for all kinds of plants, I have friends and acquaintances who periodically ask me questions or my advice regarding their green growing beauties. But if anyone has a question about a cactus I refer back to my proven declaration...*I love plants, but I kill cactus.*

You know what all plants need? Sunlight and water.
You know what cacti don't like a lot of? Water.
You know what I do to show my plants love? I water them.

Therefore...I love plants but I kill cactus.

The last few months have been very wet in our area. Most people will comment, "Don't farmers like it when it rains?" And to that I respond with, "Yes and no." Rain is a good thing. Our trees need rain to grow and produce crops. But just like most everything else, too much of a good thing can turn into a bad thing.

Too much rain can cause root rot, trees can develop fungus and diseases, and all this can eventually kill the tree if the problem persists. Too many rainy days with no sunshine can cause the trees to not produce crops or to shed crops in order to survive. And rain during harvest time can slow down the pecan gathering process. If the pecans are not gathered in time a timely fashion and remain damp on the orchard floor, the fallen nuts can begin to sprout and thus be ruined.

Most of the time our problem, in this part of north Texas, is not enough rain. We have survived many years of droughts or low rain totals. In fact, all new orchards we plant these days are done so with irrigation systems in place just in case the trees need more water. But on some rare occasions we have had years that were just too wet to produce good, abundant crops.

As I drove through the orchards earlier this week and saw all the water puddled down the rows of trees I couldn't help but wonder what in my own life am I "over watering?" If Dotty were in the car with me she would be raising her hand and making gurgling noises to prove her point.

At 13-years-old she points out to me (often) that I am very involved in her life. Sometimes, I'm too involved, in her opinion. I volunteer for many of her events. I make friends with many of her teachers. I ask a lot of questions. I give a lot of advice. I make sure she knows my opinion on everything from what she wears to what she says to who she says it to.

Now some might say...that's just good parenting.
And some might ask...where do you park your helicopter?
I promise I can see both sides.

I grew up in a house with very involved and loving parents. They weren't (and still aren't) perfect, but I never have nor ever will doubt their love for me. I knew how lucky I was to have parents at every ballgame and school program. I knew how much my friends loved my parents because my parents truly cared about all of them. I knew I was fiercely loved because they set boundaries for me and checked on me often. They kissed me goodnight, they grounded me

when I rebelled, and they made me work for things I wanted but provided me with all I needed. They were my fiercest warriors and biggest supporters always, but especially when life got hard some days.

My parents still do all this and more, even now. They cheer me on when I have success and they dust me off and send me back out into the world when I fail. They call me out when I am wrong and they call me often to tell me I am doing great. They let me soar but they remind me if I need a place to rest I can come find that with either of them. They gave me roots in a good childhood but they gave me wings to go out in the world.

Some days, 13-year-old Jill would have said I was being “over watered with love.” 18-year-old Jill might have screamed that phrase a time or two (my most rebellious year for sure). But 41-year-old Jill knows better.

Kids can be like cactus. Sometimes they don't want too much water. And their attitudes can be prickly too! Especially teenage girls' attitudes.

But in reality, I think kids are way more like hydrangeas. They crave water and need to stay saturated to really grow and bloom. Lucky for Dotty, I am very good at growing hydrangeas. So maybe my next printed water bottle should say...

I kill cactus but hydrangeas love me...just ask my Daughter.

An item like that probably wouldn't sell a lot on Amazon or Etsy but it would mean a lot to me. And I am sure someday I could buy one for Dotty when she is a mom, too.

Palms Wide Open – Life Right Now – by Hanna Bouck

Recently, my husband and I took the plunge into minimalism by buying and beginning to renovate an RV. One thing that inspired us to pursue RV livin' is something a friend spoke to me years ago.

“How so many of us live with arms extended but palms closed

(Like a little kid hanging onto their candy.)

When we do that yes, things can be taken,

but there's also so much to be placed in them as well.”

I didn't fully understand what she was saying at the time, but I continue to hear those words and I'm letting them sink in.

For context; I grew up with not much. My parents had me early on, and we didn't have a lot as far as physical possessions. So, in my adult life I have/had been obsessed with the idea of *the best*: the best clothes, the best home goods, best looking, and just being the best. Not that those things are bad, but when it is such a focus that it takes away from time with people + generosity - I think there's an issue.

Conviction hit immediately after I got married. Here I was sitting with my husband in a house with so much stuff. Stuff I didn't even want; and dreaded putting away and cleaning week after week. This same season I started to have an abundance of friends starting small businesses and others pursuing dreams such as missions; or supporting mission's organizations.

My heart tugged to do more, but literally, and dare I say, spiritual *stuff* was in the way. One Tuesday night, we had both had it.

We were cleaning when my husband said,

“Wouldn't it be great if we just bought an RV and got rid of everything?”

I looked up and said,

“Yes it would! Let's do it.”

He was definitely as shocked as I was at the epiphany, but a week later we walked away with keys to a new RV and bags full of Goodwill donations in the back of the car.

Life right now doesn't look like what I would have thought. Right now, it is a lot less cluttered and a lot more unknown. But I do know that Scott and I are choosing less so we can give more and do more with what the Lord has/is giving us.

Continuing to pursue peace + living life with palms wide open...

Strategic Women – Judge Deborah – by Debbie Haynes

This is the final look at strategic women, and this particular lady rivals all the former ones we talked about! Her name is Deborah, and she had leadership ability, strength of character and unwavering faith in God. After all, the traditional meaning of her name is “woman of a fiery spirit!”

Here’s a little background. Joshua had been ruling the land where the Children of Israel resided for about 30 years, and he was now about to die. Just before his death, Joshua gave the people a “pep talk” reminding them of all the miracles God had performed (miracles they didn’t deserve), the blessings they’d received in the Promised Land, and then he sternly warned them to stay close to God and not follow after idols.

Joshua 24:15 says,

And if it seems evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom you will serve – whether the gods your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood – or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell; but for me and my house we will serve the Lord.

The people gave a good answer of dedication to follow God, but Joshua knew their hearts and reminded them that God was holy and jealous and would not bless them if they followed after other gods. Joshua then died.

Judah was then chosen to lead the people, and Judah picked his brother Simeon to be his war general, and God gave them many victories. However, so sadly, the grandchildren that were now present had not been taught God’s ways by their parents, and intermingled with the enemy camps and completely forsook God. Of course, they were then devoured by their enemy, the Philistines.

Now that we know that back story, we can move on to read about God’s undying love for his people...

Judges 2:16-20 tells us that the Lord raised up judges which delivered the people from the hands of those that spoiled them. But the people still were stubborn and went “whoring” after other gods. And when these judges died, these children corrupted themselves again and again.

Boy, was God hot with anger against his people!

Over and over, these 12 tribes failed to drive out the enemy as God had commanded them to do...and this is the point where Judge Deborah appears on the scene – the first and only female among Israel’s 12 judges! She held court under a tree and followed God with all her heart.

One of her first actions as Judge was to commission Barak – a general for war – and he agreed to serve. But only if Deborah would go into battle with him! You see, he was a bit of a coward. Deborah agreed and now the story gets exciting...

The army coming against the Israelites had 900 chariots of iron, and the Israelites had none. However, they had fought this enemy before and lost, so they knew what they were facing. And

when Deborah prayed, she told Barak that the Lord was going to deliver this enemy into their hands. She instructed him to take 10,000 men to the mountain, but the enemy spotted them and started after them! The chase was on!

In Judges 4:15 we read that the Lord discomfited (utterly confused and defeated) Sisera and all his chariots and this guy even fled away on foot! In fact, the entire army ran for cover! Barak pursued the chariots and slew the entire army – with no one left alive except the still-fleeing Sisera.

Sisera fled to a nearby town (can you just visualize it?) to hide in the tent of Jael, where Sisera took a rest, while Jael said she'd stand guard. However, she drove a tent stake or nail through Sisera's head. And verse 21 says, "So, he died." Of course, he did!

Barak shows up at the tent and realizes Jael has already killed the enemy, because God had given his head to a woman, just as Deborah had told Barak beforehand!

All of Judges 5 is the victory song of Deborah. She praises God for avenging Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves. And she sings in verses 12-13,

Awake, awake, Deborah, awake, awake and utter a song!

This fiery woman of God didn't let the power God entrusted her with go to her head. She acknowledged Jael, the woman that killed the enemy, and she acknowledged Barak for leading the army. But God got all the glory!

There's a lot to read in that victory song that we don't read in the details of the battle. The song says God used the heavens – thunder, lightning, hail and rain (and even a flood!) to sweep away the enemy.

Judge Deborah was definitely a strategic woman, dedicated to her people and to God, and in a time of crisis she never lost confidence in God, or in herself! She knew exactly where her help came from and gave all the glory to Him!

Judges 5:21 sums up this story by saying God had a purpose when he handpicked Deborah – because after this battle – the land had rest for 40 years! That's the sweetest part of the victory because this woman was willing to arise and be counted. She was obedient as she judged in wisdom and with a strong faith in her God.

The enemies of God are never a match for those whom God chooses and those that serve Him. That's what serving Him is all about – obeying his directives to keep ourselves from becoming polluted with the world's idols and ways.

Absolutely impossible situations become amazing victories to women that trust and serve their God with a faith that leads our families and followers to places of rest in Him!

Strengthening Your Core - No More! – by Marcy Lytle

There are some things I just have decided I won't do, won't buy, won't worry about, etc. and I thought it would be fun to share them with you! After all, life shouldn't be so worrisome and cumbersome, right? And I've realized, over the years, that some things I've been doing or buying or thinking about are useless and only clutter up my life, or make me frustrated. No more!

Throw pillows – I used to buy new ones for each season for the porch and the sofa and the beds, and then I ended up with a mound a mile high of throw pillows! Did you know that Amazon sells the pillows, and the covers? So I only need a few pillows and can then change out the covers seasonally, and the covers can be folded and put away!

Blah Looks – I've gone shopping dozens of times and ended up with a top in a color that looks awful on me, thinking I will wear it because it was a cute style. No more! I don't look good in beige or khaki green, both of those colors wash me out. So I've quit buying them! I know the colors I love, the ones that make me feel vibrant when I wear them, so I only look for those. Feels good...

Mincing garlic – Maybe I'm wrong, but the jar of minced garlic seems to work just as well as fresh, and the jar lasts forever. So why would I peel garlic cloves, use that mincer tool, scrape the garlic off and then try to clean that tool with all those tiny holes, anymore? I don't! That little jar of minced garlic has saved me so much time and energy!

Bitter roots – I'm in the process of doing a study on bitterness. It's SO EASY to become bitter as we grow older, dismissing people because they disappoint, allowing roots of unforgiveness to tangle up our hearts, etc. But I've decided I don't want even one tendril of bitterness showing up in my heart. It takes diligence, knowledge, and lots of prayer and faith to uproot each one. But it's SO WORTH IT. It starts by seeing others as He sees them, and that frees us to continue to love...

Messy car – This is a goal of mine because messy cars drive me nuts. So I've begun to add organizers that help me keep the inside nice (since we spend so much time eating in it, and road tripping). I have a little JIC jar in the glove compartment (just in case things - like extra plastic forks, safety pin, pen, tissue, tiny screwdriver, etc.) We also have a three compartment organizer for the back, so things we purchase don't roll around. We've added two plastic trays for eating, and little trash bags for gathering and discarding, etc. And...I'm trying to add on my schedule vacuuming more regularly! Why feel icky in the car? No more!

Pity parties – You know, those days where you feel less than (because you've compared), nights where you feel fat and old (geez, when we ever stop that stinking thinking?), and mornings where you can't get motivated because you feel depressed about the world, your kids, your life, etc. (some days, the thoughts just get the best of us!) I've been practicing the art of giving thanks (3 things a day) and recently began to look up, more. Who wants to attend a pity party? No one!

Folded jeans – I recently saw where shower curtain hooks can be hung on closet rods for hanging jeans! Genius! I had tried draping them all over hangers (looked messy), folding on a shelf (looked messy) or storing in a drawer (didn't like not being able to see them), and finally I really like this idea of the hooks! I'm sold!

What have you stopped doing, in favor of a better way? I'd love to hear!



MARRIAGE

After 40 Years – We Get To – by Marcy Lytle

I hopped into bed the other night and looked him and smiled and said, “We get to sleep together.” Of course, all married couples do! But have you ever looked at it as something to give thanks for, to note and smile about, and to tell him how much you love that you get to? He smiled, and we both snuggled and it set the tone for a good night’s sleep.

Why not look at other things we “get to do” with our spouses, a list to read over, a list to share, and a list to savor every day, so that giving thanks for him is first and foremost before starting to complain...

We get to hold hands while watching a movie.

We get to eat dinner together.

We get to load and unload the dishwasher.

We get to ride together to watch the sunset on the horizon if we want to.

We get to take a walk on a trail and observe the occasional owl in a tree as darkness approaches.

We get to place puzzles pieces and make scenes come to life.

We get to observe children and learn from them and give thanks.

We get to plant and rake and mow and garden, and watch our yards thrive and live.

We get to tackle life’s problems together, with Him.

We get to worship together and give thanks for His faithfulness.

We get to order fast food, especially Blizzards, and enjoy our own flavors.

We get to awaken by each other’s side, wash our faces and see another sunrise.

We get to pray big prayers for the lonely, the outcast, the broken and the needy.

We get to give and share and love, without expecting anything in return.

We get to cry tears of sorrow and laugh belly laughs of joy, maybe all in the same day.

We get to skip or dance a few moves, when no one else is looking.

We get to have separate sinks for getting ready, and the same table for dining.

We get to listen without judging, affirm without ridiculing.

We get to text sweet notes and reminders, with emojis of affection.

We get to sleep together and smile as we close our eyes...

Date Night Fun – A Meaningful March – by Marcy Lytle

February and all of the red hearts and chocolate are past, and Easter is coming next month, but here we are stuck in the middle with March. Why not make our dates meaningful, this month? Meaningful means rich and significant, sincere and important. And really nothing in life is much more important than relationship with Him...and with him.

Here are five ideas:

Meaningful conversation: Make a dinner for two together, and actually sit at your table by candlelight and have specific conversation with these five questions: What was the best thing about your day? What do you love most about our daily life together? What would you consider a perfect day, from morning til night? What are five things you couldn't live without? Then really listen to each other's answers as you savor each bite. After dinner, watch a meaningful documentary together and discuss afterwards.

Meaningful drive: Plan a route to make a drive that's rich in visual pleasure, together. Search for murals, blooming plants (and try to identify them), stop at a local restaurant to support them, and purchase something from a local artisan. Finally, enjoy some rich and decadent dessert to talk over all that you saw!

Meaningful celebration: St. Patrick's Day is this month, and he was important in bringing Christianity to Ireland. So plan your date night around all things green. We even shared some of our favorite green things over on the TIPS page! Purchase or plant a green together - make an herb garden, or grow some indoors in a cute planter. Get some greens from the ATM and surprise a fast food waiter with a big green tip. Find a bakery that's selling green iced cookies or a coffee shop with a green drink! And finally, sit near a pond for a while observing green frogs, lily pads, or the green grass beneath your feet.

Meaningful walk: How can a walk be meaningful? I'm glad you asked! Walk with a purpose: make it a point to acknowledge and say hello, how are you, to at least five people passing you on the trail; decide on a specific mileage and make sure you stay the course until you meet that goal; look for something out of the ordinary on the ground, in a tree or in the sky and point it out; when you return home give each other a foot-washing and massage and you're done.

Meaningful connection: Whether you're in the mood or not, make a Facetime date with a couple you haven't seen in a while, maybe one in another town or one that's been distanced because of the pandemic. Tell them what you're going to be snacking on, and ask them to enjoy the same. Plan ahead topics of conversation, what you're going to wear, and set the date. Enjoy.

For Better or Worse - A Big Deal – by Kaelin Scott

My husband is kind of a big deal. And I'm not just saying that because he works for a famous baseball player. I'm really proud of him for all he's accomplished, but I would still be proud of him if he was the custodian at McDonald's. Having his dream job is great, and I obviously want that for him. But what I'm most concerned about is his soul. Let me tell you, my husband absolutely has a heart for God. And that's why I think he's a big deal.

A man of faith is far more valuable than any money, success, fame, or accomplishment. When it comes to a leader for my family, I care more about integrity than what he does for a living. The things that really matter are those that follow us to eternity. Investing in each other's hearts and exemplifying faith to our children are most important.

It doesn't matter if your spouse is the CEO of a billion-dollar corporation or the garbage man driving down the street. If he lives his life for Jesus, then he's a big deal too. If you've got a man of integrity leading your family, you've won the husband lottery. Money and material things might make your life easier here on earth, but they mean nothing when we pass into eternity. There are no favorites in God's eyes, and there will be no upper or lower class in heaven. The blessings we have in this life aren't meant to be our hope. Rather, they are instruments with which we can share God's love with others.

Material success comes and goes. Seasons change along with our circumstances. But there is one thing that remains constant and reliable – our Lord Jesus Christ. He is our hope, regardless of any other circumstance. When He is at the center of your goals and dreams, there is nothing you can't do. It's often when we let go and give Him control that He blesses us beyond our wildest dreams. When we give our marriage, our spouse, and our children to Him, He can use them to do wonderfully amazing things.

In This Together – Our Reality – by Bekah Holland

Sometimes we find ourselves too exhausted and worn out to keep our heads above water. We've been fighting so hard, for so long, that defeat feels like a respite. Sometimes the desire to let the waves crash over us and bury us under is stronger than any memory of love and happiness we can recall.

This is the reality that people in every walk of life, every religion, every age and personality live in every day. People you know. People you love. People who are really good at hiding their pain.

I know this because I am one. And I love many. And I see many more. I wonder sometimes if God hasn't allowed me to experience this because as much as I tried to understand and sympathize with the people in my life who live with depression, as much as I tried to be patient and gentle, I missed the mark over and over again, because I didn't really get it at all.

I have always been incredibly sensitive to things that never made much sense to me. Even as a child, I remember going on a road trip with my family, and my stomach started hurting and while what I was feeling was very physical, I also knew it was more than that. Then about 15 minutes up the road we passed a building and the intensity of what I had been feeling built until I thought I might die. My parents were praying, and while I don't know what was going on inside of that old building on a long stretch of highway, I believe with all my heart it was a battleground. Maybe spiritual. Maybe something else. But I felt it like I was experiencing it. And many more times than I'd care to think about, I've had experience after experience like that, standing in a room full of people who are laughing and joking but I felt a pain, loneliness and hurt that I couldn't quite place.

I've always been a pretty happy go lucky kind of gal. I have come through experiences that should have left me shattered. I've been at peace when I should have been in torment. Now don't get me wrong, I've hurt and cried and broken and been pieced back together many times over. I'm not impervious to pain. But I think God knew I would need the ability to both feel and experience overwhelming pain, and then recover so I could offer comfort. I've struggled with why He made me this way. And I've wondered if I was a mistake. I've felt like a burden while also feeling unseen. I've felt the darkness of those who are buried under the weight of things I can't imagine. It's been a blessing and a curse at times.

*But what I'm still working on is not assuming all of the weight of
my loved one's pain is mine to carry.*

My job is to love and then to release it to the God who sees. To listen to that still small voice, and also to the silence. To sit with others in their pain, share their burden, and then lay it at the foot of the cross where it belongs. That's the hard part. The surrender.

Sometimes this "gift" has been a hindrance in my marriage. Because I knew something was coming that even my husband didn't realize yet. And that put me on edge, fearful of the unknown. And I am far from an expert at knowing how to handle that all the time. Sometimes I try to overcompensate with extra sunshine and pep, which, obviously is more annoying than helpful. Sometimes I just turn inward, hiding from the inevitable.

I love people who fight to live in the light while darkness threatens to suffocate them. It's not just a story for us. It's our reality. It's a day by day, minute by minute fight against the dying of the light. I have often hidden my sensitivity. It's hard to be the kind of vulnerable that leaves people thinking you're a bit looney. I get it. I think it's crazy and I live it.

*But I also trust that the God who set us in motion
has a plan that I may or may not see.*

That He created in me something that while difficult, can also be beautiful. Because I have a miniscule glimpse into what He feels in our pain. In my finite and limited human capacity, I want to shelter and protect my husband and loved ones from their pain. I want to absorb their sadness and darkness and shine light so bright that darkness loses. How much more so, does the creator of our souls want this for us?

I know this isn't my normal chaotic mix of self-deprecation, humor and mess of our real lives. I love to bring lightness and laughter to distract us from the tough stuff. And I still revel in that part of who I am. However, no matter what it looks like from the street view of any of our lives, where there is joy, you'll usually also find pain. And where there is laughter, there have also been tears. And in this coming year, when you're given the chance to see someone right where they are, don't be afraid to get dirty and sit with them in the middle of their mess. Whether that mess is laundry and toys or depression and addiction.

Be the person to see your spouse, or partner or child or neighbor and know that they just need someone to see them, in all their beautiful mess. And *maybe* stand for them while they rest a while before continuing their fight. This is being who Jesus called us to be. It's so much more than preaching from a pulpit or in a stadium or reminding others of the "speck in their eye." It's living and loving and loving some more. No expectations. No requirements. No changing. Just love.

"No matter how dark your night, may you always find enough light to take the next step."

-John Mark Green



ENCOURAGEMENT

Last month, I described my state of being as “wordless.” The intense emotional climate that shook the words out of me has somewhat subsided; but, as shakings often do, it left a mark—one I welcome as a friend. I felt up against an impenetrable wall, and, out of heartache and desperation, wordless prayer awakened in my soul. What I saw and heard around me brought me to my knees, and I began to wonder if love manifested in wordless action could be the most powerful and effective prayer.

I’ve often wondered how we can “pray without ceasing.” We’re admonished to do this, but it seems impossible, unless you’re a monk or a mystic. What about the average person like me? What about people who have no time, busy moms, people who have to work hard all day? I set aside time to read and meet with God and try to be mindful and pray throughout the day, but full attention is often required and it goes by the wayside. Praying without ceasing? Hardly. Worship music helps keep my mind in the right place, but, honestly, these moments, petitions, and songs don’t satisfy my deep longing to hear and be heard. I need more, and prayer *is* so much more.

One of my favorite definitions of prayer is “the living interactive relationship we have with God about what he and I are working on together” (Richard Foster). *Working together*—that sets me on fire! Prayer is a two-way exchange—it’s dynamic, active, and it’s relevant to Now. There are no how, when, or where rules. My devoted, humble heart laid bare is all that’s required. ...*All*? That tiny word contains multitudes: all of my heart, all of my soul, all of my life, all of my willingness, all of my honesty, all that I am and all that I have.

I fall short in so many ways. I’ve wandered off the path, loved the world, wanted what’s not mine; done things I’m ashamed of...my sins are countless. Through it all I’ve experienced both the discipline and the grace of God, and I’m so very grateful for both. My devoted, humble heart laid bare can’t pretend, can’t hide. It screams a wordless prayer. It has nothing to offer except itself, and in return God gives everything. This kind of love, this kind of friendship, is deep and real...beyond words. This God of Love, who *is* love, speaks the language of love: compassion, humility, patience...summed up in 1 Corinthians 13. He clearly says if we love him we keep his commandments, and many of them involve loving. He clearly tells us how to treat one another. He clearly says that if we abide in him we can ask anything.

Abiding, loving, listening and obeying sounds is my end of “working together.” If my heart is inextricably connected to his, then his will is my desire and I really can ask anything. If I “live and move and have my being in Christ,” God-prayers, spoken or unspoken, are born and released into the heavens where all things begin. So, again, I wonder if love manifested in wordless action could be the most powerful and effective prayer? That is, love shown by obeying God’s words; love shown by walking in truth, by doing what he tells me, by loving my neighbor with no restrictions or judgments.

Through this abiding love my whole life becomes a prayer—praying without ceasing. Sometimes words come, but, when there are no words, I believe Christ our intercessor understands and interprets my silent cries to the Father.

This time of year the prayer garden looks bleak. Leafless trees stand naked, exposing what's behind and above. No shade or shelter, no concealment or pretense. Leaves litter the ground, obscuring low-growing plants and specimen rocks, narrowing the pathway. Garden creatures such as lizards, butterflies, and bees hide in their winter homes, waiting out the cold. Where is the lushness of life? Where pulses the garden heart? It's there, hidden where my eyes can't see. The garden will come to life as the season turns and sun and rain drench the earth again. I don't have to say a word.

Ps 38:9 O Lord, my every desire is before You; my groaning is not hidden from You.

Moving Forward – Waiting – by Pam Charro

A close friend recently made a comment that I'm still chewing on.

She said, "Few people realize what a privilege it is to wait on God."

Why would that be true?

If you're like me, waiting is not one of your favorite things to do. Especially here in America, we live in a fast-food society where we want everything NOW. Waiting is uncomfortable and unfamiliar and doesn't always make sense to us.

But the word of God is full of instruction on the value of learning to wait on God:

Isaiah 40:31 says waiting on the Lord renews our strength and gives us wings.

Lamentations 3:25 says the Lord is good to those who wait for him.

Psalm 37:7 says to be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.

Isaiah 30:18 says blessed are all who wait for him.

There are so many more verses about the benefits of learning to wait on God, but I would sum it up to say one main point found in 1 Corinthians 2:9:

*No eye has seen, no ear has heard,
and no mind has imagined the things that God
has prepared for those who love him.*

I don't believe this pertains only to the next life, but to the life we are living right now! Being in the uncomfortable middle forces us to rely on our faith in his goodness to us, and it's the only place we can be where all things are possible. Intentional waiting on God gives him the chance to really show off.

I'm very actively waiting on God for many things right now, and I hope you are, too. As we journey with him, let's enjoy watching just how good he truly is.

The best is yet to come!

Rooted in Love - I Can't Get Comfortable – by Kaelin Scott

You lie down in your bed at the end of a long day, shifting around until you find the perfect position. You're so comfortable that you think you'll never move again. But ten minutes later, your arm falls asleep and you have to roll over to get comfy again.

Comfort never lasts forever, especially on the journey of parenting.

It feels like I just got used to my daughter being four, and now she's already five. And I could swear my son just said his first words yesterday, but he's a constant jabber box and fountain of information. Every time I catch up to time, it runs away from me again. Sometimes I just want to pause life and not let any more of it slip away. I can't even catch my breath before my children are off accomplishing some new milestone, learning to read, and having more birthdays.

It's hard to let go when all I want to do is hold on tight. Our babies don't stay little forever. They outgrow our favorite little outfits, they lose those precious baby teeth, and they eventually ditch their training wheels. I find myself clinging to moments that may never come again, wishing it would all slow down. I don't want things to change, and I don't want my babies to stop needing me. But no season or phase is meant to last forever. Some are exciting and others are bittersweet, yet each is wonderful in its own special way.

Whenever I have the rarity of being comfortable in life, I want to enjoy it to the fullest. Instead of dreading the changes up ahead, knowing that none of this will last too long, I want to live in the moment and make as many memories as I can. I know my little ones won't be little forever. They're already so much more grown-up than I can even believe. But they're little for now, and now is beautiful. I love our days together and the moments we share along the way. Even if change is right around the corner, I've still got today. So I'm going to enjoy it while I can.

Whatever season of life or parenting you're in, it won't last forever. That can make you feel sad, but it's also encouraging. There are so many more wonderful things to come. You might be comfortable with the way things are, and maybe you don't want anything to change. I don't either! But find comfort in knowing that God has already ordained the seasons ahead. He has special surprises and blessings waiting for you. He has already gone ahead of you, and He is walking alongside you. Enjoy today, and look forward to tomorrow!

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.

Ecclesiastes 3:1

Simple Truths – Puzzling – by Marcy Lytle

All of life is a puzzle, isn't it? That's not a new analogy. It's been around for as long as the word puzzle has been here. A puzzle is something that's confusing and broken apart. And that's what life is, right about now, and gets more confusing every day. There's no way to make sense of the government, the viruses, the unrest and prejudice, and more. And yet, that's what we do, because we all like to work puzzles. We especially love it when a puzzle comes together!

We hadn't put together a puzzle in years, but during all of this time at home, we have pulled out a few and completed them. It's quite daunting to start a puzzle, as you lay out all the pieces – many of which look the same color with very little difference. And like most people, I suppose, we gather the edges, then sort the pieces into color groups, and then...we start the puzzle! Depending on how many pieces there are, then a week or a month later, the puzzle is complete and we feel this sense of relief and pride!

Here's what I've learned while puzzling, and I'm sure you can "get the picture" as you read, without my having to explain, as we think about life going forward...

It's so helpful to have a picture of how the puzzle is supposed to look, once it's together. Without that box, the photo on the front, we'd be scrambling a lot longer and become so much more frustrated...and maybe never finish at all.

Light is everything. We turned on every light in the room, including the lamps overhead and across, to shed as much light as possible while we worked. Light helped us see!

If one piece fell off the table, we immediately picked it up because it could get vacuumed up, stepped on and bent, or lost altogether. It was so important that we keep the pieces together, so the completed puzzle wouldn't be missing any part of the picture!

Working together was key, because sometimes the very piece I needed was in his "pile" and vice-versa. And often, it was so exciting to see when little groups we were putting together actually joined into the big picture!

Pausing was also key, because working puzzles is hard work and tedious and can become addicting. However, stopping for a while to rest our eyes, getting up to do life, and stepping away from the concentration – well it often resulted in faster work when we came back to the puzzle. Rest helped so much!

We gravitated toward the easy, first. The puzzle we put together was one of a huge apple pie and lots of colorful pieces surrounding it. Those pieces were the most fun, and the apple pie crust was the hardest part, by far. It took lots more time and effort to put those pieces in, the ones that blended and didn't really stand out, but once we did...OH MY GOSH...it felt so good.

Completion was elation. We smiled, we stood up and patted the puzzle, we gazed at it a while and we shared it on social media to let our friends know of the beauty that came out of the chaos in the beginning!

I'm not going to explain each analogy in detail, but you can see that putting together a puzzle teaches us so much about life as a Body, making sure the Light is near and shining brightly, working together with Others, the importance of Rest and Inclusion, and SO MUCH MORE.

Haven't done a puzzle, lately? We're all pieces of a living puzzle, and thank goodness – there are steady hands and eyes putting each of us into place for the final glorious completion that will blow the minds of those that stay on the table and play their part in the beauty that awaits us all...

Unearthly Thing - Objects in the Mirror May Not be as Bad as They Appear – by Angela Dolbear

It was a good day disguised as a bad day.

I was sure the “morning yuckies,” a debilitating cocktail of brain fog, fatigue, and pain, which I experience every morning due to life with an auto immune disease, would wear off around lunch time, as it generally does.

But it did not. Weakness and joint aches double-teamed me until I tagged out, and surrendered to spending the day lying on the couch. Might sound relaxing, but it’s far from it. It’s frustrating, and it makes me grieve for my health.

But I remembered God’s teaching about rest, and how important it is. It was technically not the Sabbath (which is loosely interpreted by this Gentile gal to mean Sunday), but my joints were not moving well, and taking a shower was looking like the major accomplishment for the day.

So I wrapped my stiff and weary self in my *Nightmare Before Christmas* fleece blanket, reclined the couch back, and turned on my side so I could gaze out the picture window in our living room. And I began to pray.

Prayer is more like talking with God. It’s a privilege, and truly, it’s a necessity.

I started with gratitude. I am so thankful for my husband, for my beautiful home, for God’s constant great provision, especially through the pandemic, and for healing me through the years of all the ailments that scleroderma has done to try to put me on the sidelines, and even tried to take me out of the game.

Anxiety had stepped-up its hold on me, giving me intense, even hostile dreams, and bad sleep in general. The lack of rest is probably the culprit for the current flare-up that has me unmoving, only able to stare out the window.

After a few moments, I quieted my mind, and watched the clouds of a forecasted rainstorm move into my view. The contrast between the bright blue sky and the heavy gray cloud bank was so striking, and reminded me of God’s power and grace, if those attributes could materialize.

*I was beginning to love my time of sequestered stillness.
I told myself I should do this more often.*

I heard a still small voice in my spirit say, “Ask Me.” It was more of a reminder than an invitation.

So I asked Jesus to heal me from anxiety. I asked, standing on the confidence of the long list of healing He has done for me (and for others that I have witnessed).

As I was thinking back through all the instances of healing that Jesus did in the gospel of Luke, which my husband and I had recently finished reading, a sudden silence happened in my spirit.

The low murmuring grinding that I was not aware that was always present in my mind ceased, and there was peace.

My spirit was relieved. It happened so suddenly, that I asked Jesus, "What was that?"

"I healed you," He said.

Throughout the rest of the day, and into the evening, I kept replaying the sudden stopping of the grinding murmur in my spirit. I felt lighter. I kept asking God if it was my anxiety He healed, because I was stunned after being plagued by it for almost three years.

I usually end each day with standing on our back porch waiting for my sweet pup Abby to do her business before we all go to bed. It's the perfect time to reflect on the day, on what happened, and what I could have done differently, and what I have to be grateful for.

On that night of my healing, I looked up at the bright full moon, framed by a few leafless branches from our neighbor's huge oak tree, and marveled at how the moon lit up the clear evening sky. And the sky was full of stars, which are usually hard to see since we live close to the bright city lights downtown Nashville.

And I noticed my spirit was still, more still than it has been since before I had a stroke in March 2018, which is when the anxiety started. The constant inner noise was truly gone.

"You healed my anxiety, huh," I said to God.

I healed your anxiety, He said, with loving authority.

Thank You, Lord. I love You.

I thought about how my perspective on my circumstances changed. And how only God can help me sort through the fragments of the situation, and provide a glimpse of a fuller view of what He is doing. I thought about 1 Corinthians 13:12:

"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I also have been fully known."

I love this verse (along with verse 13) in the Amplified translation of the Bible. It helps me dig deeper into its meaning:

"For now [in this time of imperfection] we see in a mirror dimly [a blurred reflection, a riddle, an enigma], but then [when the time of perfection comes we will see reality] face to face. Now I know in part [just in fragments], but then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known [by God]. 13 And now there remain: faith [abiding trust in God and His promises], hope [confident expectation of eternal salvation], love [unselfish love for others growing out of God's love for me], these three [the choicest graces]; but the greatest of these is love."

What I thought started out as no-good-got-nothing-done sick day, turned out to be a mark-it-down-in-the-blessings-journal day (which I made sure I did). A truly good day.

P.S. Every month, I ask God what He would like me to write about in my "Unearthly Thing" column in THYME. He told me to tell my story in the March article, because others needed to hear it. Yet another answer to prayer! He is so good.

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series, and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, all 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 inspiring readers to laugh, cry, and crave certain varieties of food. She loves reading, writing and leading worship music with her husband Tim at their church in Nashville, Tennessee. Please drop by and sing-up for news and free goodies at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>. Blessings to you!



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - All Tangled Up – by Marcy Lytle

We love to take walks, and we walk now more than we ever did before. That's a good thing, for sure! And I've also realized that when I walk, I've often thought more than observed, and that's not a good thing! Thinking gets in the way of seeing, and not seeing gets in the way of marveling at all that's good out in nature! So I put away my phone, I grab his hand, and off we go.

One of our favorite walking trails is near our house, a trail that meanders along a beautiful creek, and it's so pretty in all seasons. I'd say we see something interesting and fresh, every time we take a walk past a coop of goats and chickens, across a bridge, and onto this path that we love so much.

This particular time, up in the tree, we spotted this kite. Apparently, some kid was flying it high, possibly squealing with delight, and then suddenly, that joyful experience most likely turned to sorrowful wails, as Mom or Dad explained that kite flying was over.

There's a field across the path from that tree, and I can just imagine a family picnic was taking place, the parents had purchased or even made kites for the kids to fly, and had even imagined all of the joy that would fill their family time on the lawn. And then, as happens to EVERY SINGLE KID, they don't stay clear of the trees and the kite tangles up, and the party's over.

I stopped to take a picture of this kite stuck in the tree, and you know why? It was because this dead tree, or at least a tree that's dormant in the winter, was unattractive, unassuming, and would never have caught my eye had the colorful kite not been tangled in its branches.

That messed up picnic, wailing child, ruined party, became my focal point for the picture, because of the beauty it left among the lackluster tree without leaves.

I love lessons and thoughts that occur while taking walks, but they don't happen unless I look up and observe. They don't take place if I spend that time walking and choose to complain as I walk. And I miss them all if I'm deep in worry about what's going to happen tomorrow.

Isn't this picture stunning? At least, I think it is. There's nothing so lovely as a pop of color against a black and white, or gray, background.

And we can also learn so many other things from that kite stuck in a tree. We need to stay clear of trees, when we're told to do so. We need to listen to our Father, and obey. We need to let him help us as we soar. And we need to realize that a stuck kite isn't the end of the world, but only a fragmented piece in the beauty of the day...even if it's torn up and no longer flying.

That kid will most likely get another kite, the family will picnic another day, and the kid will become more skilled at listening, flying, and soaring...and those that walk by will then look up and see the tail flying in the wind behind the kite that's flying high against a backdrop of blue...instead of gray.

FRESH THYME - Lonely Times – by Marcy Lytle

I will not even pretend to understand the true meaning of being lonely, but I've certainly tasted it, observed it, and empathized with the lonely. Single folks, I don't know how you do it. It breaks my heart for the elderly. And being in a crowd of people and surrounded by those you love, and still feeling lonely, must be the worst of all. Loneliness is probably one of the most common feelings in so many, since we were first ordered to stay at home and not gather, not touch, and not even be near people.

Of course, for the introvert we said early on – this was a dream come true! But even if we're introverts or extroverts, loneliness can settle in over us like a dark cloud that won't just burst and rain, blow on by, or evaporate. Loneliness, after a while, can smother us.

The places and experiences where I've tasted loneliness sometimes bring with them feelings like:

- Panic – Thoughts race into my mind about being alone in the world, when I hear of someone losing a spouse or a family member to the virus or any other reason.
- Uneasiness – Being alone for too long can result in feeling like the walls are closing in, like we need to escape from being shut in, and all sorts of queasy and uneasy flutters in our stomachs and minds.
- Sadness – If we sit alone for too long, without any input from those that love us, or strangers that need us, or the sun that wants to warm us, we become frowners and downers.
- Sleepiness – Have you ever sat alone, tired of chores, uninterested in creating or reorganizing, and so you just decide to lie down and take a nap? A nap is great, but not all day...
- Despair – If we're lonely for too much and for too long, we may begin to think that loneliness is all there is, and we may begin to despair of the future, of living, and of anything joyful at all.

I'd say I tasted little bites of each of those every once in a while, and I bet many have tasted way too many bites of those feelings, and it's made us all sick. Being lonely is not a part of how we're supposed to live. But going weeks and months without physical contact, face to face conversation, and gatherings of energetic crowds can certainly create lonely times.

So, what have you done? What are we to do? How do we remedy the lonely times that last way too long, while we're still wearing masks and distancing while living?

You've probably settled in on your own solutions, but here are just a few:

- Pour out your heart to Him, and He will lift you up and be near and real, and lead you out...
- Spring is here, so take more walks, plant more flowers, and wave at more people...
- Call a friend and confess your loneliness. Don't sit and pity yourself. Ask and receive...

- Ask a friend to be your partner, in spurring each other daily to move and create and give...
- Recount your blessings, sing your praises, and start reaching out to share...

Loneliness can sometimes swallow us up, and it often swallows up our friends that we haven't talked to in a long time. So if loneliness is not part of your life right now, reach out to someone that comes to mind and call them, text them, send them a gift, or better yet...invite them to sit in your yard or a park...and create connection once again.

FRESH THYME - Sunrise – Wait for It – by Marcy Lytle

I was awake at 3am, wide awake, mind churning. Once in a while that happens, and I really don't like it one bit. And often, I pray or try to think other thoughts, but usually if I'm wide awake – forget it. Nothing works to help me return to a deep sleep that my body so desperately needs. However, this one particular morning, I was able to go back to sleep. What was different?

The panic and the sleeplessness was not different. It's been coming in waves, ever since the pandemic has worn on and on. It heightens sometimes when I watch the news or read entertainment reports. A recent report was about a new film about cannibals...not the kind in other countries in the wild...but like here living among us. What? Words like "another surge" just stand out in my mind. Thoughts about the future for my children and their children, and then there's my own future...as I age with my husband. You know the drill. Your mind starts at A and runs down the hill towards Z, only it's not the happy ABC song you knew as a kid.

A few days ago, I saw an image someone posted of a small person looking up at a big huge sky. It was a sky littered with stars, with a moon in the corner, and it looked absolutely beautiful and in order. And I felt God speak to me these words:

If I can march the stars out at night, set them in place,

give waters their boundaries and clouds their movement,

then I can make order out of a chaotic world with just one word from my mouth.

That voice, that moment, completely stilled my heart. In fact, I'd say that my worrisome heart immediately calmed down and the storm exited as quickly as it came. I was so thankful.

But here I was again, about a week later, awake and worried and bothered and burdened. The worst kind of trio in the middle of the night, and it wasn't a trio that was singing a pretty tune. I tried to conjure up that image and that peace again. And He was there with me again, this time reminding me about the sunrise.

I realized that we all (everyone in every country around the world) go to bed at night, close our eyes, and trust... We trust that the sun will rise the next morning, and when we awaken, the stars will be replaced by a few clouds, and the moon by the bigger sun, and light will return. It doesn't matter if you believe in a higher power or the Creator of the Universe...you do this, as well. You go to sleep, knowing that the darkness of the night will give way to the light of the next day.

And guess what? That process will take place without you lifting a finger. In fact, God set in motion the need for our bodies to rest during the darkest part of the 24-hour period of the day. There's got to be a message in that process.

The message to me, and it's a message to you, as well – is this:

No amount of worry can change a thing. (Where have you heard those words before?) There's nothing I can do or say to make the darkness cease once the sun sets. But there is something I can do to usher in the rising sun. And that is...*rest*.

I had picked up all the burdens of the previous day, from my children's concerns, to my dad's health, to the state of the world, to the loneliness in my own soul, and so much more. It was a heavy load and it pressed on my heart so much that it awakened me with heaviness and fear. Yes, I prayed. But more than just words, I felt He wanted me to know. He wanted me to know Him.

He is faithful, and he has been since the beginning of time when he moved over the dark formless earth and spoke into existence all that we see and experience today in the form of the beauty of another day.

I have no idea what today will bring, but I know for certain that night will fall again, and the sun will rise tomorrow and there will be another day. It might be here, or it might be there (which wow – I cannot even comprehend the light that will shine up there!) but there's no use in losing sleep over all of those worries.

Now, I know that's easy to read and hard to do. It's hard for me. But last night it was easier, because that visual of looking at the sky was still with me, the knowledge that darkness couldn't stop the sunrise reminded me, and his gentle voice wooed me back to sleep.

Sunrise. Wait for it. Sleep while it's the darkest, even when you can't see a thing, because the Creator is at work making all things and calling them good as he sends forth the Light.

FRESH THYME - Why I Don't Wear Joggers – by Marcy Lytle

They're on the cover of every magazine, they pop up on my feed, and the influencers on Instagram are wearing them and shouting their praises. So this past Christmas, I asked for a cute set – you know – the kind where the top matches the bottom. The cute jogger that is supposed to be the trend of this change in lifestyle we're all living, more time at home, and not in the office. So I put it on one morning and wore it for a few hours, and then hung it back in the closet. I haven't worn it since.

Why?

- Joggers make me feel frumpy. Yes, that's a word. It means dowdy and old-fashioned. So, maybe that's not the right word. But I felt undressed and slouchy. Yes, that's it. Slouchy. And loose fitting, slouchy clothes make me want to sit around and do nothing, and that's not me.
- Joggers are often loose and baggy. I know, some think that's a good thing. But I like pants that zip. That way I can tell if I've overeaten, I feel like my body parts are in place, and it feels better to me than a relaxed fit. Okay, maybe you're thinking I'm weird. But there's more...
- Joggers are often tight and revealing. I really don't like seeing every dimple in a girl's butt or the outline of her underwear in the tight versions, or the realization that there is no underwear, when walking on a trail behind those out actually jogging. Maybe the tight legs are good for running, but cover your bum. It's not sexy or cute when it wiggles as we run.
- Joggers put on airs. Those that wear joggers appear to be those that are trying to stay healthy by moving and exercising. But just wearing them doesn't mean anything. And wearing them shopping and out to eat and everywhere we go isn't fooling anyone.

Do I sound critical? I'm just being honest about these pants that I see flying off the shelves in every color and style, from tie-dye to open air weave down the side of the leg. I really don't care for them, a lot. Yes, I have a couple pair, but here's how I wear them...

- Joggers are for yard work. I don't mind them when I'm out mowing, as that activity will be starting up all too soon. I like them for planting my garden, because yeah – I can bend and move easily and wear a sloppy tshirt in the safety of my own yard.
- Joggers are for exercise only (in my opinion) – for the gym, for the trail (with bum covered) or for the floor at home. I haven't seen a pair yet that's appealing to wear anywhere else. Not even the cute matchy-matchy sets of tops with bottoms. Nope.
- Joggers are for sick days. Those loose drawstring types are great for sitting on the sofa, watching shows, sipping on hot tea, and resting to get well. That's where joggers thrive and ought to live, and stay.
- Joggers are the exception, not the rule. Instead of drawers or hangers full of these baggy or skin tight clothing items we call outfits, we should have only a couple...not a ton.

If you live and breathe for joggers, good for you. But I don't get it. Maybe you don't get me, either. And that's okay! We're different. I just like to spout off once in a while, and this month of March is my madness about joggers.

I'm excited to buy spring skirts, dresses, cute pastel or khaki pants, and more...to dress up...to sit on the sofa, take a ride in the car, or visit a park. I feel better about myself when all my junk is hidden and pulled in and zipped up and designed with style.

Okay, I'm done...



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

April 2021



TIPS

In the Kitchen – A Colorful Plate – by Marcy Lytle

One of the coolest things about this new season is all the color we can have on our plate at home, on a picnic, or anywhere...really! Color on the plate is not only tasty and healthy, but it looks so pretty and makes us want to eat and savor every bite! “They say” the more color on our plates the better. So here are some fun recipes that add color and flavor and all the things good that we celebrate in the season of spring!

Succotash!

We recently traveled to Mississippi and I bought a cookbook there, and found a fun succotash recipe on its pages, and made it my own. The cool thing is that this mixture can be served over rice or pasta, and both are good!

- 1 chopped yellow onion
- ½ lb ham steak cut into ½ in cubes
- 2 T veg oil or butter
- 1 qt water (I used less)
- 1 17oz can crushed tomatoes
- 1 can green beans (recipe called for frozen butter beans but I opted not)
- 1 sm can of yellow corn
- 1 sm can of white shoepeg corn
- Rice or pasta

Saute onions and ham in the oil or butter until ham browns. Add this to simmering water (I felt a quart was too much – so you choose). Add all the canned goods (drained, first) and then cook until everything is heated. You will need to season it to taste! So good!

Lemon Pesto Pasta

I saw this recipe in Rachael Ray’s 30-minute meals and it looked so good. Not only that, but I found it so easy to make, and it didn’t take long. We both LOVED it and took it for a picnic.

- 1 lb corkscrew pasta
- 1 cup refrigerated pesto (I made my own, but you can buy, as well)
- 1 lemon, juiced and zested
- ¼ cup flat leaf parsley chopped
- 1 cup grape tomatoes, cut in half
- 4 scallions chopped
- ¾ lb of ricotta salata chopped and crumbled or 1lb tub bocconcini mini mozzarella drained and halved (I just used shredded mozzarella)
- Black pepper and coarse salt

Cook the pasta in salted water. Place all the other ingredients in a large bowl. When pasta is al dente, cold shock it and chill it under running cold water, and drain. Add to the bowl and mix. Season with salt and pepper. (I added a few Marcona almonds on top – loved the crunch!)

Lima Bean Hummus

Okay, so this is a green colored hummus, but paired with the colors of carrots, radishes, cukes and red bell peppers, it makes a nice appetizer tray for you and yours! And the lima beans instead of chickpeas are so tasty. My husband thought this was guacamole!

- 1 ½ c frozen baby lima beans (8oz)
- ½ c fresh basil
- 1 T plus 1 ½ tsp fresh lemon juice
- 1 ½ t tahini
- 1 small clove garlic
- Sea salt and fresh black pepper, to taste

In a medium saucepan, combine lima beans and 1 ½ c water, and bring to boiling. Reduce heat and simmer uncovered, about 20 minutes til tender, and drain. In a blender or processor, combine these beans with the other ingredients, cover and blend til smooth. Season with salt and pepper, pulse again. Transfer to a bowl and chill til ready to serve!

Italian Sausage and Pepper Pizza

HEB is the grocery store where I order curbside, and when I click on a product to purchase, if I scroll down the page there are recipes using that product – so cool. This is one of those recipes, and it's so colorful and so tasty – and it was really easy to make. In fact, you could prep all the ingredients ahead of time for a quick dinner later in the week!

- 1 pizza crust (I used HEB Midtown Crust)
- ¼ c roasted garlic pizza sauce
- 1 ½ c shredded mozzarella cheese
- ¼ cup red bell pepper, diced
- ¼ c green bell pepper, diced
- 2 T sliced black olives
- 2 T red onion, diced
- ¼ cup sliced pepperoncini
- ½ cup sweet Italian sausage, browned and drained

Preheat the oven to 450 degrees. Place frozen pizza crust on pizza pan and evenly spread the sauce, leaving ½ crust around the edge.

Sprinkle cheese on top of the sauce, and then all of the rest of the ingredients, spreading out evenly.

Place in middle rack of oven and bake 8-10 minutes until cheese is melted and edges of crust are browned.

Noodle Stir Fry

You know, those Ramen noodles we all used to love and enjoy? Or maybe you still do! Just soak a package of the noodles in a bowl of hot water for two minutes, then drain and add in the following:

Cooked fajita chicken

Chopped green pepper, chopped onion and garlic – stir fried til crisp-tender

½ cup chicken broth (low sodium)

2 T soy sauce

A bit of seasoned salt if needed (taste first)

Wedges of tomato

It's SO GOOD! We had this for lunch just today!

Seven For You – Heirlooms

We decided to ask our panel of women to share heirlooms, treasures they have, with us. Maybe you have some cool things that were passed down to you, or...you can look around and see what you can pass down to others. A couple months ago, we shared a story about a nice neighbor that passed down piggy banks to the three little girls next door. Those little piggies are sure to be treasures!

Here are a few of the things we have that are fun and special:

Two of my favorite things are my teapot that belonged to my Nannie. It was given to her when she married my Granddad.

The other is the salt and pepper shaker babies that were on the baby shower cake when my Mom was pregnant with me. They are odd and not in the best of shape, but they're special.

My most prized heirloom is a painting of my mother. She died when I was nine. When I was about ten years old, I took a road trip with her parents, my grandparents. One of the places we visited on that trip was Gatlinburg, Tennessee. It was such a magical place to me. I do not know why, maybe it was the beautiful scenery that seemed to whisk me away from my everyday worrisome thoughts, maybe it was the candy shop letting me pull taffy with them, or maybe it was just being with my grandparents. Whatever it was, that was a wonderful trip for me. While we were there, my grandmother had a picture of my mom painted by one of the sidewalk artists. It held a special place in my heart and still does. The artist was such a nice man and did a beautiful job on my mother's portrait from a photograph my grandmother carried in her purse. I later inherited the painting. It reminds me of my mom and her beauty at thirty-two years old every time I look at it. It has moved around with me for many years. My house is filled with heirlooms, but this is the one I would not want to lose.

One of my favorite heirlooms is a set of small cookbooks that are really old. There was an elderly woman in my church when I was a young teen, and when she died I received a set of these cookbooks. I love looking at the images and the ingredients, and the wording. And even better, I love choosing one of these heirloom recipes to try once in a while!

I am fortunate to have several items that have been passed down to me by my parents and grandparents. The heirlooms that are dearest to me are not the dining room furniture pieces or the china dishes but the faded worn quilts. The two quilts in the picture were hand-quilted by my grandmother. The one on the left was made with remnants of my uncle's baby clothes and the one on the right with remnants of my mother's baby clothes. He would have been 100 this year. She is 94. I curl up with my mother's quilt on cold mornings for my early reading and prayer. I

cannot help but be grateful as it provides warmth, brings me comfort, and reminds me that I am the product of generations of believers.

I have my own heirloom given to me by my husband Brent when we got married. He gave me a pair of pearl earrings and I think I have worn them – let's say at least 5 days out of the week for 39 years. We celebrate our 40th wedding anniversary this November so I will for sure be wearing them on 11-21-21. So I guess either my daughter Sarah will inherit them or the first granddaughter to get married? I had not thought of that possibility!

I have a cedar chest that my mother had before she married. I am using it now to save memorabilia, some of my children's baby clothes, old letters and photos. Also, I use my mother's sewing machine when I sew. But on a daily basis, I use it as a vanity and put on my makeup. I hope that one of my two children, or another family member, will want to own these someday!

We were robbed years ago and an heirloom charm bracelet that was given to me by Mom was stolen. So when my mom passed away a few years ago, all of the girls sat on Mom's bed and looked through her beautiful array of costume jewelry. I treasure several of those pieces; but most of all, I love having her wedding rings. I don't wear them, but I have them in a special place, and I smile every time I open the drawer and view them, because I remember her beautiful hands!

Do you have something you love and think your kids or grandkids, or even a neighbor's child, might appreciate and enjoy? If you tell the story of how you received it, how it's brought joy to your life, that thankfulness and joy will be passed down along with the gift! How cool is that?

The Dressing – Belts and Bags – by Marcy Lytle

I see cute belts everywhere this season, and there are always cute bags, so that's our focus this month. It's April, and a cute accessory might be just the boost our wardrobe needs. And when we couple that with a new bag, we will be itching to hit the road for a little getaway somewhere to have fun. Or at least we can start planning for one!

I found this pretty belt while vacationing, but I've seen similar ones around. It's so pretty and add some for to any loose-fitting top or dress that you have. I'm styling it here with a black top over jeans, and then around a maxi dress to give it shape. At the waist, we sometimes need a little something to remind us that we have a waist! I've found a link for a pretty one from Amazon.

https://www.amazon.com/IFENDEI-Womens-Skinny-Leather-X-Small/dp/B08HMHC1CT/ref=sr_1_3_sspa?crd=1JCR2NG9UEOYJ&dchild=1&keywords=black+belt+with+gold+buckle+women&qid=1615812097&srefix=black+belt+w%2Caps%2C278&sr=8-3-spons&psc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUE5N0FWVzNIRzVORUQmZW5jcnlwdGVkSWQ9QTA1MjYxMTkxSE4zV1RMT0ZQSIRJmVuY3J5cHRIZEFkSWQ9QTA5NzE4OTdUMjA0MEVPRTNMFQmd2IkZ2V0TmFtZT1zcF9hdGYmYWN0aW9uPWNSaWNrUmVkaXJlY3QmZG9Ob3Rmb2dDbGljaz10cnVl

Isn't this bag fun with the city name on it? I saw it at Marshalls and grabbed it. I'm wondering if they have your city name on bags at your Marshalls? If not, google your city, or buy a canvas bag and paint your own creation! Bags like these are great for packing up books and magazines for a relaxing read in the park this spring season. I found a site that sells lots of city tote bags for your choosing!

https://www.westelm.com/products/lcl-claudia-pearson-city-tote-bags-d4393/?catalogId=71&sku=1686745&cm_ven=FreePLA&cm_cat=Google&cm_pla=Storage%20%3E%20Totes%20%2B%20Pouches®ion_id=680400

I've had this bag for years, but I keep it – because it adds a pop of color. And the chain is so fun. There are lots of chain bags this season. Often, you can choose to use the chain strap or tuck it inside, and carry the purse like a clutch. Either way looks great and is so fun! I've linked one here that's so cute, from Calvin Klein.

https://www.amazon.com/Calvin-Klein-Saffiano-Crossbody-Marigold/dp/B07KKLT1BV/ref=sr_1_24?dchild=1&keywords=yellow+purse+with+chain&qid=1615811886&sr=8-24

You know those cute little zipper makeup bags you can find in lots of stores? If they're colorful, small, and easy to snatch and take – then consider one for your larger purse or bag! Then when you're out and don't want to carry the heavy bag, opt for the tiny one inside – one that holds just enough for a lunch or whatever... (not sure about the pic for this) I've linked one from Amazon for your pleasure!

https://www.amazon.com/Cosmetic-BAGSMART-Lipsticks-Electronic-Accessories/dp/B08DFK9VPL/ref=sr_1_42?dchild=1&keywords=makeup+bag&qid=161581176&sr=8-42

A skinny belt with an interesting buckle is a great piece to add over a tshirt, with the wider legged jeans. Just make sure your tshirt is a little long and a little loose, then add the belt at the waist. This gives your body shape, and it adds interest to the outfit! I found one similar to the one I'm wearing - you can order here!

https://arimonz.net/products/leopard-print-buckle-belt?currency=USD&variant=34826355933319&utm_medium=cpc&utm_source=google&utm_campaign=Google%20Shopping&qclid=CjwKCAjw9MuCBhBUEiwAbDZ-7t8HzN7ni-1FlIjaHKFdeH7NP9b0oiflpdiC6WqaE4V7C_ue_wnrp9RoCRxMQAvD_BwE

Same outfit – showcasing a new backpack I recently purchased at Marshalls. But I've also linked a similar one here. This is a great statement bag especially for spring road trips and weekend excursions. I have loved mine so much. There are so many zippers and pockets, even a side pocket for a water bottle. It has straps to wear as a backpack, a tiny strap just for carrying, or one of the shoulder. I've used all three! LOVE IT so much (great for taking snacks to the movies, too.)

https://www.mercari.com/us/item/m12071141776/?qclsrc=aw.ds&utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=12272857161&utm_content=t0&adgroup=116244883406&network=g&device=c&merchant_id=130544828&product_id=353409924462&qclid=CjwKCAjw9MuCBhBUEiwAbDZ-7vgNgcWw36EqOKTKyCT8XBZ7aYsmr3yKuMkur2h83dsU1be9jvmzYRoCLfYQAvD_BwE

This is one outfit with different purses, depending on your mood! You can choose for a suede bag to match a stripe, a tiny bag to go with the pants, or a tote to pull the outfit together. Changing up a bag gives you so much variety! I'm including a link for a nice tote from Free People.

<https://www.freepeople.com/shop/fleabg-east-west-pocket-tote/?color=072&countryCode=US&inventoryCountry=US&size=One%20Size&type=REGULAR&quantity=1>

No belt? No problems. Just wear a button up shirt (buy it a speck big so you have room) and leave the bottom few buttons undone, and tie in a knot. If you opt for a longer shirt, then you have the back part still long. It works. And then carry that cute city bag, again... This shirt is from Target.

https://www.target.com/p/women-39-s-plaid-long-sleeve-button-down-shirt-universal-thread-8482-yellow-xs/-/A-81188514?ref=tgt_adv_XS000000&AFID=google_pla_df&fndssrc=tgtao&DFA=71700000014846111&CPNG=PLA_Women%2BShopping_Brand&adgroup=SC_Women&LID=700000001170770pgs&LNM=PRODUCT_GROUP&network=g&device=c&location=9028263&targetid=pla-893367080827&ds_rl=1241788&ds_rl=1246978&ds_rl=1248099&qclid=CjwKCAjwgOGCBhAIEi

[wA7FUXkt0cARF_UDS9E5Q97bmn4EeOgWuwNgUGernToSND5RWmSApwlhRdnxoCzBoQAvD_BwE&gclid=aw.ds](https://www.target.com/p/women-s-open-neck-cardigan-universal-thread/-/A-79694240?preselect=79389450#ink=sameta)

Those wraps. Maybe you don't prefer a belt because you think you need to wear something loose. A soft belt that comes with a wrap is always a good option, especially while it's still somewhat cool. It's non-restricting and adds a bit of shape and style. This one is from Luxe Apothetique, but I've linked a blue one (they come in several colors!) from Target here.

<https://www.target.com/p/women-s-open-neck-cardigan-universal-thread/-/A-79694240?preselect=79389450#ink=sameta>

Three Moms – Playing Games

We're thinking that a bunch of families need some new game ideas, especially since we were all home so much in the past year and probably are gamed out! We asked our moms of nine littles to share with us their favorite family games – either indoors or outdoors, purchased or made up, and we love what they all submitted. Hope you do, as well, and find new inspiration for family game night.

Mom of Three

We have really gotten into playing board games now that our youngest and understand rules and read! Two favorites are Life – the old version. One fun thing is that there's money involved and decisions have to be made – so we rotate the banker so they can learn! The kids really like this game! The second game is Clue. My kids love a good mystery and love the idea of figuring it out. It can be a little difficult with the youngest, but they all love guessing and engaging – we do too! Our youngest recently won for the first time!

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=life+board+game&crd=6EN4BDT4PREU&srefix=life+%2Caps%2C263&ref=nb_sb_ss_midass-sm_1_5

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=clue+board+game&crd=28NN8ZK2B9L3L&srefix=clue+%2Caps%2C259&ref=nb_sb_ss_midass-sm_1_4

When we have dinner, we like to play the question games we have collected from Chick Fil A meals. They are just “getting to know each other” questions. We do these in the car too, on road trips.

Outside, we don't have specific games, because we bike ride and walk. But they do like Bocce Ball and Corn Hole, when the weather is nice.

One game we've made up – instead of playing Jenga with the blocks – we have to create something (like a dinosaur) out of the blocks. This is fun and creative, to try and create an image with these blocks. We also do that with the Magna Tiles, where one person gives a theme and we all have to create. These are so fun!

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=magna+tiles+building+set+for+kids&crd=SL095BQLCOSQ&srefix=magna+%2Caps%2C227&ref=nb_sb_ss_midass-sm_1_6

Mom of Two

Games with a 2 year-old and a 4 year-old consist of made-up games and interactive “get your energy out” games.

I'd say our top three are:

Hide and seek – This has been a favorite for the past year, especially for our 2-year old. We pair up, one of counts to 10, and then we find the others. This teaches us to be quiet when we're hiding and it's a lot of fun.

Gymnastics circus – We set up a course, since our oldest has been in gymnastics. We have something to jump over, a place to run and push the stroller, sit down and do a pike, jump on the sofa, run and toss a toy into a basket – all stations to get through. This is entertaining and burns energy. This is a great rainy day activity, for sure.

Chutes & Ladders, Candyland – These are good starters on board games for our little girls. This teaches colors, how to count, etc. The girls love both of these.

Mom of Four

Ticket to Ride is our favorite family board game. The kids love it and we are all very competitive – deals in strategy and math.

https://www.amazon.com/Ticket-to-Ride-First-Journey/dp/B01MQ4IKQJ/ref=sr_1_4?crid=3VBPOQXVKE0L3&dchild=1&keywords=ticket+to+ride+board+game&qid=1616065713&srefix=ticket+to+ride%2Caps%2C316&sr=8-4

Another family favorite is to have a dance party – all of us – and it's so fun! Crank up the music and move!

We also play basketball outside, we pick teams, and sometimes my husband and I join in – and sometimes just the kids play.

We also play Tickle Monster (my dad played this with us when I was a kid.) The fireplace is the base, we the parents are the Tickle Monster, and the kids love running away from the “monster!”

Tried and True – Porch Pretty – by Marcy Lytle

So many people lost so many plants this past winter; and maybe you've already replanted, your gardens are thriving and on the way toward fruitfulness, and your yard is pristine. But if not...and you need a little makeover for your porch, here are a few suggestion and ideas. I like to spruce up the porch each season, and I've shared other ideas for fall and Christmas...so why not the spring season, now?

Add a chair – If your porch has room, there's nothing more inviting than a chair for yourself – for a break – or for a neighbor if she needs a place to rest as she walks by. Metal in black is a good background for anything else you might add...I found mine at Kirklands.

And a cushion – Sometimes you can find these at the discount stores, or Kirklands, or At Home, or Home Goods – so get one! And add a pillow with text, if you want! I love this one from Target that says "Welcome!"

Hang a wreath – You can make your own, or you can buy one. I opted for a different style this season, a metal wreath with just a touch of floral at the bottom – it was on clearance at Kirklands!

Succulents are fun – I found this two-tiered long tray where I set all sorts of succulents in a beautiful array by my front door. They're easy to take care of and require very little watering.

Light is good – Lanterns look great on a small table by that chair! Opt for a rather large one with a candle that has a built in timer to come on at dark and go off about six hours later. This particular candle I found on Amazon and I love it!

Why not a bird? – Choose a color scheme and then find a ceramic "something" to sit nestled between your flowers.

Colorful pots – Instead of plain terra cotta or plastic pots in black, be sure to add some color with your pots – again the discount stores have some random sizes and colors – which are perfect!

And a new welcome – A welcome mat can complete your look – so find one that coordinates with your colors or...that matches the frame of your chair and lantern. I opted for black trim to go with the metal on my porch.

The front door – I found this fun sign with a little hanger to change out each month – and I love it! So my wreath is on the side wall, and this is on the front door! So you can play with your area and see where it works best to hang whatever you choose, as well!

Happy front porch re-do! And when you get it all done, sit down and enjoy the view...



HOME

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER – THAT’S JAWSOME – By Marcy Lytle

We just had a birthday dinner for a 6-year old and I found napkins with sharks on them, and they said “you’re jawsome!” They were so cute! And I thought why not use that as the topic for April’s family devo, as we read the story of Jonah and the big fish and learn about the awesomeness of that tale!

Preparation: You’ll need paper and markers. You can use the photo of the napkin, if you want, to create a sign to invite the family to come to the table to learn! And finally, goldfish, of course, is a great snack to enjoy while you learn.

Assign these items to be drawn: A man, a big fish, a boat, storm clouds, an angry face, a heart, and a big “OK” on a page. That’s seven items, to use as props for the story.

Jonah 1:3 says Jonah ran away from the Lord because the Lord asked him to do a hard thing. Have you ever run away from mom/dad when asked to clean or eat something you hate on your plate? (The man runs away)

A big storm blew up in the ship where Jonah was, and he went to sleep. But some of the guys on the ship awakened him, and Jonah felt they should throw him overboard since he disobeyed, and the storm would calm down. Isn’t that crazy? (The boat rocks under the big storm clouds)

In chapter 2 Jonah prays from the belly of the big fish that swallowed him up, and God heard his prayer. And guess what? The fish spewed Jonah out onto dry ground. (The big fish swallows the man, then chokes and the man lies on the ground)

This time when God spoke to Jonah, he obeyed and did what God asked him to do. (The man points to the OK sign)

Jonah’s obedience saved an entire group of people from destruction, because they believed in God when they heard Jonah’s message. (Hold up the heart – God’s love)

But Jonah was angry that the people repented, because he didn’t think they deserved God’s compassion. (Show the angry face).

What can we learn from this story in the book of Jonah?

God has compassion for all people, and we should too. Jonah didn’t want to go tell the people of God’s love because he didn’t like those people. When he disobeyed, bad things happened. When he obeyed, good things happened – people loved God.

Let’s pray together as a family that when God speaks, we will obey. When he tells us to love others, we will love them no matter who they are. And when we obey, let’s ask God to bless those we bless, and for us to be happy about God’s blessings...not angry and run away.

Everyone shout, “THAT’S JAWSOME!”

An Adage a Day - At the Right Time – by Carole Gilbert

If God gave us an adage for Himself what would He say? Would it be a phrase or a word? When it came time to start preparing this month's column my husband came up with this idea. He said to me what about some of the descriptive words or phrases we use. He got this idea because I called him a "wibble wobble" one day. I will not say what I was thinking when that came out but that is where this column's idea came from.

Our family is a little odd, I guess. We use words in different ways to express what we are feeling. I am really good at this and have passed it down to my children. I say a word to replace the word I am thinking. That way what I say may be nicer than what is on my mind depending on the situation. Have you ever done this?

Some of the words or phrases we use are real words, and some are made up, but they all have meaning to us. Some are encouraging like adages and some are used like idioms in a more figurative, sometimes sarcastic way. An example of this would be the idiom, "Out of sight, out of mind." We have all probably used this one at some time, in some way, and sometimes we might even apply it to God. It simply means that we do not think about things that are not in our present view.

Also, during this time, I had the Bible verse Isaiah 60:22 brought to my attention. It says, "At the right time, I, the Lord, will make it happen," (NLT). It is such a crazy and amazingly wonderful way God does this. I did not know it at the time, but between my husband's idea for this column and hearing this verse, God was already making something happen. And it all fit into place in a way only God can do.

Not too long after my husband mentioned his idea, my daddy died. It was a blessing in disguise because my daddy had been sick and in a lot of pain. My son, Ryan, a pastor in Arlington, did the eulogy. He told of a remembrance about his grandpa. When Ryan was a child, he did like his mama and came up with his own expressive word, "Bukasika." Its meaning was unknown, but it was an expressive exclamatory word and simply fun to say. When Grandpa would come to town, Ryan and his siblings would try to get him to say it, but Grandpa was forever mispronouncing this word. Sometimes I wondered if he was mispronouncing it on purpose. Either way, his saying it would make his grandkids laugh hysterically and after a few minutes he would be laughing with them. A popular adage says, "A moment lasts all of a second, but the memory lives on forever." Those memories with Grandpa will always live on.

God was giving me a blessing in disguise starting that day I called my husband a wibble wobble. In the next few weeks, He would make so much happen at the right time, including what my son said in his eulogy down to the completion of this column. Isn't that just how our God works?! It is the gospel truth, and it does not take an act of God to notice His miraculous feats in our lives if we're focused on looking for them.

I think a phrase or adage for God would simply be what we have already heard from Him when He said His expressive exclamation, "I am." This phrase appears in the Bible over three hundred times starting in Genesis and ending in Revelation. And "I am" He is, everything, everywhere, all the time and He should never be out of sight, out of mind! Bukasika!

Chipped China – In Hope We Trust – by Jennifer Lytle

Recently, an acquaintance sent me a text message: *Now, there is hope.*

I remembered a time, several years ago, when I travailed in prayer with concern over a specific topic. Finally, I admitted to myself and Jesus,

"I don't have any hope. Will you be my hope?"

This may sound like a perfectly contrived written story, but honestly, I opened my pink, well-worn, passed-down from my mother KJV Bible. The answer genially, assuredly wiped my eyes. I laughed! The words were luminous, a perfect response as though I had been conversing with a physical, wise friend who showed me clearly, in black-and-white. Jesus Christ . . . is our hope (please see [1 Timothy 1:1](#)).

Jesus is my hope.

Hope is not in job security.

Hope is Jesus.

Hope is not in wearing a mask properly or social distancing in all places.

Hope is Jesus.

Hope is not positive affirmations that this day will be a good day.

Hope is Jesus.

Hope is not in getting an offer on the house.

Hope is Jesus.

Hope is not in a perfect plan.

Hope is Jesus.

Hope is not in having a vaccination.

Hope is Jesus.

Jesus is our only hope. Hope is His person. It is in knowing Him and being fully confident that He is who He says He is. He will do what He promised He would do. He will be with you and carry you where He has asked you to go.

I pray that you would trust Him and rely on Him today, this week, this month as the only and authentic source of Hope.

Curious about the rest of the conversation? Please add a comment or [message me here](#). I'll share the rest of the story with my response.

I Don't Do Teens – Gotta Have Props – by Marcy Lytle

There are certain spring plants that need a little help standing tall and producing fruit. For example, every year when we plant tomatoes, we get these wire cages to help the tomatoes stand and not fall over from the weight of the fruit! There are other plants that grow on a vine and need a place to climb, so we have wire climbers for them to attach their feelers to, so they can spread out and grow! And still other plants are just weak and wobbly getting started, so we insert a small branch in the crook of the plant to keep it upright while it takes root.

And yet, there's this idea that once teens get a certain age we are to remove all props and let them be. We think they should have this freedom to "explore" whatever is out there, and then we just sit and "hope" they'll grow strong.

I once heard of a celebrity mom that filled her kids' bookshelves with books on every religion, every thought on spirituality, and then stuck the Bible in the middle of it all. She apparently wanted them to have the "freedom" to choose whatever path they wanted to take, setting no limits and providing no guidance.

Just like those plants mentioned above, our teens still need props so that they produce good fruit, have space to expand and grow with support, and time to root deep, so as not to fall over when hard rains or winds show up in a storm.

Yes, kids have to make choices on their own. But also yes, we need to be their anchor, their guide, their disciplinarian, and their example – their wire cage, their stand, their branch – until they leave our homes. And guess what? If we do this, they will one day (it might be another decade before they do) appreciate the support we gave them.

Teens are weak, when it comes to being influenced by the crowd.

Teens are often insecure in who they are, so they fall easily when unnoticed or teased.

Teens have hormones that wreak havoc on their emotions that influence their decision-making skills.

Teens are not adults yet, and won't be for a long time to come.

Offering support does not mean being a parent that hovers. Cages for tomatoes surround the plant, not smother it. Wire supports just provide stability and actually a place to climb and thrive for the plants that are not supposed to just lie on the ground to be trampled. And canes of support are just a bit of strength offered until the roots run deep. They're not a substitute for the own plant's root system.

As parents, we can provide only the truth in our homes, not allowing any lies or deceit or evil to enter our doors. We can speak the truth and live it, and ask for forgiveness when we fail, which is so important. We can listen, guide, pray, affirm, and all the things that we do to our gardens to make plants stand tall and shine until one day that stem is thick and the supports can be removed. Or that day when the colorful blooms of the climbing vine takes over so profusely that the wire support is no longer seen. And when the fruit is produced and provides a blessing to

others, we can share in the beauty of God's blessings to our families because all the props were in place before our teens left home.

See the photo above? That new plant was windblown to the side until we propped it up with a forked branch, and now it's growing straight and tall.

What's on your shelves, in your home, and under your kids...so that they thrive while they grow?

Practical Parenting – Quantity or Quality – by Marcy Lytle

We've all heard parenting advice while raising our kids, even if we don't ask for it. I remember hearing that quality mattered, not quantity of hours spent with our kids. In other words, if we're focused and present for an hour, that's better than being with them 10 hours and distracted by chores and self, etc. Then other advice-givers go for quantity, stating that spending all your waking hours serving and doing for your kids, being present and super-mom is what matters.

As in most things we're told, it's often both-and. Quantity and quality are good parenting. Working all day, coming home tired and then having one hour with kids before bedtime isn't so wonderful, now is it? You're tired, they're tired, and there's really no connection – only irritation. And being with kiddos all day long, seven days a week, without a break – makes us insane!

Balance is often what we're missing in so many areas of our lives, and parenting is no different. So how can busy moms that work outside the home find more quantity of hours with kids, and how can busy moms at home reduce quantity and find sanity? Here are a few ideas below.

If your time with your kiddos is way too little:

Opt for food deliveries that have the meals prepared – no shame in that!

See if there's a teenage daughter of a friend that might like to earn a few bucks doing a few chores, so you can sit down and play a game with the kids knowing the rest of the house is clean.

If you have a partner, speak up and ask for help. He/she is not a mind-reader.

If disorganization is the problem, enlist the help from a friend that's organized. Ask her to help you with schedules, plans, meals, etc. Glean from her strengths.

Consider taking off a day and taking the kids out of school too, for a play day.

Include your kiddos in running errands, or those things you "have to do" on weekends – make it a game – stop for a Sonic blast – or take a break at a playground in the middle of the running around!

If your time with your kiddos is overkill and you need a break:

It's okay to create a "quiet hour" during the day where they play independently and you relax with a good book and glass of sparkling water.

It's okay to ask your partner for a few hours away to do whatever it is that regenerates you – spa time, coffee with a friend, shopping for a bit, or just a nap in the car with a candy bar!

It's okay to schedule a date night and trade off with friends to babysit, if possible, without guilt. Date nights are so important for a healthy mom/dad and family!

It's okay to not be supermom. You don't have to volunteer, work on projects, show up at everything all the time. It's okay to say no.

It's so helpful to have a scheduled time for kids to have their space and you to have yours. Guilt is not your friend. But a calendar and regulated times for "mom time" is.

Being mom/dad is hard and has especially been hard on every parent with the strain of finances, work, health, worry about the future of the kids, and more. Quantity and quality are great – in balance – as you can. And if one side is tipped way too heavily at the moment, find a way to move something around so that your scales are sitting pretty once again, and you're breathing sighs of relief...not exasperation.

Tiny Living – One Pot Cooking – by Leyanne Enterline

Living tiny means a tiny kitchen! Literally, only one person at a time can be there! And if there's more than one, there's ALWAYS a fight! Someone either gets pushed, tripped, pinned up against a cabinet, dirty looks, etc. It's super annoying, so we all sort of have an understanding that only one person at a time in the kitchen! Or at least we try...

My four must-haves in the kitchen are a crockpot, casserole pan, Vitamix, and a large sauté pan. My go-to crockpot meal is potato soup. It's super easy and one I can have ready to go after a late night of baseball and doesn't use up a ton of pans. I make a few casseroles a week as well, like black bean enchiladas and veggie lasagna. Notice a theme? One pot meals! Hand washing dishes is quite the pain, so as little to clean as possible is best. Also, after a late night dinner and cleaning up, the hot water goes quick for showers. So again, little to wash is best! Another simple quick meal is one pot black bean chili.

As little to wash is so important to us! We have to hand-wash everything. Since we pretty much are here every day with homeschooling, eating breakfast, lunch and dinner at home equals a lot of dishes.

For breakfast, the kids use one bowl for everything. I've got growing boys that eat more than grown men right now so that one bowl gets a homemade breakfast muffin, breakfast cookie and all vitamins in it already put in the fridge for them, so they're ready to go when they wake up. They will eat that and then fill it with oatmeal, then rinse out and fill with cereal. Three breakfasts are a lot to me, but at least it's all in one bowl!

Lunch is usually one pot pasta. Then of course dinner, the one pot meals! I'll share a few recipes below. We all eat gluten free, dairy free, and vegetarian at home. (Now, Brian is a different story when he's out to eat on his own! And Eli and I will randomly eat some meat.)

Tiny living cooking and eating has its challenges, but I think we've got somewhat of a routine down and know how to deal with the space a bit better than when we first started!

Remember love grows best in tiny spaces!

Potato Soup

- 5ish potatoes
- 3 carrots
- 2 celery sticks
- 1/4 onion
- 1 cup vegetable stock
- salt, pepper, garlic

Chop everything up, then cook on high 4 hours. Blend everything in Vitamix once cooked, leaving a few chunky pieces out. I do pour some of the juice out and add a cup of oat milk in mixer to make the soup a little creamier. Return back to pot. Add bag of frozen peas and garbanzo beans, cook on low and you're good to go! Finally, add whatever toppings you like.

Black Bean Enchiladas

- layer casserole pan with enchilada sauce
- corn tortillas
- one bag frozen kale
- corn tortillas again
- enchilada sauce again
- 1 can black beans

We do lightly top with sheep's cheese (we have a casein allergy and found that sheep's cheese does not affect us)

Bake at 400 for 20 minutes

Veggie Lasagna

- layer casserole pan with spaghetti sauce
- rice noodles (no need to precook)
- sauce again, covering noodles
- one bag of frozen kale/spinach
- noodles again
- sauce again
- chop one carton of mushrooms and 2 whole zucchini's (Can sauté before or just place on top w/ a little avocado oil)
- sprinkle with sheep's cheese
- bake 375 for one hour

If you need any more allergy-friendly meal ideas let me know!



YOU

November 15, 2020

Introduction to Daniel 1-5??

The first six chapters of the Book of Daniel are full of familiar stories of miracles and demonstrations of the gifts of the holy spirit that were in operation in the Old Testament, and the power of the God showing himself very real.

The rest of the book of Daniel, chapters 7-12 of course, are the end time visions, dreams and prophecies, which we'll save for another time.

When I first prepared this message, it included the first three chapters and was sort of a huge **rapid fire walk through** in one gigantic message. So, by time I finished it, I was still questioning the Lord if I was on the right track and I don't know how to pull it all together and the Holy Spirit brought the thought to me, why don't you split it up into separate messages! Honestly, that thought had never even entered my mind until I had struggled through the whole thing.

So, for the next few weeks, we'll walk through the first few chapters of Daniel. It's sure to be a little more palatable that way and each week an build on the last.

Background: Pulse and Peas

Daniel Chapter 1 introduces us to Nebuchadnezzar, who became the king of Babylon when his father, King Nabopolassar died while Nebuchadnezzar was besieging Jerusalem.

Both kings were named after one of two of the primary gods of Babylon; the first primary god was Bel, or BAAL (which was Bel's son) and then there was Nebo, the god of scholars and astrologers. So, in this lineage of king, the father Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar were name-sakes of Nebo. This same god was renamed by the Greeks as Hermes, and by the Romans as Mercury.

When king Nabopolassar died, his son Nebuchadnezzar quickly returned from the battle in Jerusalem to Babylon, to take care of his father and then assume the throne. So, he left his army there to finish capturing Jerusalem, to spoil the city and the temple and then to carry out the King's very precise orders, which was to capture the choicest of the Israelites to serve in the King's court.

Verses 3-4 list Nebuchadnezzar's requirements, including that they must be:

- Princes
- Youths
- Physically unblemished
- Handsome in appearance
- Skillful in wisdom and knowledge
- Proficient in the sciences, and
- Refined and polished enough to hold their own when standing before kings

So, among those who met these qualifications were the 4 sons of Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The custom was to rename captives and slaves with a Chaldean name, to show domination and servitude, so these brothers were given the names of Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, of which Daniel served as the spokesperson.

My commentary pointed out that this took place during a very an important period of world development and history, for it was around the years 610-616 BC when the first of two science eras exploded on the world.

This took place during the Greek period beginning in 600 BC and it was when the Babylonians and Egyptians gave birth to the **sciences** of

- **mathematics,**
- **metallurgy, which is the study of metals,**
- **anatomy,**
- **astrology,**
- **the measurements of the solar and lunar cycles,**
- **tracing the paths of the planets,**
- **the division of the circle into 360 degrees,**
- **designation of the constellations and the zodiac.**

Scripture tells us that Daniel and his brothers were well schooled in all of these sciences, as Babylon had huge libraries and historical records and the palace provided specialty training designed for the palace courtiers.

The King had ordered his Eunuchs to give all those who were in training a portion of his own food and drink, in order to fatten them up and ensure that their countenance was presentable to the King.

But, there was one little problem. Daniel and his brothers refused to eat meat that had not been properly butchered or that had been offered to idols, in accordance with the Jewish Mosaic law, so the impetuous King ordered them to be killed.

But God had given Daniel favor with the king's Eunuch, Melzar, who had been assigned to watch over them so Daniel made a deal with him to set up a test for 10 days to prove whether they would be just as robust on their own diet as those that ate the King's meat and drink.

V14-16 So Melzar consented to them in this matter, and proved them for ten days. And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat. Thus, Melzar the Eunuch took away the portion of the King's meat and wine and he gave them pulse.

Now, "Pulse" was a mixture of seeds which were sown; including vegetables and grains such as wheat, barley, rye, peas, beans and lentils. This was not in support of vegetarianism as we know it today, but it was in recognition of the Hebrew children's staunch commitment to honor the laws of God on the killing and dedication of meat.

Chapter 1 closes with V19, and the king communing with all his new courtiers, but when he tested them, he found none who could compare to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah in all matters of wisdom and understanding, and he found them 10 times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm. And Daniel continued in the palace even unto the first year of King Cyrus.

So God preserved these 4 faithful young men, and blessed them mightily physically, mentally and spiritually and seated them in high places in the King's court, and they remained faithful to God.

Closing:

So, what are the nuggets we can draw from Chapter 1:

- 1. God rewarded Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego for their faithfulness to him and his laws, for setting themselves apart from the culture surrounding them.**
- 2. Similar to how he did with Joseph who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his own brothers, God turned what could have been a dire situation of captivity for these young men into an opportunity to excel and flourish and even, influence the kingdom for God.**
- 3. Thank God for this example that even when times get tough for us, when the pressure is on, or when persecution hits, that's the time to remember the faith that was once delivered to the saints and contend for—to stand up for, our faith and remain faithful to God, whatever the cost, knowing that He will reward us openly before the Father.**

Let's pray.

Healthy Habits – In the Yard – by Marcy Lytle

Everyone has their own idea of what exercise is. Some have a Peloton in their bedroom, others go to the gym or meet with friends to talk the trails, and still others move to the beat while watching a video on YouTube. But have you thought about getting in the yard this month for your exercise? Yes! You'll not only enjoy the cool breezes but you'll get some much needed Vitamin D you need, now that winter is past.

Rake and bag – This involves arm movement and squats. I just did this today, and I'm sore! Sure, you can blow the leaves into the street or pay someone else to come and bag it up, but if you do it yourself, you'll be good and tired and toned!

Dig and plant – Create a garden in your yard of herbs or vegetables and start digging and planting. It's great exercise to dig and it's good finger movement to feel that soil between your fingers. It's also so satisfying, which is good for the heart, to see what you've accomplished when done!

Mow – Walking the yard, going back and forth, pushing and pulling, is SUCH great exercise. Opt to not pay for lawn service, but rather mow the yard yourself, if you have the time. It's a once a week chore this time of year, so do it and wear that sunscreen and hat, and get those steps in!

Pull weeds – Be careful not to strain your back, but get you one of those tiny stools and sit to pull the weeds that now appear after the rains. Do it on a day just after the drops fall, so that the weeds are loose and easy to pull up. This is great for your biceps!

Snip and gather – Get out your snips and cut branches, and put them in vases inside your home. Snip herbs and bundle them or chop them for that dish you're making tonight. If you use those big loppers, your arms will be tired and buff – after a few days and weeks of this activity.

Water your plants – Use a watering can or your hose, but move around and water and pour, and soak in some rays while you do. Let the breezes blow through your hair, and observe nature in all of its beauty. It will do your soul some good.

Create a garden – Buy a large pot, shop for 3-5 plants to arrange in the pot, then plant them at different heights, and place it in a prominent spot where you can see it daily. This gets your brain and your ideas flowing, as you create a thing of life and beauty to gaze at daily, and this strengthens your vitality and will to live.

Okay, we're not all going to have the time or motivation to do all of the above, but spring is the time to be active. It's not freezing any more, it's not too hot for comfort, and it's just right – for moving, planting, bending and pulling – all in balance as we stretch our muscles after a long winter's break.

Life in a Nutshell – At the Root – by Jill Montz

Did you know there are hundreds of different varieties of pecan trees? In our orchards alone we have over 20 different ones. For us, the most popular are the Pawnee, Cheyenne, Choctaw, Wichita, Kanza, and Native varieties. When I was growing up the ones that were requested most were Burkett, Mahan, Stuart, and Western Schley pecans. Thanks to research aimed at developing pecans that are more drought, disease, and pest resistant, every year new varieties continue to be studied and created for growers to plant and harvest.

Each pecan variety has different characteristics. The Pawnee is an oval shaped pecan, golden brown, good for baking and eating. The Cheyenne is smaller and more round in shape, very light in color and some think it has a sweet flavor to it. The Choctaw is a large pecan that is easy to shell out and has a little drier taste to it but people love it for roasting. The Wichita is very long and narrow and fills out very tight in its shell thus making it harder to shell out, but its abundance of oil and flavor still make it a top seller.

I could line up 10 customers and ask them to taste and rank just these four pecans in order of preference and I would be willing to bet very few would order them the same way. Everyone has different taste buds and taste preferences. No one is more right or wrong than anyone else; just different.

Pecans fall into other categories as well. The two broad groupings for pecans you might have heard of are Natives or Papershell. They can also be categorized by size: mammoth, junior mammoth, jumbo, etc. Many growers will separate their crop according to what are Number Ones versus Number Twos and so on. As pecans are run through the shelling process they either come out as halves or pieces. Even then pieces can be further broken down into large, medium, small, chopped, or meal.

Therefore, a Pawnee pecan could be classified as such: Papershell, Junior Mammoth, Number One, Half. But that's just one of the many combinations it could be. This one pecan can have many titles but it doesn't change the fact that the tree the pecan comes from is still a Pawnee pecan tree.

I feel like pecans sometimes because I too can wear many titles. I have been called: daughter, sister, mom, boss, woman, divorced, Christian, leader, busy, friend, foe, white, Texan, American, conservative, volunteer, shy, stuck-up, author, fake, obese, ugly, beautiful, arrogant, loving, lazy, hardworking, and a million more. Some of these titles I can relate to and some I just can't, but they have all been used to describe me over the last decade or so. Some have been used as compliments and some have been used as attacks on me as a person.

Deep down I know that those titles are just describing a portion of who I am or a particular characteristic and perhaps even me in that single moment of time. They aren't really me. Like the Pawnee pecan tree, the fruits of my labor are often what most people see and judge me on but at my roots I am more than just my fruit.

We all fall into categories from time to time. Some of those categories are very general and neutral in terms but some can cause quite a stir. Just this last year it seems like terms such as: Republican or Democrat, black or white, male or female, vaccinated or not vaccinated, mask on or off, and many others have all caused people to stop seeing the person and either like or hate them based on that one characteristic. But at the root we are all still children of God and the

truth is He loves all of us. God has a lot to say about us and I personally like His categories much better.

God tells me I am fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14), and that I am clothed in strength and dignity (Proverbs 31:25). I know I am a child of God (John 1:12) who has been redeemed and forgiven by God's grace through the death of His son Jesus (Ephesians 1:7). I have been set free by Christ (Galatians 5:1) and am no longer a slave (to sin) but now I am an heir to God (Galatians 4:7). I am even worth more than rubies (Proverbs 31:10). And God reminds me my ultimate destination is not this world because I am a citizen of heaven (Philippians 3:20). These aren't the only things God says about me (and you too) but they are some of my favorites.

I have grown up in the pecan business. My parents started our family store, The Pecan Shed, when I was two-years-old. I know more about pecans than I do about most of my family members and close friends. Other than a few jobs in and right after college, I have only ever worked at the Pecan Shed. And yet I have a mild allergy to pecans. I like to joke by saying I won't eat the profits but the truth is I can't! However, I still see the value in pecans and I still appreciate what they bring to the table so to speak even if I can't have a slice of pecan pie on my plate. This industry has helped my family be very successful and we are blessed to employ close to 40 people to work alongside of us.

So to me the Pawnee pecan has another title: nut allergy. But no worries; pecans and I are still on good terms. I don't hold it against the pecan that it doesn't get along well with my digestive system and that my throat gets real scratchy and I cough a lot every time I even try some of our homemade fudge with nuts inside or a piece of pecan brittle (yum...they are so hard to resist!) I just go for the cheesecake at family dinners and skip the pecan pie!

I do have a great recipe for pecan pie if you need it, though.

Just don't make me one as a thank you!

Life Right Now – Just Being – by Hannah Bouck

I'm a "horrible" Christian.

For the longest time I compared my relationship with the Lord with everyone around me and everyone on social media. I'm talking about ALL the things, my peeps.

For example: Que a friend posting her heartwarming experience of waking up at 5 am to watch a beach sunrise and have her morning devo. I immediately compared and believed I was lacking. So, in my insecurity, I set my alarm for 4:45, Bible bedside ready, shoes by the door, and cut scene to me clicking snooze and sleeping in way past when Chik Fil A breakfast was available. I woke up already defeated by the day and thought I was a sad excuse for a Christian.

Dramatic? (FOR SURE) - but that has genuinely been the label I have carried with me over the years.

I could go on and on about the countless other comparisons and name games I have compiled in my brain. But interestingly enough, none of these things have ever had anything to do with who God says I am... with where He leads me, or where I am today.

It wasn't until recently, when I was crying to a friend about what a horrible Christian I am, and the fact that it had been a long time since I had journaled, or read the Bible that still small voice came and said, "Just be with me." No comparison, no attempting to live up to an expectation I'll never live up to. Simply put; just be.

I was so exhausted by what I was not, I never considered simply being. So that's what I did. In my rawest form, I got comfortable on the couch, listened in the silence, and just sat there to be with Him. And somehow I fell asleep. A sweet, quiet, and dreamless sleep. And friend, let me tell you, I woke up more rested and more full than I can last remember.

Feeling fully embraced and known in my own unique way.

Life right now for me is learning that my relationship with the Lord won't look like my friend's, waking up at the crack of dawn, or like the one that creatively journals for hours a week. Right now it's learning to sit in silence and just be. Learning that I'm not a horrible Christian, but a human in need of daily grace and time with her Father in a way that's unique to me.

I overcomplicate things a lot. I love how the Lord meets me at the least complex places of my heart. On the couch and just being.

-HB

Strengthening Your Core – Why Not Ask? – by Marcy Lytle

We have a show we watch that's probably our favorite – *New Amsterdam*. It was off for over a year and recently started back up, and it's full of current events – including the pandemic. The setting is a hospital and the characters are so awesome, but the specific scene that really got me in the season opener in March was one that has stuck with me ever since I watched it. My husband and I both teared up several times, but this one particular scene is the topic of my story...

The head doctor called several hospitals asking for a drug his hospital was running low on, a drug needed for their covid patients. He called about four other friends at other hospitals asking for it, and they were also out – but they had other things like tubing, other drugs, etc. –none of which he needed. He had finally given up when another friend called asking for a drug needed at her hospital, and the doctor was so excited because it was a drug he'd heard was available, so he made the connection. In fact, over the course of a few minutes, he connected all of those friends with each other so that their needs were met – except his! The last lady that had called him got what she needed and he had never even asked her for the drug needed at his hospital, and come to find out – she had it!

The point of this connection story is that this doctor that runs the New Amsterdam Hospital was told there was no more of this specific medicine available anywhere, but he decided to ask anyway. And in doing so, even after several “no” answers, he and five other hospitals shared their resources in ways that all of their needs were met.

The reason I teared up is that over the past year or so, I've talked with friends who feel the same way I do. We feel disconnected, like not really reaching out to others, a sort of don't-care attitude, because we're all weary. I think most of us feel we are the “only ones” with our specific feelings, so we don't share them, and we certainly don't ask for help.

But what if, just what if, we opened up and asked. She might not relate, but she might know someone that does. And when we talk to that someone, we just might have insight on what she needs. Isn't that how it's supposed to work? We knock and doors are opened, we seek and we find, we ask and receive.

But here we sit, lost in our frustration over what the past year has “done” to us all. Everything normal is weird. Shopping is different, we can't have the intimacy we once had, faces are covered, our children have also been affected, and yes – people and friends have died!

I watched that three minute piece of a show and realized that we don't all have to sit and become unable to function because we're lacking whatever it is we need. We have people we can ask. There are churches still open with people ready to pray, we have friends that probably are waiting for a call just like we are, and it's a lie that we are the only ones feeling the way we do.

I asked a friend to pray for me this morning and it turns out that she needed prayer, as well. My niece's little girl is in the hospital today and my niece sent out a message to our extended family

to pray, because it's hard to sit alone and wonder and wait. I've had strangers I've never met, yet they are friends to me on social media, asking for prayer and praying for me!

We are made for connection, we are not made for lack, and resources are ours for the asking. And when we do, connections are made that save lives and join us in gratefulness for a lifetime.

Go on. Ask for help. And receive it. Then offer your help and receive an even greater blessing! Be the umbrella for a friend or stand under hers, when you're in a storm.

Under Pressure - Pulse and Peas – by Debbie Haynes

There was this king – Nebuchadnezzar (how would you like to have that name?) whose job it was to capture the choicest of the Israelites to serve in the King's court. The requirements for this job were that the young men be: princes, youths, physically unblemished, handsome in appearance, skillful in wisdom and knowledge, proficient in the sciences and refined and polished.

Only four met these qualifications, including one man named Daniel and three of his brothers, and this whole process took place during the Greek period 600 BC when the sciences gave birth to an explosion of mathematics, metallurgy, anatomy, astrology, and more.

The king had ordered that these young men be given the king's portion of food and drink, only these four refused this order because they honored the Jewish Mosaic law – and so they were ordered to be killed!

However, God had given favor to Daniel and he declared to the king that he and his brothers would be just as robust on their own diet as the diet offered to them by the king. In Daniel 1:14-16 it says after 10 days of eating their own diet, these guys did appear fairer and fatter in flesh than others who ate the king's meat. How about that! And then they were given pulse.

What in the heck was pulse? I'm glad you asked. Pulse was a mixture of seeds, including veggies and grains, a sort of health food of the day.

This chapter then closes with the king finding out that none could compare to Daniel and his brothers, and he found them 10 times better than the magicians and astrologers in all of his realm! God had preserved these four faithful men, blessed them mightily in physical, mental and spiritual strength and now seated them in high places in the king's court – and they continued to remain faithful to God.

So what's the big deal about this story of these four young men?

- They rejected the culture surrounding them in favor of adhering to God's ways and not man's orders.
- Even in captivity, these men continued to excel and flourish and even influence others (much like the story of Joseph!)
- When the pressure is on, when life is tough, we can stand in our faith and stay faithful to God, knowing that he rewards those who do!

Pretty cool ending to a story about four young men and their refusal to eat the king's meat.



MARRIAGE

After 40 Years – Better Left Unsaid – by Marcy Lytle

I learn lessons, I know better, and then I fail again. And it usually involves the words that come out of my mouth. Can you relate? Here's the setting for you...

My husband makes the bed daily, and he changes the sheets weekly. I make sure the sheets are washed. One recent Monday (the sheet-changing day), he noted that the sheets were not clean and so he left the bed unmade when he went to work. I thought I had washed them but didn't check, and apparently he just looked in the drawer and saw they weren't there – so assumed they weren't washed.

However, the clean sheets were in the dryer! I found them later.

I had a choice at that point, because I was a little irritated that he had not bothered to look in the dryer. I could have said nothing and folded the sheets, put them away and let him find them that night. (I can't make the bed – hurts my back because our sheets are so hard to put on!) Or I could let him know that they were indeed clean and he just didn't look in the dryer.

I even thought about what would be the best course of action, and I'm pretty sure it would have been best to say nothing or at least check my heart before I did. Often, it's not what we say, but how we say it!

I opted to say something. I was a bit irritated all day and wanted him to know how silly he was for not peeking in the dryer. So I did say something, I checked my tone, but after I said it – I sort of felt this sick feeling. It was like I'd won this battle but it wasn't one I should have fought.

You might be thinking, "What was wrong with letting him know the sheets were in the dryer and he missed them?"

Nothing, really. Except I was thinking poorly of him and wanted to be sure I let him know that I didn't shirk my responsibility of washing the sheets. I wanted to be sure that I was better than he was, and he was the one who messed up.

Therein lies the problem. And I succumbed to trying to "win" at this little dumb game we all play as married people. We don't want to be the one who forgot the keys, misplaced the remote, or messed up dinner. We want him to be the one who flubs up, so we can feel superior.

Some days, I make good choices and leave things unsaid, when my heart is right. And other days, I let those words of judgment slip out in a tone that's not nice and they wound his spirit.

The fact of the matter is that he makes a mean bed – everything is perfectly taut and the pillows are in place – and it's awesome. For that, I'm grateful every single day, and I don't need to "one-up" him ever.

It's so cool that no matter our age, we can still learn and grow and try to tame tongue that so desperately wants to lash out and kill the moment.

It would have been better if I'd left my words unsaid and gave thanks, or at least checked my heart and waited until I was no longer irritated when I spoke.

This week...I actually did forget to wash the sheets. Geez...

Date Night Fun – Bakery Bouncing – by Marcy Lytle

We recently had published in our newspaper a list of all the bakeries in the area, their specialties and photos of their pastries, and all the things – and it made my mouth water! I thought how fun would that be to plan date night in April around bakeries!

Cookies and Milk – Make it a late night outing and opt for cookies and milk at a late night coffee shop, or bake your own and pour a tall glass of milk. Make chocolate chip cookies but use dark chocolate chips instead of milk chocolate. Stop by the dollar store and get cute plates and napkins, and even a tray. Set up your cozy spot at home and watch a movie or show, before drifting off to sleep.

Scones for Two – Set out on an early morning to a coffee shop and try scones in flavors you've not had before. Scour Yelp and find the nearest bakery to you that you've not been to, and make it a date. Wear your loungewear, add your sneakers, and go for a walk afterwards or walk to a park and enjoy.

Bread and Butter - Find a baker that makes the most delicious homemade breads and buy a loaf, make some flavored butter, purchase a block of cheese, and spread a red-checkered picnic tablecloth as you slather on the butter and eat the bread. Tell each other five things about your week that were fantastic.

Pretzels and Mustard – We have a bakery in town (Easy Tiger) that makes those huge pretzels that taste so good with mustard! Or you can buy Auntie Anne's pretzel mix and make your own! Sit outside on the patio and enjoy these, and invite another couple to join you – at a distance, of course.

At Home with the Mixer – Search online for something you can bake together – like a cake, bread, cookies, muffins, whatever you like. Head to the grocery store for the ingredients and come back to mix and bake together. While the goodies are in the oven, put on some music and slow dance in the kitchen. Don't knock this, until you've tried it!

For Better or Worse - Living on Love – by Kaelin Scott

The first year of marriage was tough. My husband was in his senior year of college, and I worked part time as a barista. After paying our rent each month, we didn't have much extra money. Our apartment furniture consisted of a mattress on the floor and a folding lawn chair. Our idea of eating out was the dollar menu at Taco Bell.

We didn't have a lot, but we didn't care. All we wanted was to be together.

We made so many memories and had so much fun, without being wrapped up in excessive material things or spending money. It was a time of simplicity, full of laughter and love. In the words of Alan Jackson, we were "livin' on love."

Sometimes I look back to those days and wonder how we did it. How did we afford to eat or put gas in our car? How the heck did we survive? But that time is a perfect reminder of God's abundant love. He got us through those tough first months and gave us everything we needed. Not only that, but He gave us joy and happiness. And He was with us every moment of every day, just as He is today. He is so good!

It can be so easy to get wrapped up in responsibilities, bills, work, parenting, etc., that we forget the joy of marriage. The more complicated life gets, the harder it can be to feel content. It seems like people are always in a race for more, bigger, better. I'm so thankful that we had to struggle starting out, because it makes me so grateful for what we have now. And it also reminds me how much I love my husband. Back then all we had was each other, and that was enough. It was hard and scary at times, sure. You would have thought we'd won the lottery when a friend gave us a hand-me-down couch.

But life is about doing, not having. And love isn't dependent on material wealth or security. Its supply is limitless, as long as you strive to keep it alive. You don't have to have a perfect life, or even a comfortable one, to enjoy your marriage. All you need is determination and the will to carry on. "For better or worse...for richer or poorer." Those aren't supposed to be empty words you say but don't really mean. They are a promise to love your spouse in all seasons, no matter where life takes you.

"Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil." Ecclesiastes 4:6

In This Together – Enough – by Bekah Holland

You want to know what I think? Actually, it doesn't matter because I'm going to err on the side of narcissism and assume you do. I think, that we really aren't all so different. It can feel like we are worlds apart. We're single, we're married, we're career focused, we're stay at home moms, working moms, we're dog lovers or cat people. We hate kids, or aspire to a Dugger-sized babypalooza, or maybe, we're still hoping for a future that isn't certain. We want more. Or less. And a million different in between places we find and see ourselves. Those differences can make us feel like we're an island. I know for me, I often feel like I'm all alone in a special kind of crazy with my outrageous, never done to-do lists, and messy kitchen, and floors that desperately need to be cleaned by someone who loves clean floors more than they hate cleaning them. That my often times manic thoughts and overwhelming feelings make me a burden. To my husband especially. And it doesn't matter how many times he tells me, I still struggle to know I'm enough.

I come from a long line of "Marthas." For anyone not familiar with this particular story in the Bible, we are dropped into a scene where Jesus is at a home, surrounded by his closest friends and family. And we pick up with a view of two sisters. Martha is preparing the home, preparing the food, running back and forth. I'm assuming she's sweeping and picking up trash, refilling drinks, making sure her meal covers everyone's dietary needs. Anyone who has ever hosted a holiday meal or invited a few people over for dinner knows the pure and unadulterated fear of burning the entrée that is supposed to feed special guests. I'm assuming this was Martha's reality, intensified by the fact that Jesus, the long awaited Savior of human kind, was the guest of honor. Back in our story, there's a second sister named Mary. I picture Mary as tall and willowy, with long beautiful hair (that's more than likely hidden under a cover). *I have no historical evidence to back this up. Zero. These are just theories according to Bekah.* Pretty, popular Mary, I assume, was helping her sister, because parties are hard work. But while Martha ran around taking care of all of the things and all of the people and making sure it was all going according to plan, Mary was sitting. She was sitting and listening to Jesus talk.

If I was in Martha's shoes, I'd be very slowly killing Mary in my mind. But Jesus said Mary was doing the best thing. What the what? Did you know there are entire books dedicated to talking about how we need to be a "Mary in a Martha world?" *Sigh.* I'm not saying that Mary isn't great and that we don't need to stop and chill and listen. Because obviously, there are many times that we need to press the pause button, sit down, shut up and just be. But I truly believe there is plenty of room for all the Marthas as well. That being said, Jesus didn't say that Martha was wrong. She just needed a breather.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard this story. Probably hundreds, because I was a church kid (you know, the ones whose parents were at church every time the building was open - Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, and several random mornings during the week). It was told often in Sunday school and at home and at women's Bible study groups, and, and, and. And the story is important. But I think our human take on it can be wrong.

Every time the story was told again, or that I ran across another well-meaning book title, guilt and failure crept a little more into my mind and my heart. I thought I should be a certain kind of wife, doing the right things, looking the right way and with grace and poise because no successful woman should be caught crying in the pantry with a tub of icing. Honestly, the things that I read and heard told me I wasn't enough. I talk too much or I'm too quiet. I'm either too

hard on my kids or too lenient. I apologize too often or not enough. I'm too messy or everyone is upset because I'm cleaning and not relaxing. I'm too focused on the needs of others or I'm self-centered. It seems at times it's just a lose-lose scenario. But I don't think that's the message we should accept. There are always going to be people who are screaming from the rooftops that you aren't enough. But thankfully, we can choose the message we want to write on our hearts.

So here's the message I'm allowing today. And hopefully tomorrow and all of the tomorrows after that. *I am enough. Just as I am. Just as I was created to be.* I have value and my story matters. I am not too much, not too loud, not too gentle, not too kind, not too happy and not too focused. I'm not too anything, because I have purpose, in each moment, of each day, in every easy and impossible scenario that I find myself in. *I am enough. You are enough. We are enough. Just as we are.* And no self-help book, or "motivational speaker", well-meaning friend or even partner can or should give us the message that our best isn't good enough.

You aren't too much. You don't come up short. You are more than enough.

And while we continue to learn and grow, we can rest in the truth that our best is plenty.

"Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do." Brene Brown



ENCOURAGEMENT

Firmly Planted - Still Life – by Dina Cavazos

Right after the “Big Freeze” in Texas, I changed my FaceBook cover photo to a collage of some of my favorite garden pictures. I’m so glad I did. In fact, I’m considering adding more pictures and making a huge poster or wallpaper for my house so that I remember...

In preparation for the glacier-like cold, I did my best to cover what needed protection and brought in the succulents I could carry; for everything else, it was a test of hardiness. Having planted a lot of tough natives, most recently a Little Gem Magnolia, a Loquat, Pineapple Guava, and a few other things—I was hopeful; but the new plantings hadn’t had much time to establish, and I was concerned about losing them (we all know what happens when we aren’t firmly rooted!).

When the winter siege ended, I uncovered my beloved plant-friends and walked the garden to assess the damages. I was pleasantly surprised—most things looked pretty good! Never having experienced a freeze this long and severe, I continued in ignorant hope at first; but, as each day passed, reality set in. Almost everything got browner and browner and looked worse and worse, except for one thing.

This one thing survived unscathed: a succulent “wall” in one corner of the garden that’s still a work-in-progress. Its evergreen beauty is a backdrop to seating around a chimenea—it’s meant to be a cozy place to chat with God, or anyone. I looked at this “wall” of bright green with splashes of red and orange, flanked on each side by shriveled, dead-looking things. Did they survive untouched by some wondrous miracle?! No...but sometimes everyday life contains miracles of the unflashy kind.

Here’s a confession with a prelude: You know how much I love succulents. I’ve planted many, lost many, but I will not give up trying to match the right ones to their happy place. So it was with this succulent “wall,” created by hanging several containers on a metal screen. Not only was it difficult to find the right plants to thrive there, I also battled the squirrels who loved to dig them up and birds who loved to eat them. So, with pangs of guilt and betrayal to the plant-world and my true gardener heart, I decided to use fake succulents. Yes, I said FAKE. There is my confession, and I feel so much better now!

My justification was that it would be experimental. Fake succulents these days look so real, it’s hard to tell if they’re living plants or not. I thought it would be interesting to see how many people would think they’re real before the “touch test.” I thought I could have *one* place that looked great all the time. I wouldn’t--*couldn’t*--take credit for the beauty, the health, the perfection of “still life”/fake plants.

Gazing at the unscathed succulent wall, the gentle wind whispered a secret into my soul: Real Life hurts. Living blood and tissue and minds and hearts suffer. We are bruised and torn and frozen and dried up in the course of living. We are Real Life, not Still Life.

The plants whose roots were strong will come back. I’ll lovingly clip away the brown, feed and water, and God’s miracles of sun, rain, and soil will nurture them back to health. Green shoots of new growth will appear. The garden will change, as some plants will not look quite the same and some will be replaced. But one thing will not change—the Still Life succulent wall. Which would you rather be?

Moving Forward – The Middle – by Pam Charro

Is it just me, or does life feel especially chaotic these days? I don't know that I can say I have ever felt completely secure, but these last two years have definitely presented one situation after another that feels unfamiliar and uncomfortable. I don't like wondering what next rug will be pulled out from under my feet.

When I read the Bible, it's so easy for me to have faith in the various situations because I can flip forward a few pages and see the happy ending that God brought about. But I'm not really seeing that happy ending in my own life just yet. I have to go a little deeper with the characters in the stories to try to imagine how they must have felt while walking out their own paths.

We all have our own "middles." In fact, life is just one middle after another. All I ever seem to want to do is get to my own happy ending, to feel stability, certainty, comfort. And I have to fight hard against these desires every day or I will miss the excitement of the adventure I'm on. Sure, I get tired and I fight fear. I want life to feel warm and safe; and most of the time, it just doesn't. But none of that comfort would be worth anything if it cost me my chance to make a difference while I'm here. The only way I will change the world is if I'm willing to face insecurity and discomfort for the sake of a higher cause. And, through eyes of faith, that higher cause can be better than anything I can ask or imagine.

So when I feel sleepy and wobbly and just want safety, I will yield myself to God's higher plan for my life. I will remember all of those heroes who had to walk through their own middle so that I could have their stories to stabilize me. And I will pray that God will use my life to be someone else's strength and stability, that I can be one of their heroes, when it's finally time for me to rest. When we are all in heaven, rejoicing together, it will have been so worth it.

Rooted in Love - Family You Choose – by Kaelin Scott

On Valentine's Day, I enjoyed a candlelight dinner with my family...because our power was out...and it stayed out for over 72 hours. We were one of many families affected by the crazy weather in Texas, and it was an extremely long week. Especially for my husband, who had a ranch full of cattle to take care of in freezing temperatures. But we made it through the trial, thank the Lord. And like the Bible tells us in the book of James, it was certainly an opportunity to glorify the Lord. I could see God working, especially through His children.

People from other states, many of whom I don't even know except on social media, checked on us and prayed for us during those crazy days. My aunt and uncle in Colorado tried to figure out a way to help us from thousands of miles away. I was so humbled and touched by everyone's care and concern. In times of hardship, you really get to see people's hearts shine, and I witnessed the love of so many beautiful people.

The first two nights without electricity, my husband and I took shifts during the night. One of us would sleep while the other stayed awake to tend the fire and keep us warm. It was 50 degrees in the house with the fire blazing! I'm not a fan of being cold, so it was pretty miserable. My kids didn't understand why they had to stay in the covers all day instead of playing and having fun. Their hands and feet were nearly frozen, and their faces were the palest I've ever seen.

Thankfully, our good friends in town still had electricity and water at their home. They invited me and the kids to stay at their house, no questions asked. They opened their home to us and shared their food for three days and nights while my husband worked relentlessly at the ranch. I felt a little like we overstayed our welcome, but our hosts were so kind and gracious the entire time. I really felt cared for and loved. And our kids had fun together too. An awful situation turned into a chance to pause life and enjoy time with friends.

Those friends treated us like family, reminding me that sometimes your friends *are* your family. They're the family you get to choose. Sometimes God places people in your life on purpose because He knows you need them. He brings you together with special people, the ones you mesh with almost perfectly, because He knows you can share each other's joys and burdens.

Jesus welcomed us all into His family in Matthew 12, saying, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." He was showing us that family isn't always flesh and blood. It's more than that. It's the people who choose to do life with you – not because they have to, but because they love you.

Whether you have a close family or not, a few friends or many, remember to be grateful for your people. It doesn't matter if you're related. It doesn't matter if your group is small. It doesn't even matter if you agree on everything. It only matters that you love each other at all times. Do everything in love. Put others before yourself. Family is so much bigger than a name or an address. Family is the people around you. The people you love.

"You don't need everyone to love you, just a few good people." Charity Barnum, *The Greatest Showman*

Unearthly Thing – But God – by Angela Dolbear

Celebrating Easter may bring to mind cute fuzzy bunnies, and those large hollow chocolate eggs that are not the best grade of chocolate, but are so fun to eat. But mostly, Easter makes me think about Resurrection, marking Jesus' victory over sin and death.

But what does Resurrection mean to me in my everyday life?

It's somewhat of an ominous concept. Rising from the dead. And not like a Zombie Apocalypse sort of way. It's about new life.

I grew up attending a Catholic church in the south bay area of Southern California. Front and center of the church hung a crucifix with a particularly bloody Jesus Christ statue on it. I remember struggling with why Jesus had to suffer so horribly, and then die, and thankfully, rise on the third day.

I love that I was taught about Jesus' life, death and resurrection at an early age in Catholic Catechism (like Sunday school, but we went on Saturday mornings). In fact, I love the reverence of Catholic Church. God is holy and mighty, and we were always reminded of that. The candles and incense are so lovely (I still love them when I having a time of prayer), and the concept of holy water were intriguing to me as a child.

But what is resurrection? How can I apply it in my every day adult life?

Is resurrection like spring? I am amazed when my seemingly dead rosebush, which has no leaves and hasn't produced a single rose all winter, all of sudden grows little green buds, and then blooms beautiful red roses. But my rose bush is not dead, just dormant.

Resurrection is rising from death into life. Only God can do that. No person or thing can take credit for resurrection, which is why it's so distinctive divine. Only God can breathe life into something lifeless. Like creation.

I try not to forget the many times in my life when I experienced a hopeless situation, where there was no way I could physically make something happen to resuscitate it, such as with our finances, my health, moving across country and buying a house with no money. A particularly meaningful resurrection happened with my voice.

I have been singing all my life. But after a surgery and a stroke, I had no more singing voice. I had spent a lot of time, money, and sweat working on my craft. And then it was gone. I could only squeak out a few words, then nothing. My voice needed God's resurrecting touch.

So I prayed. And cried, because I love to sing, and write songs. My animals know when it's time to eat because they hear the "food time" song I sing to them. My husband and I have been

worship leaders for many years, and it is a tremendous blessing to be used to usher God's people into worshipping Him.

So, I kept praying. Sure, I mourned, and got frustrated and cried. But I knew only God could bring back my voice.

Only God could resurrect my singing voice. And He did.

Only God could make it so I could lead Sunday morning worship again, and then record a full album of songs for a songwriter friend. And only God could give me melodies and words to sing my own songs. I am so very grateful to Him. Singing now takes on a special meaning to me. I try to glorify God with every song.

Jesus said the reason for raising His dear friend Lazarus from the dead was for people to glorify God and believe in Him (please see the story of Lazarus in [John 11:1-40](#)...it's one of my favorite stories!) I love how Jesus---the Creator of the Universe---love and cared for His dear friends. So sweet and lovely.

New life means glorifying God in all we do (see verse 4, in the above mention reference). It means believing that with Jesus, there is always hope. Always. And help. Constantly. It means for those who believe, we will never see death, but eternal life with Jesus, Who loves us so much.

Happy Resurrection Day to you and to you and yours.

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series, and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, all 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 inspiring readers to laugh, cry, and crave certain varieties of food. She loves reading, writing and leading worship music with her husband Tim at their church in Nashville, Tennessee. Please drop by and sign-up for news and to hear NEW original music at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>. Blessings to you!

Simple Truths – Uninterrupted – by Marcy Lytle

I get so annoyed when I'm searching for a song on YouTube and I have to first listen to an ad. Or maybe I'm trying to read an article online and those pesky advertisements pop up constantly, interrupting the flow. And isn't it great now that we can watch shows on Netflix without having to endure a constant stream of commercials? Being able to enjoy something without interruptions is gold, right?

As moms, we'd love to be able to finish a sentence without being stopped by a child's question or tantrum. I know that I like to finish stories I'm telling my husband before he interjects his response. And eating dinner out, without the waiter being too attentive, is just so wonderful and relaxing. Again, there's so much peace that comes from enjoying an activity without constant pauses.

I was thinking about this the other day, and how cool it is that we can sit with HIM and he has our undivided attention. He says he's always with us, never leaves us, and his ears are open to our prayers. He never tells us to wait a second while he answers another call. He's the best listener there is, really.

Early in the morning, we can empty our full minds at his feet and he gently takes all of our worries to his heart and offers us peace for the day – uninterrupted peace from the cares of the world. Often, we have to come again and again to his feet, but He's always there and he always cares.

In the middle of the day, when we're already tired and our to-do list has grown longer instead of shorter, and a phone call has sent us into panic, or any number of things – his uninterrupted whispers in our ears speak of His love over us. He tells us that there is nothing to fear because He loves us, and all things work together for good – not evil.

Late at night, when our head finally hits the pillow, and the last child has finally fallen asleep, or we've hit the off button on the TV or put away our phones, he soothes our souls with songs – continuously playing and never ending – of his love over us. His watchful eye, his extended arms, and his ears that hear clearly don't miss a thing. We are held securely, and nothing can take us from that safe place.

The world is full of interruptions. Games we watch have timeouts, pauses for injuries, stops to determine plays, and we wait for the restart. Travel is halted by a flat tire or a detour or that pesky traffic that lines the highways in every large city. Friendships are even interrupted by miles of distance, change of jobs, or just misunderstandings or any number of things. And even our rest is interrupted way too often with the bleak look at the future presented to us, in the news, and all around us.

We have so many promises about uninterrupted love (we can't go anywhere that he can't find us), uninterrupted life (eternal life for those who believe), uninterrupted presence (he is with us always).

Ephesians 3:17-19 says,

So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to all the fullness of God.

No interruptions, no pauses, no breaks, and no timeouts. He lives in us, he secures us, and he loves us with such a fierce love that it surpasses that which we can even comprehend and fills us up – without a gap – so that we can then overflow this same uninterrupted love onto those around us.

Next time you watch a show or search for something to read or listen to, and you're interrupted by a tug on your arm or an advertisement or a telephone call, just smile. And give thanks that there is one place, one ear, one arm you can depend on to be forever safe and secure and constant without interruption – ever.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – Corroborate or Collaborate? – by Marcy Lytle

*The verb **collaborate** means to **cooperate** or work jointly with others.*

*The verb **corroborate** means to strengthen, support, or confirm with evidence.*

I woke up this morning with both of those words on my mind, and realized that I wasn't sure of the difference between them, or if there even was a difference. It turns out...there is a difference – a big one! And I realized something very important about my own mind and soul...

I struggle with thoughts, fears, discouragement, just as we all do, and I've always been so frustrated with myself that I cannot just read the Word and pull myself up and "believe" and "get over" and "move on" with some of the struggles I've faced. For example, I'll become discouraged and read a scripture that speaks to my soul, only to find I'm discouraged again too soon! Then I feel "guilty" for not retaining what I've read, or for falling short of having full faith!

I'm hoping I can now explain what I feel is like a lightbulb moment regarding these two words above, in light of trying with all our own strength to be better, measure up, and heal – or whatever we need to do with our own individual shortcomings.

I believe I've always somewhat *collaborated* with God's word. In other words, I agree with it, believe it and read it and "try" to make it sink in.

I have not, however, always *corroborated* with it – and this is why I haven't been strengthened with lasting support!

Let me try to explain even further...

I read the story of Job again recently, and he was so down and discouraged that he wished he had never been born, and he even felt like God was against him. This is the depth of lowness, and I'd say many of us have tasted that feeling, even if only for a few moments. Or maybe, we've connected with Job and his ideas for a long time! And we even read that Job had collaborated with God, because he had followed the rules, lived a good life, and not even really done anything "wrong."

After he complains for chapter after chapter about his losses and God's apparent indifference to his woes, God speaks. And I've read those chapters many times, but didn't realize how everything God spoke about were the things he's already set into place right before our eyes. Things like the sea, and the sky, and the goats and the donkeys. He mentions the raging rivers and the hills covered with beauty, and the strength of amazing animals that He's placed to roam on the earth. And Job's response is that he suddenly realizes that there are things "too wonderful" to know and that no purpose of God's can be thwarted. A lightbulb moment!

In other words, God reminded Job of the evidence and support system all around him that speaks daily of the faithfulness of God. And in listening to God speak, in the middle of the worst pain a man can imagine, Job got it. He no longer just collaborated, he was now corroborating with God.

I'm of the opinion that reading a verse here and there in our lives, sporadically grabbing hold of truths when we can't stand, is good and helps us in the moment. But for the long haul, for the deep healing, for the strength to stand in the worst of times, we need corroboration.

And the evidence is all around us. His beauty, his handiwork, his amazing creativity and order, his boundaries, his wisdom, his light and his power...it's all there on display every single day out the window, on our walks, in the skies, on the ground and all around. And unless we quiet ourselves after our bitter complaints, we will never hear God's voice calling us to corroborate with his story. That story that we're a part of, an integral part of, knowing that he's so aware of our condition, our worries, our fears, and our losses...that nothing...absolutely nothing...escapes his keen eye.

There are things TOO WONDERFUL TO KNOW that await those who corroborate – confirm with evidence – God's work in this world. And I want to rest in the fact that God's plans ALWAYS come to pass.

When I move from collaborating to corroborating, I won't keep wondering and asking why or waiting until the storm passes, but rather I'll rest in knowing Him as I await the restoration and healing of my soul that is SURE TO COME.

FRESH THYME – I Remember – by Marcy Lytle

I'm writing about a few things we noticed on our recent road trip, things we want to note and remember, because it's in noting and remembering that we recall and give thanks. And it's in thanksgiving and remembering that we then have faith on the next journey or trek, because of what we recalled of his faithfulness and love every day of our lives...

When we got our rental car, my husband noticed the tire light was on, so the guys filled all the tires with air and off we went. However, that indicator light never went off, and we had to fill the tires again, and then...after a long day of back roads and driving through areas with no phone service, we pulled into our hotel and had a flat – in the parking lot. You can believe that we GAVE THANKS that the flat did not happen in that ghost town we had just visited.

One particular place in that ghost town that we saw was an abandoned church. Normally, we would have exited our car and peeked in the windows and walked around taking pictures. However, this particular day the ground was muddy, and it wasn't a good idea for us to get out – so we drove on. The very next day, we were talking about the town with someone and they said, "That building is infested with venomous snakes." What? You can be sure that we GAVE THANKS that night as our heads hit the pillows that we did not explore that snaky edifice.

Another place we visited, we arrived to our inn (quaint and set behind the cutest coffee shop) only to realize the AC coil was frozen over and the unit wasn't working properly. My husband used to be in the AC business and was able to completely clean the coils, melt the ice, and fix it all – instead of us having to wait for a repairman and be without heat (the AC was on instead of the heat, and it was cold!). You can be sure that I GAVE THANKS that night for my husband and his skills!

We so wanted to take a boat cruise while near the Mississippi river, but most every place we looked on line wasn't sailing out until April, and we were on our trip at the beginning of March. However, we found one paddle wheel boat whose very first voyage of the season (and first voyage since the hurricane damage four months prior) was going out on the very night we were in that town, and we got tickets! It was a blast. You can bet that we GAVE THANKS for that fun surprise – and we even danced on deck while the music played – under the starry night!

I like to journal. And I wrote down these things, because I think it's important to note the surprises in life, not just the downfalls and the disappointments. Those can often completely consume us. But noting provision, timing, protection and all the things God provides daily – even in the middle of the hard times – is something that lifts our spirits and elevates our faith.

I wonder what things I'll take note of today where I realize He's with me, for me, and care for me? I know it will be many...and I hope I take the time to write them down so I can remember...

FRESH THYME – Not Today

Do you ever wake up feeling just so unmotivated and in a bad mood, and then those foul thoughts start up that attack your character, discredit His love for you, and scare the heck out of your mind?

Maybe you haven't heard from a particular friend in a while and you start wondering if she doesn't like you anymore. Or you feel bad for not "performing" up to your own expectations so you think God is displeased with who you are. And finally, all the news headlines or something you heard from a friend plants a seed of worry that grows into a huge concern before you even step out the door.

I've had that happen numerous times, because I really do believe that our enemy is not creative one bit. He just tries the same old schemes over and over again, to try and control our minds and then destroy our day.

I've started saying out loud, when those thoughts start marching in, "Not today."

That might not be what you say, but it's important to find something to say to talk back to the lies that enter your mind. It might be a verse from the bible about how God has not given us a spirit of fear but rather a sound mind. Or maybe it's a word God speaks to us for that particular day but we dismiss it and forget it, instead of stating it and believing it. It could be just an image in our mind of turning around from entering a dark tunnel, and walking back towards the sunlight of the day.

I've seen "Not today" on t-shirts, actually, and I like that phrase. What I'm saying when I state that out loud is that this day is one I've been given to live, thrive and not just survive and it's not happening – no way – that I will be defeated before I even start my day.

What often happens is that we listen to those thoughts and entertain them and dwell on them until we've invited a dozen others to take up residence and crowd out any hope whatsoever of a good day ahead.

So, in case you need some affirmation, good words, or truths to speak, here's a list to choose from. Make one, or all, of them your own. And when the thoughts surface (because they will) just speak up and say it out loud so that you hear it, and your soul hears it, and walk toward the light of day.

Not today:

He never leaves me or forsakes me.

He cares for me.

I am loved by the great I AM.

He is more than enough.

All things are possible with God.

But God.

Jesus loves me, this I know.

I am fearless.

Joy is mine.

FRESH THYME – Open Fences – by Marcy Lytle

Isn't it great to always be learning, no matter our age? I hope that I always continue to learn and grow and never believe the old adage that says, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." Why should we ever stop desiring to change and grow and better ourselves? It feels SO GOOD to let go, move on, and climb higher.

Our area went through a weird weather phenomenon this winter with record snowfall. Our area's average snowfall is zero inches, so when almost 12 inches fell over a six week period, it was noted and not liked by many Texans that enjoy our warm winters. Then when we were all "snowed in" without water and electricity for a few days, we all found ourselves moaning and complaining because of our week-long event. (In fact, some are STILL reeling from that winter apocalypse!)

As bad as it was for us, a few days of no heat and having to boil water, it was worse for others. We talked about our experience with others, and we also relayed how it was sort of scary and not so fun and how we were miserable, and we used all the words to describe the loss of modern conveniences. The truth was – we had plenty to eat, lots of clothes and blankets, and even bottled water to drink. But we still complained.

Fast forward a couple of weeks, we traveled through the state of Louisiana toward Mississippi and were shocked to see the damage still evident in those coastal areas where they were hit twice with storms last fall. We saw entire neighborhoods that STILL had tarps on their roofs after all that time. We stayed in one town on our way back where almost every street had such horrific damage, and repairs had not even begun. One high rise still had a hundred windows or more boarded up, and the innkeeper where we stayed said he was without electricity for over a month. The devastation that was still present was depressing to look at, and I can't image what it was like for those who were living there. We stopped in a popcorn/candy shop and the owner there said she lost everything in her store during those storms.

The fact of the matter is that we – here in Central Texas – watched the news of when that storm blew through but we haven't really kept up or even known or cared about what's happening there, now. The storm came and went, and we're back to normal life as usual. And besides that, our week long snow event can't even begin to compare to their year-long aftermath of winds that ripped apart their lives.

So what does this have to do with what I stated in my first paragraph, about growing? Everything! My husband and I both discussed how we had no idea that our neighbors were still suffering so badly, nor the extent of the damage. We only cared for a moment and then went back to our lives. And it made us both realize that we need to be more aware:

More aware of the neighbor that might not be mowing his yard because he's hurt his back.

More aware of the friend that hasn't called in a while because she's depressed.

More aware that our church needs our prayers not our criticism while our leaders reopen.

More aware that an annoying family member may struggle with suicidal thoughts.

More aware that our suffering should only serve to make us aware of the suffering of others.

I felt sad for my neighbors in Louisiana, and I'm not sure what I could have done differently had I known the devastation was still present and ongoing. However, I could have continued to pray, offered assistance with relief funds, or asked my friend (whose family lives there) how it was going and what they still needed.

That snowstorm event here was crazy and not typical of our winter at all. But if it served a purpose to get me to grow an inch bigger in my heart when I heard of disasters and storms and losses around me, then I'm thankful. I get it. We only have so much capacity and so much head space, and it's hard to remember and care and give to everyone everywhere. Someone tells us they're suffering, and we forget about it a week later. We are all human.

I just like that we had a conversation, we sat up and looked out our car window, and we noticed and realized that our situation wasn't so bad. We took note that we really didn't have cause to complain when we had all the necessities of life. And we realized that some of our neighbors still do not, and that matters, to remember.

I think some of the people we met were just glad we asked and glad we noted and glad we sympathized with their losses. And if that's the least of our growth – to sympathize with those that are hurting – then I'll take that little inch and give thanks.

Here's to always seeing beyond our own front yards into the yards of others...and opening up our fences with gates of compassion and love...even after the storms are gone.



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

May 2021



TIPS

In the Kitchen – Simple Suppers – by Marcy Lytle

Supper, by definition, is lighter than dinner. It's sometimes a southern term, but it's always delicious! And lately, we've had some pretty simple eats, due to time constraints, lack of ingredients at home, or just because we wanted something light and not heavy. Hope you enjoy some of these, and an evening at home or on the road with something simply yummy.

Smoked almond hummus

We took this in a cooler to a game recently, and enjoyed it so much. I love a good hummus, especially one with great flavor. The recipe says to keep the liquid with the beans, but I'd drain and add as needed next time. I also added in a few pecans!

- 15 oz canned garbanzo beans, with liquid
- 2 garlic cloves
- 2 T tahini
- 3 oz smoked almonds
- ¼ c fresh lemon juice
- 1 T kosher salt

Combine all ingredients in a food processor, and pulse til smooth. Serve with a drizzle of olive oil, chopped smoked almonds on top, and parsley.

Burritos

The simplest to make, yet so tasty. I think my sister gave me this recipe back when we first married. And I often forget about it, and then find it again. And it's so good, over and over, no matter how many times we eat it!

- Ground meat
- Salsa
- Refried beans
- Grated cheddar, or American cheese slices
- Large tortillas

Brown and drain the ground meat (or ground sirloin, if you prefer). Add salsa and refried beans, and stir til combined and heated through. Warm the tortillas to make them easy to roll. Place cheese down the middle, then the meat mixture. Tuck and roll. The amounts of ingredients vary, depending on how many burritos you are making. If a full pound of beef, it will make 8 burritos, and you'll need a full jar of salsa and beans. But if just for two, a quarter pound of meat will do, and reduce the other ingredients accordingly.

Perfect Trio

Recently, we just wanted a snack for dinner, that's all. We pulled out only three items, arranged them in bowls, on a board, and with a candle, and the simplicity and flavor was perfect – while we watched a Hallmark show.

- Lime tortilla chips
- One avocado
- Salsa

We keep our chips in a glass canister, we sliced the avocado and added lime juice and salt over top, and we poured our favorite salsa into a dipping bowl. We added fun napkins and plates (from Dollar Tree), and we were set!

Frito Pie

When's the last time you made this simple supper at home? For me, it had been a while. But it's so simple, and even great for your family, for an evening that's no fuss- and all delish.

- Chili (your favorite recipe) – can just be ground meat, beans, chili powder and cumin, onions, a bit of salsa.
- Fritos
- Cheese
- Onion

Other toppings: cilantro, sour cream, more salsa or other cheeses

This is a great dish for family, as you can let them make their bowls on a buffet table. Just a huge bowl of Fritos, the big pot of chili, and any toppings you wish!

Flavorful Rice

I like rice as a base for bowls, as a side dish, and with a protein, but sometimes it can be just plain – especially brown rice.

Brown rice (I use the quick cook kind – Success)

Chopped onions

Chopped pecans

Chopped parsley

Butter, S&P

Just cook the brown rice according to directions. Meanwhile, chop the mix-ins. Drain the cooked rice and add butter, S&P to taste. Add in your mix-ins, and enjoy. This was super flavorful and we loved it so much.

Carrot Loaf Cake

This was a hit at Easter, and would be a great addition to any May table. It was really an easy cake to make, and the edible flowers on top sent the presentation over the top! There are lots of ingredients, but honestly it was an easy bake.

- 1 c all purpose flour
- ½ cup whole wheat flour
- 1 t ground cinnamon
- 1 t baking powder
- ¾ t baking soda
- ½ t kosher salt
- ¼ t ground ginger
- 1/8 t ground nutmeg
- 2 large eggs
- ¾ c packed dark brown sugar
- ½ c vegetable oil
- 1/3 c unsweetened applesauce
- 1 ½ c shredded carrots

For the glaze:

- 3 oz cream cheese room temp
- 3 T confectioners sugar
- ½ c heavy whipping cream
- ½ t pure vanilla extract

Chopped pistachios and edible flowers for garnish (I found the flowers at Whole Foods, on the mushroom wall.)

Heat oven to 350, lightly coat a loaf pan with cooking spray. Line the bottom with parchment with 1 in overhang for easy lifting. Set aside.

Whisk flours, cinnamon, baking powder, baking soda, salt, ginger, nutmeg in med bowl.

Whisk eggs, brown sugar, oil, and applesauce in a large bowl. Fold in carrots and flour mixture til just combined. Pour into greased loaf pan.

Bake til a wooden toothpick comes out clean, 55-65 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack and let cool about an hour.

Prepare the glaze: Stir cream cheese with confectioners sugar in medium bowl, then gradually whisk in cream til combined. Whisk in vanilla.

Using the overhang, lift the cake from the pan, transfer to platter. Drizzle with glaze. Garnish.

Salad Board

For the simplest supper of all, stare in your fridge and start pulling out all the goodies for a board. This particular night, we had all the makings for a salad:

- Carrots
- Pretzels

- Crackers
- Ranch dressing
- Cukes
- Avocado
- Radishes
- Red onion
- Turkey
- Olives
- Greens
- Cheese slices

I don't know why, but eating salad by choosing the individual ingredients to build your own, is so fun and part of the enjoyment of the meal. If you don't have a large wooden cutting board, visit your local Marshalls. They always seem to have several!

Seven for You – Manners for May – by Marcy Lytle

Manners. Our moms taught them to us, or didn't teach us. And every family had different "important" manners that just had to be observed! I have a friend that insists that her children write thank-you notes for gifts received, but upon discussion with my kids, my son says a verbal "thank-you" is enough. Other parents demand a "yes ma'am" when their kids respond and nothing less will do. Yet, others feel this is a southern thing and don't require it at all. Manners are interesting, they're so important, and yet they vary from house to house.

We thought we'd ask our panel of women which manners are important to them, and why. And we also have observed that manners aren't so obvious any more at the dinner table, among social gatherings, or even in homes between parents and children. Does it matter...this thing about manners?

Read our responses and see what you think, and let us know!

When someone says thank you the correct response is, "You're welcome." Not, "No problem."

When a group sits down to eat at a table, they should wait until all of the people are present before eating - unless there is a compelling reason to go ahead and start eating.

When an elderly person needs a seat, other people should accommodate them by standing or moving to another spot.

When a person has limitations, it's not only good etiquette but also human kindness that dictates how we help them. We speak slowly and clearly if someone has impaired hearing. If someone has trouble visually, we take their arm and help them navigate unfamiliar areas like curbs and door thresholds. We hold the door open for the person using a wheelchair, walker, or baby stroller. – Shelley

Respect, kindness, and consideration. These three form the basis of good manners, which is not found to be common today. Good manners put others before you. When my twins were small and visited their friends' houses, often the mother would say, "Can your children just stay a few days? They are so well-mannered and kind; I want that to rub off on my children." Of course, I laughed and thought to myself, *This is not something that rubs off. It is taught from home from the very beginning.* – Edith

Number 1, answer a question when asked. Or at least, acknowledge that you've heard it. Technology seems to give people license to not listen.

Number 2, be aware of who is around before making negative comments that can hurt. In this angry climate, I feel it's so important to think before we speak, and to practice kindness.

Number 3, clean up after yourself and respect others' things as being *precious* to the owner. Disrespect leads to rejection, which leads to anger. – Tanya

I was raised in a very strict home, so the loss of manners is disturbing to me. Teaching kids the importance of “please,” “thank you,” and “you’re welcome,” can take them in a good direction in life. We enforced these with our kids and now encourage them with our grands.

Another manner that is important to me is respecting elders, and not just the elderly. I believe children should respect all adults and adults should respect anyone older. Actually, respect should be given to all by all. One way I see children not giving respect is by interrupting adults. Don’t get me wrong. We should listen to our kids, but they need to learn when and why to interrupt and not do it at any time because they want attention. I may be old-school, but my mom never let us kids interrupt her when she was talking. We knew to wait patiently!

The last manner on my mind also goes with my previous one. It is the simple act of giving time, even a little time, to our elderly. They are our backbone and should be treated as such. Giving them a little of our time tells them we care; and in turn, we will be uplifted. And that is good for our care. It is a win-win manner being good for all. – Carole

I looked up some of the top manners we should teach our children and ones we all should know. My parents made sure we practiced these daily.

- Say please.
- Say thank you.
- Look people in the eye when you speak to them.
- Apologize.
- Smile & have a **good** attitude.
- Respect each other.
- Treat others as you wish to be treated
- Say excuse me.

I can say, I taught these to my children and try to remember them myself.

One area of etiquette/manners that stands out in my mind as not being successful concerns table manners. I think of my Dad and how we tortured him at every meal.

We had our evening meal as a family. What was prepared for us, we ate. There were no exceptions. Napkins were placed on our laps. We had to sit up straight. No talking at the table unless spoken to. The knife and fork use....as in which hand they should be held in, caused some contention. My mom is from England and she always used utensils the "Brit" way. We were not allowed to. So many rules, I may have forgotten them all.

Most meals were painful, Dad barking orders to sit up straight, to use our napkin. Liver and onions days were the worst. My brother and I cried. I tried to eat it, but I'd choke on the liver. No dessert for us because we didn't eat our meal. This all sounds so horrible...even to me as I'm typing. So let me get to the best part.

My Dad retired from the military and we sat down to eat our first evening meal since he hung up his uniform. I didn't see any food in the kitchen and didn't get to help Mom cook. Dad walked in with KFC....something we never had. Mom took out paper plates! The end of the world was near. No real plates! We had buckets of chicken...no utensils other than a fork for the sides.

Greasy fingers and faces! Dad was slouching and stuffing his face. Napkins were on the floor and the table. We talked with our mouth full. It was amazing!

There were so many regulations that my Dad had to follow in the Air Force, so many expectations. That night, he felt free and we all felt it, too.

The lesson I learned that night is that manners are good and important, but sometimes we must be able to let them slip in the right settings and just enjoy! – Cathy

I was taught to call and let people know that you're dropping by, not just show up. Showing up, unannounced, puts everyone in an awkward position.

Unanswered texts and emails make me grit my teeth! Even if we're busy, surely we can quickly reply with "I'm busy, will respond later." I suppose all the messaging gets lost in the masses, but better efforts can be made.

Call the grandparents. It seems that some kids do this better than others, but if they only knew how much a five-minute conversation meant...

Reciprocate. If someone speaks and is interested in you, be interested in them. If a neighbor has you over for dinner, be kind and return the favor. It's not a "rule" but it's so nice... - Marcy

If you're a parent, reading these things, here's one bit of encouragement and advice. Just do your best, don't sweat the small stuff, and demonstrate good manners. When your kids are grown they will either follow suit or make their own way. But continuing to parent grown kids in the area of manners is never a good idea. By then, it's time to enjoy your own life and let them enjoy theirs. Good manners are important. But relationship – that's the best.

I do have some things I hope don't go out away - especially with my grandkids.

1. I think a handwritten thank you for a gift is always a nice thing or these days an email or text would be acceptable.
2. I still think "Yes ma'am" and "No ma'am" (or sir) is just a way to be respectful to others. And saying thank you!
3. My grandmother taught me to burp with my mouth closed. I am trying to teach my grandkids to do that. My daughter-in-law had never heard of that! - Melissa

I taught my children to write thank-you cards when a relative or a friend sent something by mail, even if they thanked them on the phone. I don't see this anymore, unless it is a wedding gift or shower gift. I also don't think it's appropriate for the mom to send a thank-you for a shower gift instead of the bride-to-be.

My pet peeve is anyone talking with their mouths full! I see kids and adults doing this. And no elbows on the table. That's all! - Debbie

The Dressing – Clothes that Travel – by Marcy Lytle

Hopefully, you'll be traveling again this summer, at least on a road trip or away for a few days. And packing for travel, I hear from so many, is always a chore. I love packing, but I do take time to make sure the clothes are what I need and want to wear. I do not like having to iron, or wondering what to wear, or finding myself caught without an item I need! Clothes that travel well are a must for me, so here are a few tips!

It's almost summer, so **dresses are awesome**. I've shared this brand before, but Merokeety dresses from Amazon are not only super inexpensive, many are made from fabric that doesn't wrinkle, they have pockets, they fit loose and comfy, so they're a great choice for summer vacations.

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=merokeety+dress&crd=2EJP3PUBUKO9M&sprefix=merokee%2Caps%2C241&ref=nb_sb_ss_ts-doa-p_1_7

Always, a **wrap or a jacket** is a must. Whether he cranks up the AC in the car, or the airplane is chilly, or we find ourselves out on a night and the wind is cool, I don't want to be caught without something to keep me cozy. I also like to have it early morning in the hotel room. A long cardi works best for me, because it too folds up, doesn't wrinkle, and a neutral color like gray, black or beige can work well for any outfit.

https://www.amazon.com/MEROKEETY-Womens-Sleeve-Neckline-Cardigans/dp/B07FMRVMYL/ref=sr_1_15?dchild=1&keywords=long+cardigan&qid=1618226816&sr=8-15

The purse or bag to carry ends up being a **backpack or waist pack**, for me. Hands-free is what I want to be when we're sightseeing, hiking, or wandering around new places. If we're doing a lot of hiking or walking, a backpack is great for carrying waters and snacks. (You can have him carry it, too!) If we're mostly shopping and staying in one place, the waist pack (there are so many new options) is great.

https://www.amazon.com/Backpack-Leather-Shoulder-Fashion-Satchel/dp/B083LDYSV4/ref=sr_1_1_sspa?crd=1UN7AMEOZUD4N&dchild=1&keywords=miztique+backpack+purse&qid=1618226897&sprefix=myztique+back%2Caps%2C216&sr=8-1-spons&psc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUE0VkiRQU9BNTNDTjcmZW5jcnlwdGVkSWQ9QTA1ODg4ODAxRjlyTVBPS0VVMzdLJmVuY3J5cHRIZEFkSWQ9QTAxMTA2NzEzOUUyVTNITEwxM0dTJndpZGldE5hbWU9c3BfYXRmJmFjdGlvbj1jbGlja1JIZGlyZWV0JmRvTm90TG9nQ2xpY2s9dHJ1ZQ==

Shoes, oh my. The feet are the problem, right? Walking a lot means comfort, but comfort isn't always cute. **Two pairs of shoes**, at least, go with me (and often, more). I'm not a fan of normal tennis shoes, so I like a cute walking shoe that's stylish yet functional. Sperry's, Keds, or even Converse are all good choices. And then for days when not as much walking is involved, I love a good pair of slides or sandals that don't hurt anywhere! Sore feet make for a sore vacation.

https://www.amazon.com/Keds-Womens-Double-Chambray-Sneaker/dp/B07VB15BK3/ref=sr_1_6?crd=1RQI7ML8KTTVB&dchild=1&keywords=keds+slip+on+sneakers+for+women&qid=1618226967&srefix=keds+slip%2Caps%2C385&sr=8-6

Jewelry. I usually take my pearl studs (I feel they dress up even a t-shirt day), one cute necklace (pendant on a chain), a cuff bracelet, and a watch – and then a few bolder earrings to match outfits. Once all of my outfits are chosen, I **choose the jewelry** and pack it away in a little fabric zip bag.

https://www.amazon.com/ideas/amzn1.account.AFGMY23AF4JI2JNTTWLXIE3ZJVCQ/2TVKQTSKJZ8G6?type=explore&ref=idea_cp_vl_ov_d

Tshirts and jeans/pants. That cardigan I mentioned above is great to wear around the waist with a **graphic tee and jeans/pants**. Opt for one of the wider leg styles for this season. You can wear a pair of pants more than one day, if you're not too messy! Just lay out the pants, top with the tee, and roll up the combo to pack.

https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/category.do?cid=1035712&mmlink=5151,1,HP_Prim_4_a

Tie-Dye tshirt style dresses are so comfortable and cute, especially this one from Old Navy. Pair it with a pair of sneakers, and you're off for a day of sightseeing and fun. You can even tie a cardi around the waist with this dress, too.

https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?pid=647174DBhDpARIsADJ3kjnYKhFqxGHpuN82TRtmOeNZWCzyDiinhDtzvGA8nXzQsoA3txqEjv0aAr7wEALw_wcB&gclsrc=aw.ds

A hat or a head scarf. This is a must-have! There will be days when your hair is not your best look – because of the water in the hotel, the fact that you're too tired to wash it and style it, etc. So find a hat that fits your face, and take it! Or pack a couple of scarves and make a headband. Just fold in a triangle, then roll. Make a knot in the center. Place knot on top of head, and tie scarf at the back of your neck. Pull out hair around the sides, and you're done!

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0792WD78P/?ref=idea_lv_dp_ov_d&tag=onamzmarcel05-20&linkCode=ic6&ascsubtag=amzn1.ideas.2AP72CHJ5C5P9

Lay out your outfits, with jewelry and shoes and bags, before you pack. Always pack an extra couple of tops in case you need them. And of course, leave room for those must-haves you see in the cute shops where you stop, wherever your vacation leads you.

Enjoy!

Three Moms - Loving Laundry (Not)

I'll start by saying that I'm very bad at laundry, and my husband does it all! I would say he probably does 95% of it, no joke. He is way better at balancing working at home and laundry. I'd rather do any other chore! I am good at putting in the washer and into the dryer, but putting it away and folding it – I'm bad at it! He folds while we're watching a show with the family. I'm grateful for him!

Now that the kids are a bit older, the kids are involved. Each has a basket, and we tell them to put away their clothes. We still have to hang for them, though, because they're too short for that! They put things in their drawers.

Now, we have all the masks to wash! So I created a basket in the laundry room for the masks after school, then we wash them at the end of the week. We have stayed on top of that really well!

We do laundry daily, as with five people that works for us.

My laundry room is now organized, which helps us all. I hate it when the room is a mess. I have added wall decals, a cubby for vacuum parts and attachments and laundry soap, and I'm excited about it (maybe I'll even do laundry more often). I have collapsible laundry baskets – a space saver! I also switched to dryer balls instead of dryer sheets. I have saved money by using these, and I can spray them with essential oils diluted with water, so they smell nice!

We use Method laundry detergent – free and clear, and mango scent for softener. I even have a lavender laundry boost for bedding and towels. I switched to Method years ago, because of allergies, and I also shop at Target. For some reason, certain smells linger in clothes (from kids) but this brand works. We use liquid detergent. I also clean my washing machine with bleach solution in the tub of the washer every few weeks. We also have a hamper in the laundry room for wet things, or super soiled items, so these aren't in their rooms.

Mom of Four

We are in a new season of laundry! The old way was having the kids responsible for folding and putting away, before the season of sports and activities. But now, there is no time for chores – really at all. Back in the early part of the year, we realized how busy we would be, and it seemed insane...as I'm also working a lot of hours with my job!

I have recently hired a lady to come every Friday, and for \$60 she cleans and does laundry. She does 4-5 loads while cleaning, and gets us caught up. I've also been in a good habit of throwing a load in, in the morning, then transitioning to dryer after school, as I can...

One of our biggest challenges is towels. The kids are supposed to hang their towels but it's not a habit. These are still an issue! Six towels for a family each night is too much, so we're working on that! My mother-in-law (she had five kids!) recommends that each kid have a different color of towel, and is then responsible for washing and putting away that towel, and then reusing it!

We use all Tide Free & Clear because our oldest is sensitive to laundry detergent. For drying, Arm & Hammer dryer sheets, and dryer balls!

Mom of Two

Before kids, I used to do laundry when all of our clothes piled up, maybe once a week. But since kids, with constant spills and stains, one day a week would end up being an entire day of laundry! So now, if I see a laundry basket full, I throw in a load first thing in the morning, then in the evening I dry and put away. I do about three smaller loads throughout the week, so weekends are not overwhelming!

My kids do not help, but they do run and jump in the warm and dry pile. I sort out the clothes into piles and then put away. I have had the girls try to take their clothes to their rooms, but they're just starting that.

I've been trying to teach my kids that sometimes their kids are not always dirty, so they don't always have to be thrown in the hamper! This helps loads not be so big!

I just tried a new detergent Buff City Company – and I love it! They have all sorts of products for laundry, cleaning supplies, soaps, etc. It smells great and has just a few ingredients. Both of my girls have sensitive skin, so we do not want harsh chemicals. This detergent is great for all of us! Side note: my husband is a dentist, so at work we wear lab jackets and scrubs. My husband's scrubs are a mess – so they are kept separately.

In summary, best thing for me, being a working mom, is to divide up the laundry into smaller loads, so that the weekends are left for fun! (I do not like putting clothes away, so I do ask for help...)

Tried and True – Emergency Ready – by Marcy Lytle

Back a few months ago, we here in Texas experienced something that perhaps we will never experience again, and had never experienced before. I'm sure you heard it on the news...as the ice/snow storm of the century wreaked havoc on our city, our power grid, our water system, and more. We were not prepared for that emergency. But I have a brother-in-law that is prepared (he lives in California), and he was so nice to send us our first item for our emergency kit, should we need it again.

I thought I'd share with you what he sent, along with the links to buy the items. Maybe you will want to prepare for your next storm when the lights go out, the water is shut off, or food is not plentiful in the stores. Who would have thought we'd need all those things? Not I. But it's good to be prepared, and why not start now, and slowly but surely get our supplies in order?

Portable Heater. These run on 1 lb. bottle of propane. There are many on the market but a good choice is Mr. Heater little buddy. They run in price from \$80 to \$150.00. The propane bottles are \$50.00 for six. You can often find them on sale. 12 bottles is a good amount to keep on hand.

https://www.amazon.com/Mr-Heater-F232000-Indoor-Safe-Portable/dp/B002G51BZU/ref=sr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=mr+heater+buddy&qid=1617738234&sr=8-2

Water. You can buy water at the store to keep on hand or you can buy emergency water that has a longer shelf life. It comes in cans, quart cartons and in bags. For drinking you should keep 1 gallon of water per person, per day. If you buy store-bought water, write a date on the bottles and rotate every six months. My brother-in-law has a 55 gallon drum of water he keeps filled and rotates the water every year.

Food. You can buy food at the store and set it aside for emergencies. Most store-bought food has a "use by" date printed on it. This does not mean the food is bad on that date - it just means that it might lose its nutritional value. One idea is to keep emergency food in an emergency shed. Canned fruit and vegetables, meats, tuna, beans and rice, and a large bucket of freeze dried breakfast foods are great. Rotate the food as it expires. Some emergency food that is freeze dried has an expiration date anywhere from 5 years to 20 years. This is not the best tasting food but will keep you fed. Keep about a month's worth of food. You can also buy emergency food bars that have 1200 calories that will keep you alive (some taste good - some don't.)

Communication. We were given a crank powered radio, weather channel, phone charger, flash lite combo. It also has a solar panel for charging. It's good to have two heavy duty auxiliary batteries for cell phones that have four complete charges and can be recharged with your computer (if there is electricity) or solar. One option is the Patriots 4 (they run about \$50.00.)

https://www.amazon.com/Version-Emergency-Hand-Crank-Radio-4000mAh-Portable-Flashlight/dp/B085ZX6TCR/ref=sr_1_6?crd=3ILG8ORPX38DU&dchild=1&keywords=crank+po

[wered+flashlight%2Fradio%2Fcell+phone+charger&qid=1617738843&sprefix=crank+powered+%2Caps%2C211&sr=8-6](#)

Here is list of additional items that would be helpful to keep in your emergency kit:

Lanterns

Batteries with a shelf life of 10 years

Solar blankets

Propane stove and propane bottles

Solar sleeping bags

Glow sticks

Water filter/water filter straws

Extra medications

Cash (if there is no electricity there will be no banks)

Treats you enjoy to keep up your morale

Hopefully, these kits won't be used. But weather is certainly going to extreme these days, all over the country, and it's great to be prepared when storms hit...or to have supplies when they hit a neighbor nearby, so that we can share.

I'm thankful my brother-in-law got us started. It might be a fun idea to get your family started, as well.



HOME

A Night to Remember – Wild Flowers – by Marcy Lytle

May flowers. Hopefully, they're blooming somewhere near you, and you can gather a few for this study with your kiddos. They're beautiful, they only appear certain times of the year, and they're called "wild." Why is that? It's interesting to know, and might just help us all grow...

Preparation: Take the kiddos on a weekend to view wildflowers and try picking several to use for the study that evening. If you cannot pick wildflowers, then print some pictures of several to use in the study.

Wildflower characteristics:

They grow without human help – We have to water our houseplants or they die, but wildflowers just depend on the water they need from their Maker. We too, can depend on what we need from our Maker, God, to bloom where we are planted.

The daisy is one of the most identifiable of all wildflowers – Do you know the names of the wildflowers we have picked? If not, give them a name by what you see!

In most cultures around the globe, *wildflowers symbolize happiness* – Why do you think that is so? Is it their color? Do they make you happy looking at them?

Wildflowers regrow each year by reseeding – The wind blows and there they go – replanting wherever they land! Wildflower seeds hitchhike on animal fur, get blown by the wind, or even float down the river.

Watch video.

Native plants, like wildflowers, are necessary to *support insects and other wildlife* – All of God's creation works together to create beauty, provision, and growth. Isn't that cool!?

Wildflowers *help stabilize the soil from erosion* – they have a job other than just to stand there and be pretty.

During winter, wildflower seeds *are an important food source* for birds!

Embed this video https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=11&v=3CCOWHa-qfc&feature=emb_logo

Luke 12:27-28 is a great verse about observing the flowers of the field. And we are told that God cares for the flowers, so why wouldn't he care for us – the ones made in His image – the ones he died for – and where he now resides – in our hearts?

Let's read it together:

Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith!

Do you know who Solomon was? He was a great and wealthy man, but God says even his great riches didn't make him as valuable as one lone wildflower that God cares for.

We are like these wildflowers in many ways. God is the one who takes care of us, keeps us growing and living, and he also spreads our "seeds" across the world so that his beauty keeps replanting and showing up, to bring happiness to those around us!

An Adage A Day - Here's Hogan! – by Carole Gilbert

Have you ever thought of someone as being as “stubborn as a mule?” Maybe you even said that to them. A lot of us in our family are stubborn. My kids will tell you that I am and it's true. I get it honestly from my parents and my kids get it honestly, themselves, from me and their dad. There is nothing wrong with being stubborn as a mule, depending on what you are stubborn about.

For many “donkey's years,” I thought a mule and a donkey were the same but as I researched this column, I learned that is not true, I guess I need to get off my high horse and learn a little more about the animals around me. I always heard, “A horse is a horse, of course, of course, and that's according to the source, the famous Mr. Ed.” I loved Mr. Ed, the horse.

We have horses down the street from us and a family of donkeys across the street from them. And then we have one donkey just two houses away from us named Hogan. I do not know if any of these are mules, but I bet most of them are stubborn. Hogan is a small little guy but when he brays, or honks, as the neighbor boy calls it, he can be heard for a long distance and he sounds like he is in such distress although I know he is not. Hogan is very well cared for by his hosts.

Every time I hear Hogan, I am reminded of the phrase “stubborn as a mule.” I imagine Hogan brays the way he does because he is wanting something, even though he has everything he needs. He is stubborn because he wants something more, and he is going to be heard until he gets it.

This phrase, “stubborn as a mule” seems to have no definite origin on file. It does have one reference from the early 1800's and it has been quoted ever since. While writing this column I learned that mules came from horses and donkeys being bred together. I thought, “What? Hold your horses! I never knew that.” This was the straw that broke the donkey's back! I had to know more. I learned that mules are actually not stubborn but smart and cautious. So much so that they will in any way possible avoid danger which is where the misconception of stubbornness began.

And it was no “donkey work” to me to also learn that donkeys held symbolic meaning in Biblical times. They were a symbol of peace and wisdom where horses were symbolic for coming in power as in carrying kings coming to fight. This is thought to be why Jesus chose a donkey to ride into Jerusalem, to come in peace. This is also thought to be why donkeys have the impression of a cross in their fur on their backs. Did you know that? I didn't!

All of this reminded me of one of my favorite stories that is as strong as a horse, even though it is about a donkey. It is found in Numbers 22 starting with verse 22. This story tells of Balaam and his donkey that had been with him for a long time. Basically, Balaam is not doing what God wants, the donkey is not doing what Balaam wants, so Balaam punishes the donkey for being stubborn. Then the donkey looks at Balaam and starts to speak! I think if my pet started to

speaking, I would listen. The Angel of God was using the donkey and spoke through him to Balaam because in the end God would prevail. I believe donkeys must be special if God used one like this and Jesus chose one for His triumphant entry.

So, every time I hear Hogan braying,
I will look to God and I will be praying.
I hope to not be stubborn as the mules,
But wise like the donkey,
In remembering God rules.
As strong as a horse I will try to be.
I will share about God,
And I hope you will join me.

Picture of Hogan is courtesy of his Hostess, Deborah Klein. Thank you, Deborah!

Chipped China – Thyme for Cheers – by Jennifer Lytle

It has been a year since my first article with THYME Magazine. I am so grateful to be able to write, to share, to laugh, and to reflect on God's love with each of you. I would love to reflect on some of my favorite takeaways from the articles throughout the year.

- Close your RV's awning every evening to avoid needless repairs.
- Sometimes we might seem like a big loser, but Jesus makes us a winner!
- Pecan trees can bring a family together.
- You have permission to celebrate!
- The middle of one's life story often requires faith.
- Bedroom decor goes on sale in January.
- Plating food probably makes it taste better.

With all that I have gleaned from browsing the pages of *A Bundle of THYME*; I am curious about your favorite thoughts, lessons, ideas, or encouragements.

I have enjoyed the travel plans and date nights. They have inspired me to try to make my own, but also freed me up to simply try the same activities. We tried:

- the dinosaur park
- a stay-cation over Spring Break

I have appreciated "meeting" the authors through their biographies and shared photographs. Maybe I can make a road trip out of visiting:

- The Pecan Shed
- Angela's church
- Marcy's porch (don't you love the different set-ups?)

Even though fashion magazines have never been my favorite type of perusing material, it has been interesting to consider current fashion trends. Now I might try:

- purses with chains for straps
- scarves as belts
- scarves as headbands

Some of my favorite articles are those found in *A Night to Remember*. Memorable moments with my own kiddos are thanks to:

- the big Loser
- a drive-in movie night

Aside from these fun tidbits, I have continued to hear God whisper the same message I first shared when I began to write with THYME. My work is to embrace what is before me and know the joy that Papa has given as my inheritance. Thank you THYME (and readers!)! Cheers to another year together.

I Don't Do Teenagers – The Next Season – by Marcy Lytle

Summer's near and there's this fear that our teens are going to nag us, sit around and play games, eat us out of house and home, or want to be with their friends nonstop, and all the other things that teens do to drive us bonkers. It's good to have a family talk and decisions made and items covered, before the last school day ends. Expectations and realizations need to be stated and even written down, so that the family can breathe and look forward to the summer vacation rather than dread it...

Will they work? If a summer job is what we want for our kids, have them start looking now. But decide on number of hours, if you will need to transport them, where it needs to be located, or will they babysit or do lawns, or what? Or maybe you could pay them to do work you need at the house. Talk about it now, have a plan, and use the month of May to make it happen.

What about home life? Lay out a plan with your teens on expected items to work on during the summer, like closet cleaning, bathroom drawer organizing, tending the animals and/or yard, perhaps making a meal once a week, watching younger siblings, or applying for colleges. Talk about each expectation and/or chore and line it out on the calendar. Perhaps you'll pick three big items, so place one in each month of the summer for them to do.

Phone/game time? Set limits. It's summer, so maybe they can have more hours alone with their phones/games, but still set limits. And if the phone/games ever become an issue of contention, then they're taken away. Talk about what games are allowed and safe. Remind them again about proper interaction with others, and have them check in. Be aware of what they're doing, and commend them when they do well.

Activities? Will there be a family vacation or weekend fun? Get it on the calendar, and include your teens. Let them also have input with maybe a sleepover, or a shopping day, or time with their friends. Sit down and talk about family vs. friend time. Hear their concerns, listen to them, as you want them to listen to you.

Food and meals? If teens are home, invite them into the kitchen/planning of meals. Maybe they can cook or prepare something healthy on a regular basis. Or maybe she'd rather do dishwasher duty, or he'd rather set the table. Make sure family dinners happen, and happen often.

Sleep? This can be a real point of contention in the summer. Will you allow sleeping in til noon daily? And staying up til 2am nightly? If not, teens need to be told expectations and talk it through. Maybe one night a week is late night. Or one morning is late sleep. Schedules are so helpful, talking is a must, and having family discussions are good!

Who's the parent? YOU ARE. It's so good to listen to our kids, get their input, and give as we can. But there will be things they ask that we have to say no (if we feel uncomfortable or that it's unsafe or they've lost our trust). There will also be things we can say yes to (as they've matured, become more responsible, or just because we want to offer fun.) We can try our best to balance both.

What if we disagree? YOU WILL. There will be non-negotiables that they won't understand, but that's okay. There will also be things you'll realize you've been too hard about, or too lenient with, and you'll need to explain or apologize. But communication helps. Praying together helps. Listening helps.

And respect wins.

Practical Parenting – Clothes Issues - by Marcy Lytle

He emerges from his room in his favorite shirt, but it has a ketchup stain you were never able to get out. She shows up in a polka dot skirt, with a striped tee, and her high heels and looks like (well, you have no words), and she's waiting for your approval of delight. He insists on wearing ONLY boots everywhere on every occasion, even to the playground. And she will not wear a dress, no matter how much you plead and beg, no way.

I think dressing kids is one area where we parents daily have troubles and constant turmoil between their idea of what looks good and our idea of what IS good. After all, we are the parents, right? I recall such issues with my own kids, often.

So how, as a parent, do we navigate the clothes issue? It doesn't go away in the teen years. In fact, by then it's brands and how much skin to reveal, and image, and body parts, and oh my!

I think one of the most fun things about being a mom was shopping for my kids' clothes when they were little. But I remember being so sad to realize that they started forming opinions about their own outfits at a very young age, and they no longer wanted me to pick out their clothes! Mom alert! Some kids don't care about such things, but so many do...

Here are some general ideas on clothes picking and wearing, to help young moms let go and still have control and sanity when kids show up for school, for that wedding, or wherever we are going...that might help.

Discuss clothes options. It never hurts to have a discussion with our kiddos about their likes/dislikes and about your demands/leniency. From the time they can talk, tell them your expectations (they have to wear underwear!) and listen to theirs. Then meet somewhere in the middle.

Discuss skin baring. Believe me. These issues will occur before you're ready. Tell her why she needs to cover her stomach. Just don't make her feel ashamed with your stern scolding. Use clothing wars to talk about wise (and safe) life choices.

Discuss and even write down closet choices. Maybe your three no-budge items are: No stains, no bellies, and nothing tight. This allows them to choose their clothes within boundaries, without you saying a word.

Let go of perfection. You may see an outfit put together that's SO CUTE and want her to see it through your eyes, but she most likely won't. Let her mix/match. It's okay. He may only prefer solid t-shirts even though that plaid button-down would look handsome. Let him wear what he loves.

Let go of battles. Ultimately, what you say goes, when they are little. But think about your battles and if it's your "image" you're protecting or if it's really a battle worth fighting and winning.

Let go of projection. In other words, maybe you detest ruffles and bows, but she loves them. Let her love them. Or maybe you absolutely love khakis on little boys, but he only loves jeans. It's okay.

Clothing wars start when they're really young and then they turn into bitter brawls when they're teens, if we're not careful. Parenting, even from the closet, is hard sometimes. But it requires examining our own motives as much as it does teaching them to observe their own. And it requires us to stand firm, but also to let go. That dance that is never easy between mom/dad and the littles.

And after you've thought hard and discussed and let go, then pray. He cares even about the closet wars. So ask Him and let Him give you ideas and thoughts to consider as those kiddos of yours choose their outfits wisely...or show up at the breakfast table in garb that makes you gasp.

Tiny Living – Water Wars - by Leyanne Enterline

One thing I've learned most about tiny living is that we have to be creative and work with what we have! We literally must be prepared for the most random, strange things that could possibly happen.

Something that we did not think about is the amount of humidity that comes inside our tiny home. We constantly have a line of water dripping from the edges of the inside on the ceiling. The mess this causes is really annoying. It mostly drips onto Eli's bed, the cabinets that contain all our clean towels, and my side of the closet. (We have no idea why it's on only one side!) The only guess is that we have vent fans that are on the other side, so those must in some way help prevent the humidity - just on that side. To help with mildew smell, we have added a vent box *thing*, not exactly sure what it's called, but it absorbs the drips. And then we add a towel over the clean items that are inside the cabinets. As for Eli's bed, his bedding just gets washed a lot!

Water wars tend to be an ongoing issue with our tiny living. I have somehow managed to make something pour out a ridiculous amount of water, which of course has caused some warping. We have a filtered water container (I never know how much water is in it), so I am constantly filling it up. And more than once, I have overfilled and awakened the next day to a massively wet floor and counter top. I managed to do the same to our espresso machine and had another lovely mess on the counter. I guess the plus is that the counter gets a really good cleanup about once a month!

Another good idea for our tiny living is that we make sure the outdoor fridge is completely closed. Apparently if it's not, water will for some reason leak into the kids' drawers in their room and make another unwelcome pool inside. We found out the hard way, as well, that we must check all around the outside for any cracks that may happen over time. During a good rainstorm here, if there are any leaks, water can possibly seep inside the closet and soak all the clothes. *Isn't that awesome...*

Speaking of water, we have super hard water out here. This really affects everything. Anything that has a filter must be changed regularly. Our shower vent head must soak in vinegar weekly because it gets so clogged with calcium build-up, and this causes water to shoot out randomly and everywhere! It's the same with the sinks. The filters must soak regularly to help rid the calcium build-up. The hot water heater is something that must be cleaned very often, as well. It gets a collection of rocks in it, and this too can cause major problems.

Do you want to live tiny, yet?

All in all, we have learned that we will forever deal with water wars. We are thankful that they've all been resolved for now! We think in living tiny that we're ready for whatever may come, but somehow the water wars keep us on our toes...towels and tools in hand.



YOU

Healthy Habits – Routines – by Marcy Lytle

Routines, we hear, are meant to be broken. And while that's true, when routines become ruts, there are sometimes that routines can be healthy for us! If we routinely wear the same outfit and never branch out for something new and fun, well that routine might be one that needs to be changed up a bit. But if we have no routines at all, this can affect our health negatively. Let me explain:

The routine of brushing our teeth and cleaning our face is healthy. Leaving makeup on and going to bed is not a good mix. What causes this, sometimes, is that we stay up too late and are too tired when it's finally bedtime. A better routine might be to set the alarm and start the prep for bed at a better time, when we are wider awake.

The routine of daily quiet time is healthy. No, we don't need to fret or feel guilty if we miss it due to schedules or "down" days...not at all. But the practice of sitting still to read, pray and listen is rejuvenating. And if we can't find a good devotional, it's okay. We can just read a few scriptures, or release our troubles at his feet, or pray for that friend. Just the routine of stillness is so refreshing.

The routine of watering plants is healthy. Keeping something alive, tending to it, taking the time to stand there and water it is something I find to be soothing and just what I need to calm my soul. I learn so much from watching wilting leaves perk up in a matter of minutes. If you're a young mom, you probably don't have time to tend plants, so just tend your children and observe them while you "water," and smile.

The routine of list-making is releasing and healthy. I find that writing down my to-do's daily, weekly, and monthly takes them out of my head (where they are scrambled) and onto paper or my phone or calendar (where they are ordered.) Do I get them all done? No way. But I sure feel organized and it's easier to keep track, with this daily routine.

The routine of exercise is healthy. We all know this, but often days and weeks slip by (because we're busy) and exercise is avoided and not experienced altogether. I get it. But I've found that sometimes we put pressure on ourselves to perform these massive workouts that require so much time and energy. Even a 15 minute walk on a routine is good. Even a 15 minute dance workout on YouTube gets our hearts pumping. And if these are routinely done, daily, we are actually moving and getting it done!

The routine of giving thanks is healthy. Stopping to actually write down our thanks or note them, daily, is maybe one of the healthiest activities we can do! I've found that when I don't, days go by and I forget the niceties, the blessings, and the beauty of the world around me. But when I stop and record, I smile bigger, breathe in deeper, and sigh out a huge "thank-you" to the ONE that keeps me sane.

The routine of cooking is healthy. It's hard to keep meals healthy, make them from scratch, and take the time to clean up, especially when life is busy. But we can find ways to cook so that it's fun and healthy. We can ask for help. We can buy premade veggies cut up or frozen or other

products to help with the speed of cooking. We can keep it simple. But cooking, because we control the ingredients, is always better than grabbing in a line somewhere...

The above are probably not something new, and we could go on and on with other routines that are healthy. The gist of this article is that some established routines help give us order, make our lives more organized, and enable us to have time to actually relax when the routines are done. Routines aren't meant to break our backs and cause us angst. Those types of lists can be let go. But the good ones make us strong and healthy and more agreeable to be around...

Life in a Nutshell – Those Red Marks – by Jill Montz

Very few people know I was the valedictorian of my high school graduating class back in May of 1998. Other than putting this achievement on a lot of scholarship forms and a few summer job applications in college, it rarely is useful information 23 years later. While I don't lead off with this accolade when I introduce myself to strangers, it does hold more meaning to me than I actually wish it did.

I always loved school. I loved to read, I loved to learn new things, I loved to write (and still do) and I was good at taking tests. Math was never my strongest subject, but, when things did click for me, I loved that feeling of breakthrough. School helped me to validate myself. Getting those red penned 100s on tests and straight A's on a report card reaffirmed that I was "good enough."

After high school, college proved to be a bit tougher. There were no more daily grades to tell me "good job" and some classes only had mid-terms and finals. These courses made me wait a long time until I got the reassurance from a number that I was measuring up to what the expectations of the professor were. Then there came my first B. Talk about wailing and gnashing of teeth. And of course it was in Algebra. I only let that happen one other time and that was in grad school. Another math-based course. Geez! Jill and numbers just don't compute.

I spent five years in college getting my bachelor's and master's in business administration and I would have gone longer if I hadn't decided getting married was more important. I still loved school. I still loved to read, learn new things, write, and I was still good at taking tests. And I still loved getting those red written 100s and A's to remind me I was "good enough."

After college, I joined the working world in the human resources department of a local hospital. Here there were no daily grades and only one yearly evaluation. Then I left the hospital to help manage my family's retail store and working for my parents meant no evaluations. Of course I was told daily I was doing well, but there was not a grade to justify such a thing. I had no numerical way to quantify how I was doing. Without the red pen marking up my progress or a printed letter beside my name to tell me I was "good enough" I had no way to reassure myself I was...or wasn't.

And so I leaned more towards the "wasn't" on my own self-evaluation. (When you are a perfectionist at heart and good in academics it is easy to have validation that you are or are close to "perfect" at least in one area of your life.) Without grades, I tended to focus on all my mistakes, failings, areas that needed improvement, and never saw myself as "good enough."

I marked up my soul with red strikes against it.

Now let me tell you about a different type of measurement we use in our business. Most people don't know we keep track of how many pounds of each variety in each particular orchard we harvest each year. We keep these records for a variety of reasons, but one is to see how the trees in that area are doing. Are they continuing to increase in production each year, maintaining, or declining? Then we use that information to see if we need to investigate problems or manage the trees differently. We need to know if we are doing a good job with the trees and if the trees are "good enough" to keep investing time and resources into them.

The trees, however, do no such testing. They keep no records from year to year. They don't even consult the birds or the bees for their input. They are simply trees. They grow when it is

time to grow. They bear fruit when it is time to harvest. And they go dormant in the winter when it is time to rest. They know they have done “good enough” because they did what God created them to do. Outside forces like nature and our orchard crew might break them or shake them, freeze them or fertilize them, soak them in rain from the heavens or water from a sprinkler, but the trees don’t worry about such things. They go back to doing what God made them to do and that was not to check their total production numbers from the last five years.

Now back to me. It took a divorce (where, ironically, I felt like someone had scribbled a big fat zero on my heart) to help me find a way to better evaluate myself. During those dark days when I felt no one could understand my pain and hurt, I turned to the only one I trusted that could. I was 30-years-old when I read the Bible cover to cover for the first time. And in those pages I found a different way to wield a red pen. Proverbs 3:5-6 says “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him and he will make your paths straight.”

So if I was to stop leaning on the old ways I knew how to judge my own worth, I had find new ones. And thankfully the Bible had plenty.

Psalms 139:13-14 “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Jeremiah 29:11 “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Luke 12:6-7 “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs on your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

In these and many other scriptures, God tells me and you we are worth more than what a red pen writes on a test or a report card says. We are worth more than what this world says about us. And we are worth more than what we think of ourselves. In fact, He tells us we are worth the ultimate gift He could give us. Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

God took a red pen that day that flowed, not with ink, but with the blood of His Son Jesus Christ, and He wrote on each of us the words...*forgiven, redeemed, loved, wanted, and worthy*. The greatest teacher of all said we could never be “good enough” but we don’t have to be because Jesus paid it all.

I still struggle with my perfectionist ways from time to time. I often want to go back to college just to get that rush of seeing a number or a letter next to my name. I pray daily for God to take these needs from my heart and fill that hole with His love. It’s a process. And if I was grading myself on how I was doing so far, I wouldn’t give myself a numerical or letter grade. I would just take my red pen and write on the top of the page...Showing Improvement! Keep up the good work!

Life Right Now – Running Buddies - by Hannah Bouck

Growing up, my dad was a marathon runner and I SO badly wanted to be like him.

I was in 7th grade and decided I wanted to learn how to run with stamina and gusto like him. After weeks of begging to take me along with him on a run, Dad finally gave in, but prefaced the excursion by letting me know I was required to keep up. I felt confident, so I put on my best Skechers and hit the gravel, eager to join my dad....

What I did not expect was for him to take off and literally leave me in the sand, frustrated with me that I couldn't keep pace and that I had intruded on his running ritual. From that day forward, I have hated running.

Sob story aside, I learned a lot from that happening. And also, let me preface by saying I absolutely adore my dad! He has his moments like we all do, but he is a great dad! He just takes running a little too seriously (wink wink.)

What I learned is the importance of walking.

We have to walk before we can run, and we have to tie our shoelaces before we can go outside. All of those steps lead to something else, and they all are also learned. All of this to say, each step leads to a destination and as we strengthen certain muscles, we soon have learned to run from point A to point B with little effort. What we forget; however, is to bring people along for the journey and slow down enough to walk with them along the way.

In a twist of fate, I recently began walking distances with a goal to be able to run a 5K. I'm taking baby steps, as I conquer previous mindsets towards the activity, but I am grateful for those who are taking time to teach me along the way. It's hard to break old ways of thinking.

My dad had his "running solo" mindset and I had my "no running at all" one. Neither really had positive outcomes, because they were both centered towards the "I."

The hope right now is that as "I" strengthen this learning muscle, ultimately I hope that I continue to walk with those in need of a running buddy, as well.

Holding you close,

Strengthening Your Core – Never Heavy – by Marcy Lytle

I've heard all of my life that we are to "bear one another's burdens" and "carry our cross" and "intercede" for others, etc. While all of those are great things to do for others and for HIM, we often miss exactly what the scriptures mean when they tell us to carry things! I was just reminded of this lately, when I heard his sweet voice remind me,

"Carry your burdens TO me, not instead of me."

God never asked us to pick up the burdens of others and carry them as if they were our own. Maybe we hear of a best friend going through a horrific illness with her child and we are sick for days with worry. We carry her need in prayer, until we almost become sick ourselves. We wonder what would happen if we had to endure that same hardship. We are angry at God for not helping her out NOW. And we keep pleading and begging, all with the idea that this is casting our cares on Him.

Casting is letting go. And the reason we can let them go is because HE CARES FOR US.

I have the most trouble with this, and have had all my life.

I carry others' burdens on my own shoulders, and then that makes both of our burdens too heavy to bear. I empathize to the point of being unable to sleep because I'm overcome with sorrow as they too are sorrowful. And then...I don't know what to say to this friend so I retreat and pray...and cry and wail...only to feel exhausted when I'm through.

Here's one of the most familiar passages in the Bible:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find **rest** for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is **light**." (Matthew 11:28)

However, I don't know many of us that walk in the rest when we are weary and burdened. *Rest* is the key word here, right in the middle of weariness and overloaded shoulders! How can that be?

Somehow, we have to let these things go and lay them on His shoulders, and then walk beside Him, in His strength. Maybe we can visualize the burden hoisted up to his shoulders and the relief our shoulders feel when the transfer is made.

The next part of that passage says to take his yoke upon us – because he's gentle and humble in heart AND his yoke is easy and his burden is *light!* If the burdens we're carrying are heavy, they're not meant for us to shoulder! With oxen, a yoke enables both animals to share the load. But a yoke with Jesus – well he's pulling and we're just staying next to him!

Somehow, we have to connect ourselves to the truth that Jesus is the strong one, and because of his strength, we are able to walk, without heaviness, because His arms never tire. We have to see that the yoke just connects us to Him, it's secure and steady, but it's never heavy.

That rest for our souls is so elusive, right? How can we rest, when our friends are suffering? I don't think anyone wants their friend to suffer when they are suffering. What good does that do? If we find rest for our souls, then our friend can glean from that rest, instead of having two that fret.

He promises rest when we come to him weary and tired, yoke up with him and walk in his strength and learn from his gentle humble heart.

Somehow, we most certainly will find rest for our souls – that will then translate to rest for the souls of our friends in need – because the transfer has been made. Visualize it, thank Him that when we are weak He is strong, and then walk along admiring the One who not only carries our burdens but relieves them in due time...

He offers rest. So let's take it. And not feel guilty or refuse it, and keep stumbling along.

Under Pressure - A King's Dream – by Debbie Haynes

Last month, the story was about the four guys that took a hard stand against the culture of the day and against the king's order by refusing to eat the king's meat – because it had been contaminated with idol worship and not prepared according to right standards. In the end of that story, God poured out favor and these four young men influenced the entire kingdom, and the king even declared that the one true God would be worshipped by his people. So we saw that it certainly paid off to take a stand!

This month, King Neb (we'll shorten Nebuchadnezzar) starts having troubling dreams, but then forgets what his dreams are about. He calls together magicians, astrologers and sorcerers who tell the king to relay his dreams so that they can interpret. Since King Neb doesn't remember the dreams, but only the trouble they cause, he requires these guys to make the dreams known to him – and if they don't he will cut them into pieces and make their houses dunghills. Sounds like a good movie plot, right? However, if they do show him the dreams and interpret them, these guys will receive gifts and great rewards, with honor!

Of course, the guys start defending themselves and state that there's no one who can do such a thing, stating, "Only the gods can do that!" They continued to argue, and King Neb stops them in their tracks. He is so angry that he decrees that all the "wise" men be killed. What a tantrum the king throws!

Daniel and his brothers were sought out to carry out this decree (the same four guys from last month's story.) But Daniel went straight to the king and said he could relay the dreams and interpret, if he was given a little time to pray to God. King Neb agreed, and Daniel and his brothers prayed, and God gave them the knowledge they needed.

Daniel praises God for his wisdom, for the seasons, for kings that he places and displaces, and for all of God's understanding. He thanks God for making known the king's matter to him, and was ready when the king asked Daniel to share.

Daniel starts by stating that the guys the king sought out to help him could not help him at all, but only God in Heaven *reveals secrets* and makes known such things, and then he tells King Neb the details of his dreams.

In verse 44 of Daniel 2, Daniel interprets, by stating that God is setting up a kingdom that cannot be destroyed. The king hears the full explanation and falls down and worships God, the "revealer of secrets," and makes Daniel a ruler over the entire province and over all the wise men in the area.

The declaration in this story is that there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets!

In the New Testament in Luke 12, it says there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nothing hidden that will not be known. It further says that whatever is spoken in darkness will be heard in the light, and that which is said in closets will be proclaimed from the rooftops.

God still has ways of revealing hidden things through His Spirit that lives in us, when we believe. He is always about bringing darkness into light, so that lives will be saved. He demonstrates his faithfulness to those that follow His ways, and he still guides human affairs when we humble ourselves to honor and obey His ways, and to hear his voice. And when we do, even kings and kingdoms will fall and declarations will be made that honor God and no other!



MARRIAGE

After 40 Years – What a Picture – by Marcy Lytle

He carries the umbrella to the door to open it for me, because it rains.

He holds the popcorn box during the movie for me, all I have to do is enjoy.

He asks me if I'm cold so that he can offer me his jacket.

He rubs my tired feet while we watch a show.

He forgives me when I'm snappy because I'm tired.

He thinks I'm beautiful when I know I look disheveled and a mess.

Very often, I sit in wonder at this husband God has given me that depicts a picture of the love of God to me, the love that I missed somehow growing up among the “do’s” and the “don’ts” of Christian living. God knew I needed that, so here he sits beside me, my husband of over four decades, now.

Oh sure, we often get in arguments and there are days when I don’t see those niceties above, but only the words or the inactions that bug me and make me angry. All married couples have days where we see nothing but the bad about the other, because of a misspoken word or deed or out-of-character move on their part, or ours!

But today, in this early morning time alone, I’m so thankful for the picture of Christ my husband has been to me on so many days.

He wipes the kitchen clean, a lot better than I do.

He goes along with my adventures and enjoys EVERYTHING we do, because he’s content.

He hugs me tight and holds my hand, so that I know he’s there.

Today, I choose to focus on the good in him, and not the bad. I note that I can always find bad, because we’re flawed, and we mess up daily. But I’m focusing on the good from His hand and from his hand, because enjoying the good brings peace to our marriage and my heart. Enjoying the good about him turns my gaze upward to give thanks for this jewel of a man that stays with me, is loyal, and is my best friend.

I don’t know where your marriage stands, or if you’re even married, at all. But there’s this verse that says HE will even be our husband – our protector and provider – when we feel alone and without. Isaiah 54 says our Maker is our husband.

I know that my happiness and feeling loved is not dependent upon Jon, because he fails, and so do I – so often. But on these mornings where I give pause and notice the areas where he shines, it feels good and right and maybe one of the most holy things I can do all week – find the good in him and give thanks. And that, in turn, focuses my gaze to the goodness of God, as well.

Date Night Fun – Small Town Simple – by Marcy Lytle

It's warmer outside, it's the perfect time for picnics and strolls and shopping, so it's time to hit the small towns in your area for simple getaways that refresh and restore. There's nothing like stepping out of your normal into another town to visit their simple. Seriously, it's so fun to getaway for the day to another world...even if it's just an hour or so away. These dates for the month of May are dates for the entire day:

Small Town bookstores – Search the web and find bookstores in small towns near you, and make it a day of browsing and buying perhaps a new cookbook, a destination book, pages of beautiful sceneries, a good mystery, or any five topics on your list. Maybe one will have a coffee shop inside or nearby. What a fun day this will be!

Small Town shopping – Go to a town near you that has a great town square or a historical shopping district. Very often, the square will also include an old pharmacy where you can stop in for an old-time shake, a vintage store for treasure hunting, and an eatery on a corner with local food fare. Just search for things to do and check out the shopping options.

Small Town picnicking – Many small towns have a city park with trails or picnic tables or gazebos, or a pond with ducks, etc. Plan to spend the day under a tree playing games, up on the lawn throwing Frisbees, and spread out on a blanket for a picnic fare like no other. If you want to make the food, search and find and make it all together, before you leave. Or stop in at your local store and purchase all the snacks, and go. Consider Italian sodas, cute plates and napkins, and a good playlist for listening to while you eat and relax.

Small Town attractions – There's a town near us that has a castle for touring, another has a tiny amusement park right downtown, and still another has a cute theater that's now open and serves food! So search the towns near you and find an attraction, or one that's out away from town, and make a reservation for a tour or to visit, and enjoy one or more.

Small Town markets – Now is the time of year when small towns will be having their farmers markets or vendors set up, so maybe find two or three, take a cute shopping bag, and go hunting for your next yard décor, home décor, plant, even gifts for Christmas – early! Pick up some fresh cheese and crackers, and olives and chips, and enjoy these, as well.

- If you're in the Central Texas area, Belton has a cute theater to try, Taylor has a great downtown and vintage stores and a coffee shop, Salado has a great area for picnicking by the water, Bellville has the castle tour...for a few options.

For Better or Worse - Boots and Glue – by Kaelin Scott

Everybody has that favorite pair of shoes. The ones we wear until they fall apart, and then we still wear them some more because we can't bear to part with them. For me, it's my cowboy boots. I bought them at a flea market, so they were already a little worn when I got them. But I love them, and they really come in handy living on a ranch. They're comfy and cute, and they're my go-to shoes to throw on.

Awhile back, the sole came completely off one of the boots. I was just walking along when all of a sudden, it was hanging down and flapping around. I was obviously a little upset. They're my favorite boots, after all. I wasn't about to throw them away, so I commissioned my husband to glue the sole back in place. He did, and it lasted a few weeks before falling off again. But I still didn't give up. I asked him to glue it again, so he did. And this time, it worked. It's been over a year since then, and those boots are still going strong. You can see a little bit of hardened glue on the side, but I don't care. I love those boots and I'm going to keep on wearing them.

It sounds kind of funny, but my boots remind me of marriage. People in the world today are so quick to throw things away in favor of something new, and it seems like that extends into marriage. When things start falling apart, it's easier just to replace them than do the work to repair them. It's not convenient to stay and fix it, or to try again if it doesn't work. Other times, things get too comfortable and worn, and we get tired and restless. We just want something new because we want excitement.

But marriage is something that is meant to last. Throwing it away just isn't an option. When it falls apart, we've got to bust out the glue. There's no right answer on how to fix things, and I'm not trying to minimize marital issues. I know life can get messy, and pain isn't simply wiped away with the snap of a finger. But marriage, like my favorite pair of boots, is worth salvaging. It may be easier to throw it away and move on, but what's easy isn't always what's best. And sometimes, things are even better after a little bit of brokenness.

When things get hard, we can't give up. We must stand and fight for our marriages. And above all, remember that God knows exactly how to put all the broken pieces back together. But we have to trust Him in all His goodness. He created us to become one flesh, and He is able to heal any division.

In This Together – I Don't Know Much – by Bekah Holland

I think we're going to try something a little different. Not because I feel like I'm in a writing rut (even though I probably am) and not because I have some deep, spiritual feeling about something life altering to share (because, trust me, I do not). Nope, we're trying different because I'm stretched fitting-in-my-swimsuit-after-a-global-pandemic thin. So here's the thing....I don't really know much about anything, much less marriage, but I have learned a few things along the way in my 40-ish years, most of them the hard way.

I've learned....

How to meet people where they are, but also when to leave them there.

Sometimes, there is nothing you can do to make someone feel better. So either let them figure it out on their own, or join them on the floor.

There is no such thing as a perfect marriage. Sometimes it's exciting, sexy and amazing. Sometimes it feels like your old favorite, comfy worn out t-shirt. Sometimes you just want to change your name and move to one of the rural Dakotas to teach goat yoga.

Every friendship is different. Some are important for certain seasons in your life. Some remind you that it is okay to walk away. Some become family and lobsters for life (sorry, not sorry, for the shameless *Friends* reference!)

There is not a mess too big or shame too ugly to make you unlovable to God. Ever.

I can trust God with everything, lose my faith, and then crawl my way back again. And again. And again.

Sometimes in marriage, you give more. Sometimes you need more from your partner. It's not 50/50. We're rarely able to give equally all the time. So give when you can. Speak up when you need a little extra. And don't keep a scoreboard, because that's a surefire way for everyone to lose.

Learn your loved one's love languages. It sounds sappy and woo. Do it anyway. It will be worth it.

There is no required standard of beauty that you need to live up to. You are valuable. You are worth it all. Period. Find someone who loves you enough to remind you when you forget.

When you mess up, when you hurt someone, when you recognize that you are wrong, apologize. Don't wait. Own your words and actions. And don't apologize with expectation. Say I'm sorry. I was wrong. I hurt you. I will work hard to do much better. Don't make excuses for why you did what you did. It doesn't matter.

Don't ever stop growing. I look back at things I've said, phrases I've used, ignorant to how they might affect someone else, and I'm embarrassed. But never let embarrassment make you defensive. Know better. Do better.

Do not under any circumstances ask your spouse if something makes you look *insert adjective here* unless you're willing to hear an honest answer. If you want to hear a compliment, give one to yourself, call a girlfriend and ask for one, or do what I do...."Babe, I took a shower and put on pants with a button. Tell me I'm pretty. Now mean it."

Kindness is beautiful. Work harder at being more kind than working toward society's distorted view of beauty.

Practice empathy. Is it hard? Sometimes. Do they deserve it? Maybe not. Will it really make a difference? Who knows. Do it anyway.

Find your happy place. No, not the tropical destination with an umbrella drink kind of happy place. One you can access easily. Daily. Maybe multiple times a day. Mine is a patch of green grass in my backyard with the sun shining on my face. Pre-Covid, the bookstore was a close second. Whatever it is, find it, guard it, treasure it and find your way there often. We all need a little space that brings us peace.

Love. Love big. Love loud. Love quietly. Love often. Don't let those three little words lose their meaning because there isn't action to back them up. Love your partner, your friends, your kids, your local barista, your neighbor who forgets to rake their leaves, your dogs (okay, cats too, but they're kind of jerky so...). Love because God loved you first.

I don't know much, but I know these things without a shadow of a doubt. Do I always follow my own advice? I wish. But I do try to remember when I forget and go back and try again, but better the next time. There will always be an army of critics ready to call you out on each and every misstep, big or small. So work your tail off to be the voice of peace, forgiveness and kindness....even to yourself.

"Just keep loving me. I'll keep loving you. And the rest will fall into place." *Unknown*



ENCOURAGEMENT

Have you ever wished you could push a button and reset your life, or certain aspects of it? I made decisions in my youth that changed the trajectory of my life. If you've read some of my past stories, you know that it took me awhile to "grow up" (not that I'm "grown up" yet!) In my ignorance, I lived out my willfulness and desire to have my way. I said and did things that reflected my inner emptiness. Before I *really* knew Jesus as my Lord and Savior, I acted as if I was Lord and Savior, of myself and others.

This awareness of my past mistakes, my shortcomings, and my selfishness can, at its worse, bring sorrow, regret, and self-criticism; but, at its best, it brings so much more. At times I'm overcome with thankfulness for God's grace. His complete acceptance and forgiveness is overwhelming, and it has helped me to extend the same (as best I can) to others. The way he has worked in my life and has changed me—despite my blind resistance and waywardness—is unspeakably kind and miraculous.

What if my life had been "perfect"...what if my path had been smooth and easy? What if I'd been born into affluence and comfort? What if I'd been "successful" as the world sees it? Would I have been led to question the emptiness of it all? Would I have been able to let go of it? Only he knows, and what I know is that I can trust him. He goes after those whose hearts are turned towards him in truth and he knows how to draw us to himself.

It's futile to wish for a different past, to regret and lament over what was. It is what it was because I was who I was. Now, I am who I am because of it. Even though I'm not always pleased with who I see myself to be, I know (by faith) that my creator is and that's what I hold to. I move forward with God by my side, doing my "utmost for His Highest" each day.

Right now my garden is in re-set mode. The historic deep-freeze event devastated gardens all around, mine no exception. The bright spot, for me, is that I'd made some plant choices that I regretted. Some of those plants, like the viburnum still standing as a brown skeleton, aren't coming back and I have a chance to make a better choice. One tree I regret losing is my Arizona Cypress, but I plan to plant another one, in a better spot vacated by another freeze victim. My garden, like my life, is always changing. It reflects the choices I've made in design and content—not always the best, but the best according to the vision and knowledge I have today—and that, my friends, is all we can do. Be at peace, for the Lord your God is good.

Moving Forward – Let Go – by Pam Charro

I had a very good friend once say, "You know, life is just a series of learning to let go." We were talking about parenting at the time, but I'm realizing that statement applies to so many areas of life.

Ecclesiastes 3 tells us that there is a season for everything, including a time to keep and a time to throw away. Unfortunately, I was not taught as a child to let go of much. We did not have a lot of income, and even if an item wasn't really serving us well anymore, we would hold onto it "just in case." I've struggled throughout my life with clutter issues because I'm never sure when to let something go.

While I've made some progress in this area as it pertains to material items, I seem to have a much more difficult time letting go of people or life seasons. I've evaluated so much of who I am based on where I spend the most amount of time. So when a job or relationship ends, it's such a struggle for me to know what to invest in next. And God has allowed me to experience a lot of that type of loss in just the past two years.

*After all, I can clearly see what I am losing. And that hurts.
But I have very little idea of what is coming my way.*

My children have mostly grown and left. My marriages have both failed. I have been unemployed for over a year. People I have invested in have suddenly discarded me. It's painful and it's uncomfortable.

And yet I know that God is developing me during this time because he is teaching me to trust in his goodness during all of the uncertainty. His promises to always bring about a better life than I could ask or imagine are what I have to count on more than ever, now. He has shown me countless times that when I couldn't see any good ahead, more good was to be found. And it showed up in the most unexpected ways! This same God is still alive and well and is working to bless me.

I've also come to realize that it's not the trial; it's who is in the trial with me. I have been made so much stronger by finding his presence in my life, especially when circumstances have seemed the most difficult. He is faithful, loving, and steadfast. The best friend anyone could ever have! Really, everything else is just stuff that will quickly pass.

So let the seasons come and go. As Proverbs 3 says, I will trust in the Lord and not rely on my own understanding.

*I will learn to gracefully move forward
so that I can continue experiencing
God's beautiful next for my life.*

Rooted in Love - The Small Stuff – by Kaelin Scott

A few months ago, a freak thing happened to me. Okay, actually, these kinds of things happen to me quite often, so it wasn't that unusual. I had a sore or something on my head that bothered me for several days. It finally went away and I forgot about it, until I was getting ready for church one morning and noticed it had left a bald spot! It was right on top of my head and about the size of a dime. I'd like to say I reacted calmly, but I didn't. I freaked out. Actually, I was grumpy and upset all day. I mean, I'm too young to be bald!

But after a while, the shock and dismay wore off, and I realized that it wasn't really that big of a deal. It was frustrating, yes, and definitely not desirable. But there are much, much worse things in life than a little bald spot on my head! Lots of people face bigger problems and worse situations every single day, and getting my panties in a bunch over something so trivial is kind of silly. Realizing this also led me to realize that...

I tend to sweat the small stuff a little too much.

I worry and fret about things that might not even happen. I freak out and get worked up over things that are out of my control and which, frankly, don't really matter that much. Life is so beautiful, but I often focus on little details that aren't perfect. I nitpick my life instead of enjoying it as a whole. What if I could roll with the punches a little more instead of letting myself get beat up by everyday imperfections? Because honestly, looking back in ten years, am I going to remember those minor details that I thought were so important? Probably not. But I will remember the days where I made the most out of life.

Does a teensy weensy bald spot stop my family from loving me? Not a chance. Does it stop God from loving me and providing for me? Absolutely not. So why should it stop me from enjoying my day? I can choose to sit and wallow, or I can choose to embrace joy.

We always have a choice. We can sit on the sidelines waiting for everything to be perfect, or we can jump in and seize the day.

By the way, my hair did eventually start to grow back. Now it's about an inch long and sticks straight up, making me look like a rooster. But I'm a happy rooster, and life is good.

Life is always good, if we choose to look at it that way.

Simple Truths – About Moms – by Marcy Lytle

I think it may be the shortest prayer I've ever heard before a meal, and it was often prayed by my mom. "Father, we're grateful," she would say and then smile her little smile, as we all lifted our heads to start eating. We teased her and often wondered why she said such a short prayer, but we also liked it, because it meant we could eat right away. It was much better than the prayers of some others that thanked God for the wind and the rain, and the friends present and those gone, and oh yes – the food that was prepared and the "hands that prepared it." No one wanted that prayer. We all wanted the prayer that Mom prayed.

I'm thinking that short succinct declarations or songs or statements made by moms are the ones that stick with us our entire lives, so they better be good ones. The best part, I think, about Mom's prayer is that it says just what it needs to say. It acknowledges God as our Father – our provider. And it thanks him with a grateful heart, one that is humbled to receive his blessings.

So, for all you moms, moms to be, grandmothers, and any women that love children, here's a list of encouragement for you, to keep on saying your short phrases from your heart. They're not too silly, too short, or too simple. They're just right, when said with sincerity out of a heart of a woman that's walked with God and loved fiercely all the little children in her care.

- When you sing "Jesus Loves Me" to your babies, it seeps into their souls and will never be forgotten.
- When you state "God loves you, son," he will remember that when he strays as a teen and feels unworthy.
- When you call out "Wash your hands" for the tenth time before noon, he will give thanks when a pandemic hits that he learned this healthy routine.
- When you remind her that "money doesn't grow on trees" she'll say it again to her daughter, when she's demanding that new dress.
- When you insist "Say Thank You" when they open that present or receive that gift, they won't like it, but they'll do it, and soon their heart will follow.
- When you command them "Don't talk with your mouth full" they will be glad for that advice when seated at tables with colleagues.
- When you query "Is your homework done?" before they head out to play, those same children will run a company someday.
- When you reply "NO" because it's unsafe or unwise, they'll still be alive at 35.
- When you say "I love you" while they're sticking out their tongues, they'll feel the sting of disobedience and come running home.

I don't know what phrases your mom said to you. Moms often say wonderful things, but they can say hurtful ones, as well. Short phrases stick with us, and we can take those untruths and make them truths, if we are now grown moms with wounds from words said. And we can speak kind truths, stern truths, and loving truths to our kids so they too will smile as they remember what we've spoken. And if we make a mistake, the best thing we can then say is "I'm sorry," and the children will remember that too, and grow up repenting for all the wrong that they do.

Think back, this month of Mother's Day, to the words and the phrases and the songs spoken over you, and remember. Ask Him to erase the bad ones, and to establish the good ones, as you now pass on motherly love to the generations to come...

Unearthly Thing - Style that Brings Praise – by Angela Dolbear

Mounds of clothing surround me, as I sit on the floor of my dressing room. I am stunned by the abundance. The piles take up most of the floor space in my 10x11-foot underground dressing room.

It's spring cleaning time, and I have started the process with my clothes. Each pile consists of a different genre, such as pajamas, workout clothes, jeans, etc. And then there are sub-genres defined by season. Having lived two years in Tennessee so far has taught me that we have real seasons here, which I need to be prepared for with the appropriate wardrobe.

I try not to mentally flog myself with guilt over the copiousness of my garments. I collect clothing and accessories like some people collect Hummel dolls or Elvis plates. Style is important to me.

Instead, I convert my brewing guilt into gratitude. I gaze up at the "[Shoe Tower](#)" which holds my many pairs of Creepers (my favorite casual shoes) and heels, and remember all the incredible deals and sales that allowed this independent author to purchase them. I thank God for all the beautiful and useful things He has given me.

God consistently guides my attention toward items He knows will fit me and bring me joy, and that will be useful. He once directed me to a [pair of baby pink Creepers](#) with big black hearts on them. So cute! They were \$75 shoes on sale for \$13. And there was only one pair left, and they were in my size. I clicked my cart to check out, and cheered the day our awesome UPS delivery man, who also adores my dog, delivered the shoes.

Every time I wear my pink Creepers, which is often, I look down at the hearts on my soles, and my heart swells with love for my Lord, for the gift He gave me, perfectly in my size, and exactly in my style.

Being in my style helps me feel more prepared for the day, and any situation that arises. If I am stylishly dressed, my hair is done (even a ponytail in a [scrunchie scarf](#) qualifies), and my makeup is on, I feel physically charged to get to work.

I work at home, and I doubt that my dog and my cat have opinions on my appearance. They seem to be mostly concerned with treats, food, and playtime. But my husband works at home, too. So I put forth effort for him, as well as for myself with my appearance. I guess I'm "old school" like that.

My style has changed over the years. Right now, I am all into black and white, [particularly black and white stripes](#). I am undoubtedly influenced by Moira Rose, the super-stylish matriarch of the Rose family on Schitt's Creek. We just finished watching all six seasons of the funny and touching comedy series, where Moira's over-the-top dramatic black and white ensembles grow more flamboyant with each episode.

Along with cleaning out and organizing of clothing, and making room for new clothes, the arrival of a new jewelry armoire for my birthday, has me put my focus on my jewelry. I still have all the turquoise necklaces, earrings and rings I wore 20 years ago, when I sported a bohemian style. Quite the opposite of my current mid-century pin-up style. But I still love all the turquoise jewelry. Perhaps I can work a piece or two into an outfit some time. Especially, during the summer. Hmmm...

I have never followed current trends. It seems exhausting to me. And what if something that is currently on trend doesn't work on me?

Style is a form of expression, whether you have your own style, or you are totally on board with all the new spring lines. It's part of who God made us, as creatures of choice, and change.

Style has been around me all my life. My mom has a great sense of style, which undoubtedly has had the greatest influence on me. I used to love to play in her shoes when I was a little girl. In all the pictures I have seen of my mom's mother, she too, was a beautiful woman always dressed with flair.

God has used my style to minister to others. The younger women in church tend to gravitate toward me, maybe because I appear non-threatening, and/or a little bit nuts. I try to pray unceasingly to be an excellent spiritual auntie, or even mother figure for these precious lambs.

My personal style evolves as I change on the inside, too. My faith grows stronger and deeper through every season I live through. Whether I am reveling in a time on the mountain top, or trudging through the valley of the shadow of death, I know God has His Creator's hand on me always.

Through changing times and trends, God is always with me, with His rod of discipline to keep me from faltering and hurting myself, as well as His staff to keep me from wandering off, and getting eaten by proverbial wolves.

As I navigate around the lawn-size plastic bags marked "Goodwill," and the box of items to sell on [Poshmark](#) in my dressing room, I stop and look at all the beautiful things God has given me. At the rows of cardigans, jackets, my tower of shoes, and at the fabulous pink chandelier my husband installed for me, and I can't help but be overwhelmed with thankfulness, and appreciation.

"Let all that I am praise the Lord; may I never forget the good things he does for me."

(Psalm 103:2, New Living Translation).

Yes Lord. Thank You and praise to You.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – Don't Walk Away – by Marcy Lytle

There are so many Hallmark stories with the same story line, the same mistake that the main character makes, and the same ending. You know what I mean. The couple that liked each other way back in high school or college now meets again 10-15 years later. They slowly warm up to each other again and just as one is starting to tell the other how they really feel, they “overhear” the other one talking and misunderstand...because they only hear in part.

It just happened in the last Hallmark show that we watched. He decided to tell her he loves her and he's going to stay in the city, only he walks in as she's talking to a girlfriend. That girlfriend is asking about a different guy, and asks if her friend is interested in him...because she thought perhaps she was. The main character says, “No, I have no feelings for him at all,” and the guy listening thinks she's referring to him! He walks away and almost leaves...until he goes back and the story ends well...with a kiss.

How many times does that happen in these stories? I've often wondered why Hallmark can't come up with more endings for their romantic love stories. I suppose they feel the scenery, the music, and the pretty people involved are all we need to be satisfied. But, seriously?

Today, when I watched this story I thought of the most romantic love story of all time – that of Jesus and us. It's so simple and pure. He loves us so much and wants a relationship with us, so that he can share all of the Father's love with us so that we are changed into the best version of who he made us to be – people that care for and love others.

However, we walk into that story of Jesus in different parts of the movie of our lives, just like the characters in the Hallmark story:

- We grow up in church and overhear talk of religion and nothing of relationship, so we walk away.
- We encounter a person that calls himself a Christian only to be hurt by that same person, so we dismiss Jesus – if that's what he's all about.
- We enter a group of friends that are meeting for bible study, and we hear a verse about how God heals, but our own brother died...so we walk away from “that truth.”
- We read the Bible out of duty and obligation, so we can ease our minds before bedtime, but we never hear the full story of God's love...only snippets and pieces...so away we go.
- We confess our love to the One who died for us, only to have bitter roots from our childhood come up and choke that love because of memories or losses. We're off...

In other words, we're like the people in the Hallmark story. We only hear in part, see and assume because of that part we've heard or experienced, and we walk away to never return until...

The only thing that made the man in the story turn around was the overpowering desire he had for change, and he knew the girl he was leaving was the one he wanted to spend his life with.

In a split second he didn't get on the plane, but drove back to the lodge (there's always a lodge) and tells her she's the one. They kiss, and all is right with the world.

I don't want to miss out on anything God has for me because of something I've witnessed or heard others say that made me doubt who He was. I don't want to walk away from his Word because one scripture (out of context) stirs up ill feelings because that promise "didn't work" for me. I don't want to turn my face away from His gaze because I'm afraid or skeptical or I've been hurt before by those who misrepresent Him.

Jesus loves us, fiercely. He doesn't play games, he doesn't recall our past experiences with him and hold them against us, and he never walks away – threatening to leave us for good. And the quicker we realize this, the quicker we can move that piece of the puzzle out of its misplacement and into its rightful spot – in the whole beautiful picture of the wonderful plan that awaits us.

Next time you walk in on a conversation and only hear in part, observe someone's actions and dismiss them because of what they've done, or walk away because you're fearful...reconsider what you're doing. And then think back and see if you've done that with HIM because of what others have done in His name, by mistake, to wound your heart against Him.

That girl in the story really did love the guy, and he almost missed the happy ending because of what he "thought" she said regarding her feelings for him. We can also miss our happy ending if we only see in part and dismiss the whole, in favor of never walking back to declare and receive the Love of Our Life.

FRESH THYME - Exchange the Why

Recently, I heard a speaker say we need to exchange the “why” for the “who” when it comes to understanding and walking with God. And I also recently studied the book of John and read of the many, many times Jesus was asked SO MANY questions, and he answered them all the same, “Believe in me and the one who sent me.” It seemed their questions constantly got in the way of seeing who Jesus was, right before their eyes.

Another common question I’ve heard from friends, and now even kids, is “Why won’t God speak to me? I just want to hear him.” And that’s something we all long for, I’m sure. It would be so cool if God would thunder his voice out of the heavens and tell us what to do, where to go, and that we are loved so much. Or if he would just write in the sky with a permanent marker the direction we should take our lives, we’d feel so loved.

I spend a lot of my time asking why. And so do toddlers. They start pulling on us, asking why, almost from the time they start to talk. They’re learning, so it makes sense that they wonder and want answers. But honestly, there comes a time when we as parents get so tired of “why” and as our kids mature, we just want them to know who we are, trust us, and love us for that alone.

Asking why enables us to learn, in seasons of learning and growing and maturing. But continually asking why because we’re skeptical shows that we don’t really trust the one we’re with. The followers of Jesus wanted to know why he healed people on the Sabbath, why he talked to an outcast in society, and why he went into homes of sinners for dinner. If they’d only seen who Jesus was and believed, they would have understood his love and compassion and how that superseded the rules and the traditions they followed.

I have a million and one questions about life, and there are some days that the why questions get the best of me. Why did that person die that horrific death? Why were those little girls so mean? Why did my friend do that? Why did my husband not do that? And when I have days like that, I’m exhausted by nightfall, and guess what?

Those constant “whys” keep me from observing all of the answers written in the sky and on my heart and all around me. I miss the sunset because I’m worrying while I walk. I miss the phone call from that friend because I am frustrated with the other friend. I miss the sink that he cleared because I’m angry that he forgot to call. Numerous whys make for broken relationships.

I know the goodness of my God, and it’s present all around me every day, below me, beside me, and above me. His faithfulness screams and is in my face, while I shake a fist and demand answers to my questions. I know the love of the Father, in the fact that he sent his only Son to die for me – for me! And yet I wonder if he truly loves me when a prayer goes unanswered for too long of a time... And finally, I know the Word because I’ve read it all my life, of his wonders, his amazing love, his patience and his mercies. And yet I miss this ONE who has said it all, answered it all, and given His all...in favor of grilling Him for more.

No one likes to be grilled, drilled, or killed with questioning. It’s tiring for the one questioning, and it’s heartbreaking for the one being questioned, if they’ve proven their faithfulness and love

with their life. And we then have this choice, daily, because it's daily that we're going to be tempted to question why.

Are we going to keep asking why, demanding answers, before we will relax and enjoy our Maker?

OR will we exchange all of those questions for Who is it that loves us fiercely, keeps us at all times, and cares for us like no other?

I have to choose daily and sometimes I fail miserably. But thank God, there's another sunrise tomorrow and I get a chance to choose again. And when I choose the Who, I think I'll be at peace because I'll see him for the Provider and good Father that he truly is.

FRESH THYME – It Takes a Year – by Marcy Lytle

I've shared multiple times about my journey in 2020 of giving thanks for three things per day, and recording them. At the beginning of that year, it was easy, because I just spouted off the normal: food, health, family, etc. Those are the obvious. Then a month into the practice, I realized that some days I woke up and had to think hard to come up with three new things. And this bothered me, because there is SO much to be thankful for! As the year progressed, and 2021 was suddenly here, I realized the progress I made took an entire year to occur.

Finally, after a year of taking note, purposefully looking around me – at the small and the big – I had begun a rhythm of giving thanks and actually seeing things to give thanks for! But yes, it took an entire year. Lots of things take a year (or more.)

It takes a year for the cycle of the seasons to run their course. We cannot hurry up any of the seasons, because they are set in motion, and we have to wait for each change patiently...until the cool winds blow...or the heat of the summer appears. And after a full year, they begin again, giving order and hope to our cycle called the world.

An entire calendar of 12 months takes a full year to fulfill. We tear off a page, or mark off our to-do lists, over the course of January through December. Each month brings its own set of holidays, weather events, styles of clothes we wear, and rain or no rain. We make plans for vacations months in advance, and then that month arrives, and we go. And after a year, we start another calendar and another...

They say when a loved one is lost that it takes a full year of mourning, because every holiday or celebration we approach brings memories and pain, until that full year has passed. I suppose it's mostly true, because I remember experiencing that when my mom passed, almost four years ago now. The grief is still there now, but it's not as deep.

Some movies are even made about "a year in the life of..." including *Minari* and *Nomadland*, which we saw this year. The producers chronicle a year in the life of someone interesting, and we sit and watch that family or person evolve over the course of a year's time, and we find it compelling.

I read a quote "Our hope is not in the new year...but in the One who makes all things new." And it's something to take note of, this timeframe of a year.

I remember when I quit drinking sodas. For a long time, I still craved them, especially when I ordered a hamburger! But over time, the craving lessened and I eventually came to prefer water instead. And that process took about a year.

There are all sorts of time schedules that we build our worlds around, and sometimes a year can seem like an eternity, especially if we're waiting for vacation to come. Other times, a year seems like a flash, when our kids are grown and gone. But a year is something to notice, something to be patient about, something to reflect upon, and something to record and grow and learn during the process.

We can all give ourselves a little grace when we aren't improving as fast as we'd like, getting over wounds or hurts, or seeing change in areas of our lives and remember *the year*. Cycles. Months. Moons. Rotations. Seeds and seasons. And when the year comes to an end, we can look back and then measure and see where we've come from and where we are now.

Summer's near, and it's been a year since summer was here. How will this summer be different from last, or will it be? What are we thankful for now that we didn't even notice last year? And how have we loved better, forgiven more, observed all things beautiful?

Just something to think about...

TRIED AND TRUE - The Family Vacay – by Marcy Lytle

Whether you stay at home, tour the city, take a road trip, or fly away...planning a vacation can be daunting, especially with little kids, big kids, or no kids at all! Here are a few tips to help you as you navigate the idea of vacationing this summer. Even if funds are low, there is fun to be had! Even if you think there's nowhere to go, there most certainly is! And even if they might complain, take the kids anyway. Memories are priceless!

Staying at home

- Make one room like a hotel room or BnB (trays, snacks, robes, TV, drinks, games)
- Pack your suitcases for the night.
- Show up in that particular room for an "overnight stay"
- Close off the rest of the house
- Party away

In the city

- Find a new park with picnic areas and trails, maybe a new library or museum, too.
- Search for a new fast food place you've not tried
- Pack up kites, Frisbees, blankets and mosquito spray
- Make an invitation to give to each member of the family
- Put it on the calendar for a Saturday very soon and go.

Road trip

- Get a paper map of where you want to go and pick a route (do you have a whole day, multiple days, or what?) Figure out driving time and city stops.
- Search for "things to do" in those cities (be open to parks, eateries, shopping, history, zoos, etc.) and figure the cost and search the hours open. List it out and print it!
- Pack snacks like trail mix, fun drinks, Pringles, cookies and more...
- Reserve hotels if staying overnight.
- Clean out the car, then pack it up with all the goodies, and head out of town and don't look back.

Flying away

- Pick a city or destination you love and search for "best things" in that area or prices and events of the resort or park, or wherever you're going.
- Search "four day itinerary" or however many days you're going, and read blogs of other families/people that went. These are so helpful!
- Get your tickets/rental car/hotel reservations. Search for coupons first, for the places you'll visit!
- Put the date on the calendar and plan activities related to the trip from now til then (packing, meal planning (eating out or in while there?), shopping for necessities (travel size toiletries, extra bathing suit, etc.)

- Place all your printouts, maps, etc. in a folder or even booklets, if kids are going – they can follow along! Then fly away and enjoy...



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

June 2021



TIPS

In the Kitchen – Sandwiches for Summer – by Marcy Lytle

Who doesn't love a good sandwich? And they're especially great for taking on a picnic. You can assemble them ahead of time, or take the parts and make the whole, once you arrive! And the picnic can be in a park or even at home on the floor, wherever you like it, and where the weather allows! I love a fun picnic. And packing up all the ingredients for the picnic are so fun!

Enjoy each of these sandwiches this summer:

Gouda Turkey

Ingredients

- ½ c shredded Gouda cheese
- 4 t mayo
- 1 T sliced green onion
- ¼ t garlic powder
- ¼ t ground pepper
- Toasted bread (4 slices for two sandwiches)
- 2 t butter, soft
- Romaine leaves
- 4 slices tomato
- 4 oz deli smoked turkey sliced
- ½ med ripe avocado

Mix first five ingredients. Spread two slices of toast with butter, then cheese mixture. Layer with lettuce, tomato and turkey. Peel and mash the avocado. Spread over other slices of toast, and place over turkey.

Dilly Turkey Melt

Ingredients

- 2 med onions sliced
- 4 T butter, divided
- 4 T BBQ sauce
- 8 slices sourdough bread
- 8 slices Monterey Jack cheese
- 8 slices Canadian bacon
- 8 thin slices cooked turkey
- Dill pickles

In a large cast iron or heavy skillet, saute onions in 1 T butter until tender and set aside. Spread BBQ sauce on 4 slices of bread. Layer each with 1 slice of cheese, 2 slices of bacon and turkey, pickles, onions and another slice of cheese. Cover with remaining bread.

In same skillet over med-low heat, melt remaining butter. Cook sandwiches on both sides until golden brown and cheese is melted.

Simply at Home – I used what I had recently (some of the leftover bacon from above recipe), and he said the sandwich tasted great!

Ingredients

- Multigrain bread
- Eggs
- Canadian bacon
- Cheese

Place a little butter in a skillet and toast one side of the bread, then flip and toast the other – placing cheese slice on top to melt. In same skillet, scramble seasoned eggs and cook the bacon. Stack and assemble, and you're done! This is the simple version, but you can add anything else you like, such as onions, fresh spinach or tomatoes!

Black Bean Swiss

This recipe was adapted from the one posted by Pioneer Woman, and I only changed it a bit. It's really easy and the bean patty stays together so well, instead of falling apart like so many other veggie burgers. Enjoy!

- 2 cups seasoned black beans, drained
- 1 c seasoned breadcrumbs
- ¼ c grated onion
- ½ t chili powder
- 1 large egg
- Salt and pepper
- Canola oil for the pan
- 4 slices Swiss cheese
- ½ c mayonnaise
- Pico de gallo, lemon juice, season salt
- 4 buns, toasted
- Lettuce and sliced tomatoes

Using a fork, mash the beans in a medium bowl til mushy but leaving a few whole beans throughout.

Mix the breadcrumbs, onion, chili powder, egg and S&P into the beans. Add a splash of water if mixture looks dry. Set aside for 5 minutes.

Divide the bean mixture into 4 balls, then flatten into patties. Heat large skillet on med-hi and add a few tablespoons of oil.

Cook burgers til browned, 4-5 minutes each side. Add the cheese to the top of each burger and let it melt.

Combine mayo with pico and lemon juice and seasoning. Spread on buns, top with the cheesy pattie, lettuce and sliced tomatoes.

Chicken Salad

I love a good chicken salad sandwich, and I seem to have several that are favorites. But most often, I just use what I have in the fridge to make one each time, and they taste so so good.

Ingredients (all chopped)

- Cooked chicken
- Carrots
- Olives
- Red onions
- Walnuts
- Celery
- Radishes
- Season salt
- Mayo

Mix everything in a bowl with dollops of mayo until you get the consistency you want. Season to taste. Serve on wheat bread as a sandwich, with a large slice of avocado to go with!

The Dressing – Bangles and Bracelets – by Marcy Lytle

In the colder months, when I wear mostly longer sleeves, my bracelets hang in the closet unworn...but now that arms are showing and sleeves are shorter...bangles are making their grand entrance once again! I think arm jewelry can add SO MUCH to an otherwise neutral outfit. So I'm gathering some pretty bracelet ideas for you, should you want to invite some of these pretties to your party this season!

Enamel and Stretch – These are my newest set of bracelets I purchased at Attic Salt, but I don't see them on line in their store, so I found some like them on Amazon! They go with everything, and you can stack one, two, three or more....

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B085S8DP8M/?ref=idea_lv_dp_ov_d&tag=onamzmarcel05-20&linkCode=ic6&ascsubtag=amzn1.ideas.2TVKQTSKJZ8G6

Wrap Bracelets – I saw these bracelets and liked the latch – magnetic – and the bohemian style. There are two choices of color, and both would be great for the summer months, for a little color on your wrists.

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07T6ZTF4D/?ref=idea_lv_dp_ov_d&tag=onamzmarcel05-20&linkCode=ic6&ascsubtag=amzn1.ideas.2TVKQTSKJZ8G6

Little Words – Have you heard of the Little Words Project? These bracelets can be custom made or you can purchase ones already made, with words of encouragement for women. Each bracelet features a different inspirational word. And these can be stacked, as well! Check them out...

<https://littlewordsproject.com/collections/new-arrivals>

Chain Links – I see these little chain link bracelets everywhere, and I love them. This set and its price is unbelievable, but has great reviews. You might even want to buy some now for Christmas gifts! Or just wear them all yourself...

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08MLNRH5K/ref=redir_mobile_desktop?encoding=UTF8&aaxitk=4f680c5f9363df6c6a368cd01ea36a22&hsa_cr_id=8375719180001&pd_rd_plhdr=t&pd_rd_r=6eec7147-5571-4d50-992b-ead28b33738a&pd_rd_w=lhYR1&pd_rd_wg=msjGV&ref=sbx_be_s_sparkle_mcd_asin_0_img

Love the Beach – Do you love the ocean and hanging at the beach in the summer? This bracelet, found on Etsy, might be the bracelet you need and love. It comes in a choice of blues, and it's so pretty, and also has that great magnetic closure

<https://www.etsy.com/listing/812218029/beach-bracelet-for-women-with-magnetic?qpla=1&gao=1&>

The Ladder – Isn't this a pretty and yet classic bracelet? It's from Madewell, and it can be worn alone or stacked with other bracelets. So nice!

<https://www.madewell.com/tracecraft-bangle-bracelet-96528.html?color=EG5779#q=bracelet&lang=default&context=women&start=1>

Blossom beads – I love this pretty bracelet (they have several similar ones to choose from), and you could wear one or more. But the colors just speak summer and fun! I want one!

<https://www.urbanoutfitters.com/shop/blossom-beaded-bracelet2?category=SEARCHRESULTS&color=000&searchparams=q%3Dbracelet&type=REGULAR&size=ONE%20SIZE&quantity=1>

If you've found a cute bracelet, share with us where you got it in the comments below! And show your arms this summer, then add something classic, trendy, or whimsical on your wrist for summer fun.

Three Moms – Managing Life – by the cousins

Our three moms of nine littles all are working moms. A working mom is a mom, period, whether or not she holds down another job. But for the sake of this month's story, we're focusing on these three that have another job besides their job of mother. One works in a dental office with her husband, the other for a marketing firm, and the other has her own business selling skin care. All three are super busy trying to juggle kids, home, family time, food, working, making money, and oh yes – fun. It's not easy. We asked them to share their experiences:

Mom of Four

As a work mom, I've learned to delegate. We have four kids and two are assigned dishes, and the other two laundry. This definitely helps get us caught up, and my husband enjoys getting groceries and cooking, so he helps!

I've also invested in a cleaning person, a lawn care person, and our kids have friend-Friday – they can have friends over if their rooms are clean. What a motivation!

On Sundays, our kids get an allowance after doing chores, they get half their age for all of the help they've given.

I do have to replenish (take care of myself and all of us!) – a great word given to me by my counselor. Besides work, life has been hard with church, grief and life. so replenish is my word! I take inventory of what that means. For me, it's gardening and working with my flowers, going on walks with my husband (kids can ride or walk behind), sports activities together with my family and cheering them on.

Another way that helps me is a couple of transition times from work before being present with family. Sometimes I go into my room for 15 minutes and look at social media or resting my eyes, or i take a few minutes ot breathe and sit outside. That way I feel like I've transitioned and energized myself.

At night, we have tuck=in ones for the youngest, individual time with them.

Encouragement ultimately comes from the Lord, but one thing that's helped me when I sought counsel is to take care of myself and not go so hard and so long without breaks to replenish. REPLENISH – taking moments daily, and longer in the week, in my marriage and my kids. it's not all about chores and to-do lists, it's okay. Dishes can be in the sink and we can still be fine!

Mom of Two

Being a working mom and a stay-at home mom, there's always a balancing act with everything being a mom entails! It's a weekly chore to focus on! It changes with every season, as well, as our kids grow.

Right now, my season is working full-time about 40 hours a week, helping my husband with his business, and raising two little girls. Keeping up with life and chores is a lot!

I look at the big pictures and my priorities.

First, I am a daughter of Christ – spending time in the word daily gives me energy and focus. I notice when this area is lacking.

Second, is my spouse. That is actually hard with two kids and owning a business. And it's hard to stop talking about work, outside of work! We make a commitment that after work, we don't talk about it. Night times are filled with family.

Third, is my kids. They need to be loved and fed. Of course, I have an internal battle "Am I being a good enough mom?" I try to drop it all when I get home from work and hold them, talk, and play, at least 15 minutes. However, sometimes we do rush to sports practices and games.

Our evenings are family time, and it might be T-ball or gymnastics, but it's definitely family time.

Last, are my chores. I do try to keep laundry going through the week, and other chores like dishes – I sometimes do that after the kids go to bed! My husband pitches in, as well. We also have yard work – and we just do it when we can! I do have a cleaner once a month or two, for deep cleaning.

So, remembering priorities – daughter in Christ, wife, mom – helps create boundaries of pouring into each.

Personally, I spend time with God, I put my phone down, and I play with my kids. Those things bring me joy. There are times when I exit to the store or work out by myself. Sometimes I wake up early and my husband and I work out together. These things help keep us calm and ready for the day!

Mom of Three

Honestly, I don't feel like I manage everything very well from working and being with the kids. I don't have a good "groove" yet because of virtual school, and then back to school, and now summer! We have, however, implemented a few new things that are going well:

I'm "chunking my time" now, instead of "nickel and diming" my time. I need to get chores started and finished. So what I mean, if I have an hour I clean – I don't respond to messages. I can't be distracted, or the chore won't get done. My business is on social media so distractions are many!

I prefer to go to bed with a clean house, so that I can just focus on breakfast and getting kids to school. 15 minute cleanup happens – with a timer – we all five do 15 minutes of cleaning. We put away things in the common area and in the bedrooms. So far, it's working. It helps us all having a time limit. We start a load of dishes at night, so the next morning I make coffee, light a candle and worship – that's my encouragement time! Or sometimes, I clean with worship music – it's peaceful when the rest of the house is asleep. The dishwasher gets emptied and a load of laundry gets started, and I run the floor vac.

Giving the kids attention looks like going outside after school. We might play in the yard or have friends over – a yard full of kids is fun! During sports season, we rotate so that when one's at practice, the other one goes with Dad, and I have the other one at home. That gives us one-on-one time. Or sometimes, he takes all the kids and I have me-time.

Putting the kids to bed looks like reading books and singing songs!

I also include my kids in my business, with helping me make videos, packaging products, and going to the P.O. to mail them.

As far as time as a couple, my husband works at home, so we sometimes watch a movie or have lunch together. Often at night, we chat after the kids go to bed. And date night is a treat, when we can make it happen!

Worship and scripture and my community and team (for my business) are all sources of inspiration for me. We have zoom meetings and group chats for encouragement. Most are all moms like me!

I don't think there's a formula for balancing. I typically am a joyful person, and I feel like I handle stress pretty well. However, if I start being negative and start not feeling good physically, then something's off and I have to see what's out of balance. So, knowing myself and my strengths and weaknesses helps me know that a shift needs to be made! I just have to pay attention to sore throats, my snappy comments, and seeing things negatively. Those are my indicators...and readjustments are made!

Tried and True – Meal Prep – by Marcy Lytle

Do you prep for your meals, or just gather as you go? I'm sure there are lots of us that do either one or the other, and there's no "best" answer. I used to be a cook that gathered as I went, but then after many times of realizing I didn't have a specific ingredient halfway through cooking, I changed. Now I prep ahead and I really enjoy it!

Here are some hints to prepping ahead, when preparing a meal, and the little things that help:

When trying a new recipe or making one of my own, I gather all of the ingredients and lay them out on the counter. Not only does this allow me to see if I have everything I need, but it makes cooking the meal easier – because I don't have to constantly go back and forth to the fridge and the pantry.

Meal prep bowls are so fun. From a pinch of this to a teaspoon of that, I can measure out the small ingredients and have them ready to just add at the right time.

Prepping meals, for me, also means gathering recipes and ideas once a week, printing them out or noting their page number (if in a cookbook), and then typing it all up as a "meal list" and hanging it on the fridge with a magnet! This is a bit time consuming, but I love it. I don't mind a "cook what you have" night here and there, but for the most part I like to know and have our meals scheduled for the week.

Including snacks has been a new addition for me on my meal planning. Besides having entrée items on my list, I include several snacks like homemade hummus, granola, perhaps a pesto, and dips and chips. This way, if a few of these are made, we can easily have a charcuterie board night at least once a week! And those are fun.

When I'm chopping and cutting, I often keep a Ziploc or one of those plastic grocery bags in the sink near where I prep. I toss in clippings, paper towels, ends of carrots, squeezed lemons, etc. That way I have one big bag to toss in the trash, instead of a mess in the sink.

Meal prepping includes looking at your calendar. If we have a picnic for the weekend, I like to plan groceries accordingly with items for that. If we're having guests drop by (yay, we can do that a bit now!) it's nice to have perhaps fun beverages or a cookie recipe available.

Finally, prepping ahead enables me to clean my fridge, realize if I need more of the good stuff like veggies and fruit, makes me more aware of the healthiness of what it is we're eating, and it keeps me organized. And I like organized.

I carve out a few hours each week for meal prep – with groceries and meal planning. I take a few minutes before meals to gather all the ingredients and set them out – before I start. And I love any little bowls or gadgets that help me with meal prep – from tiny pinch bowls to buying garlic already minced to a couple of good sets of measuring spoons and cups I keep hanging nearby (I love Rachael Ray's set!)

Maybe you cook on the fly, and that's great. I have many friends that do, but I need structure. On the fly is fun one night a week, when I clean out the fridge and make a stir fry or veggie bowl. But being prepared is more my "cup of tea."

Seven for You – Travel Time – by Marcy Lytle

It's that time of year for traveling. Over the past year, we've changed our mode of travel to mostly road trips, at least for a while. I love reading travel blogs, shopping for travel accessories, and planning our places to go...don't you? So we asked our panel of women to chime in on their travel tips and ideas and fun...

—

We don't travel except for one trip to our family's cabin in Colorado every summer. I've been using the same packing list for over 10 years. We pack clothes, sheets, and towels in large black trash bags. We can press all the air out and conform the bags to fit in any space we have available. We pack very casual clothes. We may go several days without seeing other people so it's all about what the weather is doing that year and how to stay comfy. It is truly a high mountain getaway location. I like the location because I can read, have quiet time, hike or cook.

It is very difficult to cook meals here, freeze them, and travel with them for two days in an ice chest. So, at the last available Walmart, which is one hour from our destination, we pick up pizzas, lasagna, TV dinners, and soup. We have a nice breakfast every morning which consists of some combination of bacon, eggs, oatmeal, toast, pancakes. Lunches are leftovers or sandwiches. Dinners are something frozen (above list) spaghetti or burgers.

– Shelley

The last Thanksgiving I had with my dad was less than a month before he passed away. He told us not to wait for retirement to live our lives. He waited and then lost his sight, his hearing (or most of it), and his health. And the opportunities to do all the things he had waited to do were gone. In 2013, I decided to just go somewhere. My daughter and I took a short trip to San Francisco. I found a quaint hotel, not far from the piers and booked the rooftop room. A single room, all by itself on the roof of the hotel. It was so worth it! The hotel is the San Remo. It's quaint and quirky and the perfect choice for our trip. Below the hotel is an Italian restaurant called Fior. It's the oldest Italian restaurant in America! I kept waiting for the "Brat Pack" to stroll in. I still dream of their Ravioli di Zucca, pasta stuffed with pumpkin, amaretti, and mustard fruit with butter, pine nuts, and safe sauce.

I booked the hotel and the flight but we did very little planning. We knew we wanted to walk everywhere, so I invested in a good pair of Keen shoes. That was the extent of our planning. We found out where the piers were and took off walking. It was early before the crowds arrived and most of the shops were closed. We heard this noise coming from across the way. We just instinctively headed toward the noise. We pushed through two double doors and there they were...the sea lions of Pier 39. We had no idea! Alexandra was in heaven! It was like this huge surprise. The sea lions were all barking good morning to us. The look of joy on my daughter's face was amazing.

The rest of the trip was just as surprising...from finding "Owen" the cat in Dog Eared Bookstore in Castro, to navigating a subway on our own, to diving into piles of chocolate at the Ghirardelli factory.

My advice is to not plan too much...especially do not over-plan. Let yourself just enjoy the destination and do so without fear. I may never get to go back to San Fran, but the memory of that trip will last forever. – Cathy

For me, travel these days requires a few special items. When I am traveling I always take a cross stitch project. This gives me something to do while riding. Plus, the natural light is great for seeing small stitches. I also take disposable, oversized toilet seat covers. I found these on Amazon when I was planning a trip with my 4 year old granddaughter. I liked the long, side panels since littles have to hold on to the toilet as they sit.

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B085LPC413/ref=cm_sw_r_em_api_qlt_fabc_0SAGWTXKVT10F8_S21SCQ?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1

Finally, I like to take travel size Lysol and/or disinfectant wipes, and flushable wipes because you just never know when you might need them. It is important to be prepared as you enjoy a fun road trip. – Gina

I started a few years ago using large Ziploc bags for dirty clothes, instead of a drawstring bag. Each night I fold the day's outfit into a couple of Ziplocs and press the air out. They stack up neatly in the suitcase, instead of having a huge dirty clothes bag with no structure to it.

I always take something good to read, as I'm an early riser and my husband is not. Having magazines or a good book helps me relax and fill that time, instead of trying to wake him up to go...

We start months ahead planning for bigger trips, and paying for things ahead of time, as we go. This helps with the budget. And we now always rent a car for long road trips, instead of driving our own. It's so much less of a headache and worth it, especially if there is car trouble of any kind. And your own car gets to sit at home, free of mileage! – Marcy

A little over seven years ago my daughter-in-law was expecting our grandson, their first baby. They lived three hours away and I was going to be going to stay with them and help for several days after the baby came. As I anticipated how to pack in a rush when that call came, a lightbulb went off in my mind. I decided to buy an extra of everything I would need and have it already packed. All I needed to remember in the rush of leaving would be extra glasses and the pills I took each day. I found a toiletry travel bag that was perfect. This worked so well that I never unpack my extras. I just replace what is needed. We travel a lot, so this makes packing so much more relaxing and so easy. It is already basically done. And what I really love is when we get to where we are staying, I just pull out my travel bag, hang it in the bathroom, and I am unpacked. No fuss, no muss. – Carole

My bag I got at a Thirty one bag party that a friend held. Are you familiar with that brand? This is my second toiletry bag like this and I've almost worn it out! Here's a link to their website.

<https://www.mythirtyone.com/us/en/>

We do have some trips planned for this year. In July, our family is going to see our daughter in Canton, Georgia, which is about 45 minutes north of Atlanta. We are flying (we have been vaccinated and we don't mind wearing a mask). We will have fun playing in Sarah's pool and then we are going to venture to a baseball game for the Atlanta Braves. I haven't been to a baseball game in probably 15 years, but with the grandkids it will be fun (mostly eating the concession stand food!) Then our most exciting trip planned is in October to Carmel, California

for our 40th wedding anniversary. We will visit this beautiful area on the coast of California near Monterrey. They have an awesome state park that we will spend time venturing about and then just driving around seeing the sites. I am sure we will shop and eat yummy food. We will also take some road trips to Ruidoso – where we bought a small cabin this past fall. It's been something we have been dreaming about and saving for the past 20 years, and we were finally able to do it. The summer will be nice and cool. We can work from anywhere (we learned that from covid) so we can be away, but not really be away. I hope in a few years to visit Scotland. Always been a dream - who knows? We will see..... - Melissa

It's so tempting to go nowhere, because funds are low, time off is hard to come by, or planning is overwhelming. As you can see up above, traveling is different for each family/couple/individual. Sometimes planning is great, if you enjoy it. Other times, just going is better. There are always obstacles to getting away, but travel is so fun and a necessity for health sometimes, that it's worth going...even if it's just down the road not very far...with a cooler or not...with an itinerary or "no particular place to go."

So, happy travels wherever you go!



HOME

A Night to Remember – The Main Thing – by Marcy Lytle

It was a Sunday morning, and it was an activity that she had asked her mom if the family could participate in, and they did! There was a community clean-up in their neighborhood, and 8-year old Ayla wanted to help out. So several families got together and cleaned up an area in a construction zone, and collected bags and bags of trash! Being able to serve was the best, and the entire family felt blessed! So how can this idea be incorporated into a family devo?

Start by asking your kids...is it more important to show up for church on a Sunday morning...or to help a neighbor in need?

Preparation: You'll need a small plastic animal, a large sofa for sitting, and a table prepared with snacks.

Let's look at a few stories in the Bible from Luke 14. It was a time where people lived by lots of rules that were just made to control others, like not doing any work at all on the Sabbath Day. So some people took this to the extreme and used it as an excuse to do nothing for anyone else.

So for this story, let's pretend that our rule is - ***no one can speak or move during the lesson.*** Let's say that's our "rule" that we have for tonight.

First, there's a sick man that needs to be healed, on the Sabbath Day. Jesus went against the people's "rules" and healed the guy. The problem was that those questioning Jesus cared more about their laws than they did about love. (Ask a child to pretend they're sick and ask for help...only the family cannot move.) Which is more important, to help our sick family member or sit on the couch and not move? (Obviously to help the sick!)

Jesus asks these questioners if their child or animal falls in a ditch on a Sunday if they would pull it out. (Ask child to pretend he/she is a farmer and the animal falls into a ditch – off the sofa). Will we sit here on the sofa and not rescue the animal and let it die, because we're not supposed to move? No way! (Pick up the animal and rescue it)

Now, let's get rid of that rule, and pretend we're all going to a wedding and the dining table is the best seat in the house! Where would you want to sit? Our new rule is to ***grab the best seat!*** (Let children answer).

Jesus watched these same people as they attended a wedding and ran to get the seat where they could be seen and honored, instead of looking out for the needs of others.

If you have a party, isn't it fun to invite your very best friends only? What if you invited a few kids that have no friends and offered them a seat by you? (Let kids answer with what that might be like.)

Jesus says when we have a celebration we need to invite the ones that others might not invite! In fact, we're supposed to invite people that may never invite us back!

Let's gather around the table for snacks. And let's sit in a chair where we normally wouldn't sit.

Now that we're at the table, the new rule is to ***pass the snacks to the left, only.*** (Start passing the snacks).

But what if we forget and pass a snack to the right? Some rules are not really rules, only just ideas someone has, and we have to be able to tell the difference.

Rules are made for safety and we must follow them to live. But random demands (even ones we make on friends when we play) are just selfish and rude. Look at our rules we made during the lesson and how silly they all were!

We need to make sure we don't make others follow rules that are just mean. Friends don't have to play like we play, and we don't have to be so strict that we cannot care for others.

Back to our first question...

Going to church is a great rule to follow, and a great habit to have in our lives. But there just might be a Sunday when it's best to join with neighbors for a clean-up!

Think about what Jesus teaches us in this story, to care for people. That's the main thing, and should always be the main thing.

An Adage a Day - See the Beauty – by Carole Gilbert

“March winds and April showers bring May flowers and June bugs.”

This saying started in 1886 in the UK because of their wet springtime, but interestingly enough, it still holds pretty true today. Even in our neck of the woods. And we can closely follow this saying; the wind and the showers are correct. We had the March winds and the April showers. Our May flowers were beautiful as always and some are still around. Timewise, we do get June bugs in May also, but they are in full force by June. Did you know June bugs are also called May beetles? So, we are right on time with that part of the saying, also.

I could do without the June bugs, but they could be worse. I can tolerate them far easier than I can some other bugs and besides, it is June! Summertime! It's wonderfully hot, full of bugs and other little wild creatures, but I love it! Like famed sportscaster, performer, and writer Al Bernstein said, “Spring being a tough act to follow, God created June.” And as for flowers, this is Texas. Pretty much flowers left in June are not flowers at all but blooming weeds. And I love all flowers, even weed ones.

I remember one June when I was about seven. There was a pile of building material left on the side of our house. It had been there for a while and in the summer months wildflowers grew up around it. Actually, they were weeds, but to me they were beautiful flowers, and they were mine.

My neighbor friends had a cousin about our age that would come to visit occasionally. She knew how I felt about my “flowers” and she was always determined to pick them just to make me mad. One day, as she started to pick my flowers, I felt something building up inside of me that I had never felt before. I raised my hand to stop her by hitting her on the back and suddenly I heard a familiar voice from the door of our house. It was my Mama. She sternly said, “Carole Lynn, come here now!” I knew I was in trouble and my Mama did not “spare the rod.”

I got over my feelings of uncontrolled anger after that and I hope this cousin eventually got over her feelings of spitefulness. After all, my Mama did allow her to pick all of my flowers that she wanted that day.

If you look at each month in this saying and see the beauty that lies within the mentioned wind, rain, flowers, and yes, even the bugs, you see that God has a purpose for each one. Just like He does for each one of us.

Colossians 1:16 says,

“For in Him all things were created: visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him.”

God did not and does not create anything without beauty and purpose. I learned a lot about how God loves and has purpose for everyone and everything that day from my Mama and I learned

to see the beauty that lies within, even within the people picking my weeds, my “flowers,”
against my wishes.

When it comes to June,
It is all quite clear.
There is still more to come,
But it has already been half of this year.

Chipped China - Good Enough & Grateful – by Jennifer Lytle

“Mom, I put dinner in the oven for you!”

Whew. That is helpful.

Seven minutes later I ask, “Did you take the plastic off the pizza?”

“No.”

I opened the oven and found the boxed pizzas which had been taken directly from the freezer and placed onto the oven racks.

Whew. That is wild.

In my work as a counselor, I have been focusing on the benefits of gratitude with some of my clients. The [neuroscience of gratitude reflects some brilliant findings](#). The brain literally lights up (specific areas in the brain are activated) with expressions of gratitude.

Gratitude is not an all-inclusive party. The mind cannot be both grateful and dissatisfied. What I find pretty exciting, is that we have been empowered to direct thoughts and retrain thought patterns. What a gift! (Please see [Philippians 4:8](#) and [Romans 12:2](#).)

Some days, I acknowledge it's difficult to [lean into the beauty of a perfectly imperfect](#) life or situation. It's one thing to help others with mantras or confessions and another to face your own wrapped and boxed frozen pizza cooking in the oven.

I screamed, “AHH!”

I closed the oven door. I grabbed two oven mitts as I continued to scream.

“Oh my gosh! What did you do? Are you serious?”

Yep. That came out of my mouth. All of it.

My oven mitt hands held onto the two pizza boxes as I commanded, “Open the door. Hold the screen door open for me.”

The edges of two boxes flopped in my oven mitts and floppy pizzas plopped into the trash bin.

After I took a minute to cool my mitts, I came back inside and said, “I'm sorry for screaming like that. I overreacted.”

The counselor likely would have coached her parent-client to continue with, “It was really nice that you tried to make dinner for us tonight. Thank you for making an effort to take care of us. That was so thoughtful. Next time, we can put the pizzas in the oven together.”

In that moment of the pizzas and the plastic and the oven mitts, I admit, I chose to focus on the craziness of boxed, plastic-wrapped pizza heating up and emitting fumes throughout our home. Next time, maybe I can do a little better with acknowledging the intention behind the action, praising the effort over the achievement, and being thankful that I have both a son and pizza.

You know what my son did though?

He said, “Okay, Mom.”

That simple apology was good enough for him. For that, I was grateful.

I Don't Do Teens – Up Through a Crack – by Marcy Lytle

I often take walks in my neighborhood, and this day was no different. I stepped across the street to start my usual path and spotted a huge array of wildflowers growing up through a crack in the concrete, on the side of a ditch, and it was as if they were screaming, “Look where I’m blooming!” And I did! They provided a beautiful sight right there in the middle of ugly concrete. They weren’t planted in anyone’s yard, not tended to by any human, but they were seeds that had blown and taken root and bloomed profusely – with only the care from above.

I started thinking about this, and how it relates to parenting. We all may have kiddos that are compliant, easy going, obedient (for the most part) and we sigh and give thanks. And then...there are those kiddos that keep us on our knees daily, because they’re – wild – so to speak. They are hard to manage, always questioning, constantly getting into trouble, and we sigh and throw up our hands!

Let’s think about flowers again, and compare them or use them as a story about our own children.

Some flowers we plant in beds and in our yards, they require quite the attention of fertilizer, water, and a perfect place to bloom, and they do. And we’re so proud of the array of blooms that people see when they walk up to our door. They might comment, “That rose bush is beautiful” as we smile and think of when we planted it, how we pruned it, and how it’s done so well.

Then there are seeds that we plant and fertilize and they just don’t grow well at all. In fact, they disappear, because maybe some bird picked them up and flew away with them. We really worked hard, but no fruit appeared on that squash plant, or the petals on that particular rose bush were eaten and left with gaping holes, until the whole bush was diseased and gone.

Perhaps we tended both groups of seeds the same, but one bush grew and the other one didn’t. Let’s call those that didn’t “wildflowers.” These seeds were blown away by the wind or flown away in the beak of a bird.

We may see those beautiful roses that grew so well near our doorstep for years, people may comment, and we may smile over and over again. But those wildflowers...we wonder...and we wait...for them to appear from the cracks in the concrete.

And then that day comes, when we’ve prayed, we’ve wept, we’ve thrown up our hands in the air...and we just decide to leave those seeds in HIS HANDS, and take a walk.

We step off the curb of our lawn with the blooming rosebushes behind us, snugged neatly into the places where we planted them, and there...we see them. The gasp occurs and our heart skips a beat. Those seeds did scatter but they landed. They were tended to by Someone Else and they’re among the most beautiful array of flowers we’ve ever seen, and the beauty actually takes our breath away.

Parents, don't lose heart. Maybe you have one child, or many, that just aren't blooming where you planted them, and you feel as though they've left and you've lost. There comes a time in all parents' petitions, when we have to open our hands and ask God to take those seeds that were blown by the wind and carry them. And he will. We may lose sight of them, they may wander around in the wind, but they will land. And it might be in a crack in the concrete. But then the rains will come, the sun will shine, and there they show up – tall and beautiful – planted over there. And not in our yard.

Be encouraged. And wait for the wildflowers of the season to appear...because they will.

Practical Parenting – I'm Bored – by Marcy Lytle

It's the two-word phrase that makes parents want to pull their hair out, especially when there are lists of things our kids can do, but instead they want to plop on the sofa and moan at the state of their world of boredom. We recently had the kiddos in our backyard to play and we had spent a while cleaning up their "play area" and adding new items for their little villages they make, and it was quite inviting...or so we thought. Five minutes into play and setup, one of the three lounged on the porch to declare the two words mentioned in the title of this story. *What?* I was shocked...but I don't know why...because I've said the same thing.

The kids are going to get bored this summer, no matter what we have planned to keep them occupied and happy. It won't matter that the family is going to Disneyworld, on multiple picnics, heading out for bike rides, or even enjoying creative activities at home. There's always one that's going to find whatever it is that we've planned to be NOT what they want to do. But what DO they want to do? Who knows?

What if being bored at times is okay, and we should just let the kids be bored for a bit? It's not really up to us to constantly cater to our kids when they're listless and don't know what to do. Yes, it's fine to suggest things, and yes there are times when maybe they are really tired of their same ole' existence, but let's focus here on the times when they have no good reason to be bored.

Aren't there days and hours when you feel things and think thoughts that are based on no good reasons, as well? Maybe you feel unloved, when everyone around you has told you they love you and you know it, but one afternoon you just don't feel it. Or perhaps you too have a list a mile long of things to do, you're away on a romantic weekend for two, and you find yourself thinking about being bored, as well.

So if we're bored for no good reason, here's maybe a reason we can consider:

Sour moods can lead to laziness and boredom, and sometimes we just need to decide to stop the downward trajectory toward depression that starts with the first stair of boredom. It might be good to tell that child that boredom isn't a choice today, and to get up and move and do, and chase those thoughts away.

Ungratefulness can be a root of boredom. Many of us have so much, yet we want so much more, and ingratitude visits our table and wreaks havoc with our emotional state. Kids often want more than, different than, what they already have. One idea might be to give that bored kid a pen and paper and let them start writing all the good things in their life, until they get to 20.

Boredom might not be what we're feeling at all, but rather a need to rest! Maybe that child, and we as well, need to close our eyes and take a nap or empty our minds or be still and do nothing, while we destress and readdress and then get up and move again...

Finally, boredom might just be perspective. Maybe we see the things we do as unimportant or boring because they're the same day after day. Or maybe the tasks and chores on our list today, instead of fun in the sun, seem like burdens instead of blessings. Our menial tasks can

be laced with worship, if we let them. And we can teach our kids to do so, as well. Teach her to whistle while she works. Show him how to smile while he makes his bed. And teach yourself how to rejoice while washing that load of clothes.

It's easier to just say "I'm bored," than to analyze and get off the sofa and move, or close our eyes and rest, or decide to give thanks or whistle a tune. But it's worth reminding our kiddos and ourselves to at least try a little exercise of the mind, soul and body (maybe exercise is the key!) and see if boredom doesn't flee.



YOU

Healthy Habits – The Nap – by Marcy Lytle

Sometimes, it's all that's needed to either make or break our day, or even our relationships – that little thing called a nap! I see young people taking naps, and obviously older people do as well. And while too much of a good thing like a nap can make one feel worse, just the right length and place can rejuvenate and make us all pleasant people again...

So how and why and where are naps to be had and taken, for good health?

The why is that we often have sleepless nights, we often work really hard, and sometimes we just need our body to rest. "They say" 20 minutes is a good length for a nap to reset our droopy eyes. Some don't nap because they have this idea that napping equals laziness. Not so! I encourage my husband to nap after a long work day, because we can then go out for the evening and he's happy! Sometimes, I can just close my eyes for 10 minutes and I feel like a new person!

The where varies from person to person. I prefer NOT to nap on the bed, where we sleep at night. Oddly enough, I prefer to retreat to the car, lay back the seat, and close my eyes. I start with a bit of reading and then I'm out. However, if I'm disturbed right when I'm sleepy (like someone calls and I hear it because my phone is still on!) then forget it. I'm wide awake. However, he loves to nap on a bed with the fan on, to drown out noise. And that's that.

The how to make naps happen when life is so busy is really a choice. If we're too busy for a quick nap, then maybe we can shorten our lunch, leave a to-do until tomorrow, or request of our family that 20 minutes that we need, and then take it – without guilt. It might be that we need to purchase a cute little pillow (I did – for the car!) or stretch out on the sofa, or drive the car to a park under a shade tree (we've done that, too!) When our families realize how much better we seem after we nap, they'll gladly allow the time...believe me.

The healthy part of napping is this. According to *Psychology Today*, our bodies are wired to slow down midday and rest. Isn't that interesting? Napping can even help our dull minds become sharper, after a brief break. Decision-making is never good when tired, so go ahead and nap for that reason, as well. And reducing stress can boost our immune system, so a nap is a good way to relax, sigh and breathe at rest.

Little babies require naps to grow. Toddlers start fighting naps so they can play. Older kids think naps are for babies. And then there are the adults that think staying "productive" all day long is the key to success. Without a nap, we might just make a lot of mistakes, say the wrong thing, or find ourselves sick for no good reason.

So go ahead. Take a nap. Enjoy it. Set your timer so you're not oversleeping and waking up groggy. And smile while you drift off to the 20 minute non-workout that your body, soul and mind needs on a regular basis.

Life in a Nutshell – All the Nuts – by Marcy Lytle

It's a busy season for our usual writer in this space, and I'm filling in for her! I want to keep with the topic of the column – which is usually about her awesome pecan orchard and business, coupled with raising her beautiful daughter. I've visited a couple of pecan orchards on vacations and have loved riding or walking through the trees and seeing these nuts and how they grow!

So since I'm filling in for Jill, I thought I'd write about the pecans in my life and how and why I enjoy them!

Since I can remember; my dad shelled pecans every Christmas. He has a HUGE pecan tree in his yard, but even if it didn't produce enough, or if the squirrels got all the nuts, he found pecans around town. Dad drove to where he knew pecan trees were and got out and gathered them in sacks, from off the ground. He knew just how many he needed for his holiday gifts!

Every time we drove up to his house in the fall, Dad was in the garage at an old table with a very old pecan sheller (he did not want the new kind!), cracking the shells and bagging the nuts. One year we even had labels made for him to stick on the bags that said "Melvin's Pecans." And all of his friends at church, and all of our family, looked so forward to receiving our bags of pecans.

Sometimes, we kids thought he gave away pecans mostly hoping he'd get back desserts made, from friends using the pecans!

This past Christmas was the first time Dad didn't shell any pecans. He's declining and forgetting and wasn't able to go foraging, and all the things. And it was sad. That was part of who Dad was, the giver of all the nuts to all the people. And all the people loved that gift SO much.

I never eat a pecan without thinking of Dad and his sheller, his bags, and his joy in giving those nuts. And the best thing about the nuts, according to Dad, was Mom's pecan pie. I'll leave the recipe below for you to try. As for me, I'm not a pie fan, but I love tossing a few nuts in a small container with some pieces of dark chocolate, to slip into the theater to eat with my popcorn when the movie begins.

It's Father's Day this month, and the dad I knew is disappearing rapidly. I'm super thankful for his example of taking what he had (a huge pecan tree) and using it to bless friends and neighbors. It brought smiles to their faces and brings a smile to my face now, as I think about him and his gift.

If you have a good memory of your father, pin it up on the wall of your mind and hang it there with pride, and smile. If your father was absent or not a good father, then think on memories of gifts the Father has given you in the form of others, sunrises and sunsets, health and food and shelter, and even June bugs and swimming pools. And hang those photos up on that wall, and give thanks.

I'm so thankful for pecans, not only the memories of Dad in his garage, but the reminder that God provides for all of us in all of creation because of the Good Father that he is, at all times.

Thank you for "listening" to my story about Dad, and I hope you have a story to share about your father or Father, to your friends or kiddos or family, as well.

LIFE RIGHT NOW – The Sweet Stuff - BY Hannah Bouck

So much. So little time.

Currently, I am sitting in my new office cubicle sipping on one of my favorite drinks with my husband, Chik-Fil-A diet lemonade! I discovered it in college when I moved down to the South and it quickly became one of my all-time favorite things. I love how something as sour as a lemon can become something so crave-able with just some water and sugar added.

It got me thinking about some lemons we have encountered over the last year and things we/I have learned, but it never ceases to amaze me how quickly we can also forget. And, I am referencing this last season of life we ALL as a world experienced... Quarantine. Now, I know this wasn't the case for everyone, but quarantine was (honestly) not all that bad for me. I was able to rest, spend time with family, laugh, cry, listen, learn, and more. We stepped away from the hustle and stepped into unknown.

Interestingly enough, I welcomed the unknown with open arms because I was WORN OUT. With 60 + hours of work a week, grad school, planning a wedding, family drama, and simply navigating life, I wasn't thriving; I was barely living. All of a sudden life blossomed and living looked like working from my in-law's house, waking up and kayaking in the lake in their backyard, going on walks, late nights of laughing and baking peanut butter cookies, and simply being.

As soon as quarantine lifted and my office opened back up, life quickly began to speed-up again. Everyone all so quickly began to forget the short-lived peace we experienced and began to run back towards the shrine of the hustle. But for some reason I didn't. Yes, I do know the importance of working and finding purpose, but I began to feel more worn out and depressed than I had before quarantine. I had finally begun to experience the life I actually wanted to live, a life filled with family, quality time, outdoors, and rest.

Work became more draining by the day and originally monotonous tasks became more like nails on a chalkboard. I knew I had enough, but I didn't know what to do. We couldn't afford for me to not be working, but I also knew I couldn't continue as I was. So, we did what we knew to-do – we prayed. After months of praying, an opportunity came up for me to work at a local church, full-time with a flexible schedule, and a genuinely more life-giving environment. Super bonus: It also allowed me to join with my husband where our offices are only feet apart vs. an hour's drive away. It's definitely a transition, but it has put me in a place closer to the life I want to live.

Life right now isn't exactly as relaxed as it was in quarantine, but it's a lot less of the hustle. It's more about people and time well-spent with them. As it should be. The craziness we've all experienced as a people this year wasn't ideal, but I am grateful for the lemonade it's made and to be sipping some of that sweet stuff beside my husband, in this new season.

Strengthening Your Core – In the Moment – by Marcy Lytle

I'm the most terrible at living in the moment. Honestly, I'm only writing about it because it's on my mind and my heart quite often, because learning to live in the moment seems a much better way to live than the way most of us operate on a daily basis.

I go to bed thinking about tomorrow and my to-do list, about the meals I'm going to prepare, and dream about the next getaway. I suppose there's nothing wrong with that, but besides those things, I think about the sad news I've just watched on TV, the worries others have shared with me, or the future and how bleak it seems, and pretty soon...my mind is full like a bulging sack of trash that literally needs to be removed and taken out!

I also waste a lot of time thinking about regrets or things I wish I'd done differently, or how I shouldn't have felt that way or this way, or why did I let that rudeness slip off my tongue. I pine sometimes for what was, or who used to be present, or all sorts of things that cannot be changed and pretty soon...my mind is sagging like a scary Day of the Dead piñata that needs a bat taken to it, so that its contents can spill and the piñata be thrown away.

I suppose those are odd visuals, but it's what I thought of when I realized how much time and space in our hearts and minds are taken up by everything BUT the moment.

The picture here was definitely one I took for social media, but the setting, my backyard and all that's growing is definitely a "live in the moment" place. It's a yard where we've planted lots of living things in hopes that they will grow and produce color and brilliance and happiness around our home. And they do! But only if I methodically, daily in the summer months, exit the back door and stay a while.

I get the water hose, I turn on the faucet and I start spraying. It's not a quick pass, but it's a slow soak, that keeps the blooms alive in the heat of the season. And there's nothing else I can do but stand there and wait while the water soaks in, and the plants drink. I can almost see drooping leaves perk up in a matter of a few minutes.

And it's there in my backyard that I get as close to living in the moment as I ever do. I'm out of the house where chores beckon and lists lay by pens screaming, "Pick me up and add more!" I'm in the sunshine and the wind and I feel the warmth of something real and moving and life-giving, and I hear a small voice whispering to me to notice...

...the rainbow that appears in the spray of the water from the fanning of the water droplets in the sun

...the honeysuckle vine that clings to the fence and climbs and spreads out, even after the freeze that destroyed other plants, a few months back

...the peppers hanging on the plants waiting patiently until full grown, to be picked and enjoyed and eaten

...the roses that we first planted decades ago, now giving birth STILL to profuse blooms as long as water is near

...those plants that only bloom when the heat is on and the cool temps are past, as they fascinate and emerge so tall

And I live in the moment surrounded by living and breathing plants, some that come back year after year, and some that I've just planted. I have no other agenda except to water and observe and wait and feel...and maybe that's what living in the moment looks like.

Gardening and yard work is hard in the Texas heat, and it won't be long until the heat keeps me indoors more than out, but I'll still find the early morning or late afternoon hours to exit and tend and water and snip...every single season.

And if I don't do this, the color and beauty starts to fade and slip away...without my ever having noticed.

When's the last time you lived in the moment, and what did that look like? I'd love to know...

Under Pressure - Golden Images – by Debbie Haynes

When we think of images of gold, the Oscar statue might come to mind, or perhaps exquisite jewelry, or even maybe the golden arches at McDonalds! But for our story this month, we're referring to an actual image of gold that was 5X10 feet wide, set up by King Nebuchadnezzar (King Neb) in Daniel 3. Let's look at what he did:

He called together all the rulers to come to the dedication of a huge image that he set up, and then commanded everyone to fall down and worship this gold statue. When the people heard music from all sorts of instruments; then that was their signal to kneel. And if they didn't worship the image, they were cast into a furnace of fire! So, of course, when the people from all nations and languages heard the music, they did what they were told and worshipped this golden image.

Right after this command, plots began to take place against the Hebrews and others came to the king and said, "Didn't you command everyone to obey?" And they proceeded to point out specific Jews that were only worshipping God and not the image. In particular, there were three brothers that weren't bowing, by the names of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The king was angry and wanted to see them.

The three brothers knew about a higher command back in Exodus 20 given to them by God to not have any other gods before the one true God, and to not make any images and bow down to them. They responded to the king with great conviction that they would not bow to the golden image. And they went on to declare that if they were thrown in a furnace, God would be able to deliver them. And then, they went further to state that even if God didn't deliver them, they would still not bow to the image!

Of course, King Neb was furious so he heated up the furnace seven times hotter than it had been before, and sent the brothers into the flames. Maybe you know the story, but right away the king jumped up and stated that he saw four men in the fire – the fourth man looking like the Son of God.

That visual, that realization of the truth of what the brothers had said, and that awakening, caused the king to make a brand new decree for the people.

He blessed God and said there is no other God who can deliver in this way that he witnessed, and he promoted the same three guys that stood up to the king's original command. What a shift!

One thing to note in this story is that the people were blind followers of a corrupt leader, with no truth to anchor them. They were easily led to follow a dead idol. Seems silly, but it still happens to us today.

We copy behaviors and customs around us, without seeking the truth. We have to stay true to God's word or we could find ourselves bowing down to images that have no life, as well. The only way to remain rooted and true to God is to know what the word says about his character and to align our thinking with that!

Aren't you curious how the king knew the fourth man was the Son of God? It could be that God just revealed himself at that moment, when the king looked and saw what he had done, and God showed up and revealed what he could do.

Psalms 25 tells us that if we fear the Lord and choose his way, God himself will teach us, and our souls will dwell at ease, and our seed will inherit the earth.

Isaiah 43 reminds us that when we pass through waters and rivers and even walk through flames, we won't be burned.

Will we choose golden images to worship...or will we see the image of a fourth man? One brings certain death, and the other delivers us from that death.



MARRIAGE

After 40 Years – Beautifully Different – by Marcy Lytle

We go to the movie theater a lot. It's a happy place for us. And I often am amused at how he can sit by me and laugh at the same previews and commercials we've seen a dozen times before, as if it's the first time he's seen them. And last night, when this happened again, I looked at him and gave thanks for this man that is so different from me in so many ways, because I need different. I need to glean from him the way he sees every day as if it's new and fresh...because it is!

We take walks often, on different trails throughout our city, and he marvels at many things I wouldn't even notice. He spots a cardinal in the tree or hears the sound of water and walks to the side, and catches the sight of a small waterfall in a creek behind the bushes. I would have passed on by, as my thoughts of what's for dinner or my to-do list kept me preoccupied from the beauty of the moment. I need to walk by this man that notices and points out, and calls me to look...because it's wonderful!

We sometimes share in projects and cleaning in the house, when we're having company or just sprucing up the yard. I hurry through projects and chores, ready to get them done and move on. He, however, takes time to make sure these things are done correctly so that the fix lasts, the plants get full attention, or the cleaning is thorough. I need to work beside this man that is meticulous and precise, when I'm haphazard and quick...because I'm in too big of a hurry!

We read a page a night from a devotional book by Max Lucado, so that the last thing before we go to sleep is truth from His word. Sometimes, I'm looking at my phone or I'm preoccupied in thought, and he starts reading. He holds on and smiles at and wonders with the writer, over just one little truth. And often, I might daydream or think of something else and miss what he's read altogether. I need this man that simply loves God and his word...because I need that Word of life, as well!

I could keep writing about our differences and they would be many. We are about as different as night and day in so many ways. But just like we need the night and the day to complete a 24-hour turn, he and I need each other. I can easily forget this sometimes and become annoyed at those differences, and that makes for an unpleasant evening. But when I stop and admire the way he laughs again at that ad, when I look up at that bird he notices, when I observe and learn from his skills, and when I lay my head on the pillow at night and really listen, our marriage is at its best.

Sure, my husband has issues just like all of us do, but so do I. And those issues can sometimes become bigger than the beauty of our differences that complete the two of us into one beautiful whole.

Right now, he's asleep, because I'm an early riser and he prefers a couple more hours. He's going to eat things for breakfast I wouldn't touch. By the end of today, we will have done and observed and operated in entirely different ways in our work and play. And I hope that I always pause to observe this man who's so different, so beautifully different, from me.

Date Night Fun – On the Floor – by Marcy Lytle

We have recently had several fun nights arranging our floor in the living room while we eat and watch a movie, so that we feel like it's a date. These can also be moved outdoors to your yard, instead, if you wish! Hope you enjoy them all and try several, and share your pictures with us, or leave a comment below. And have fun setting up each experience as you date night on the ground this month of June.

At the Beach – Open a couple of umbrellas (Target has \$5 ones in the dollar spot!), bring out your beach towels, set out a picnic basket and pick a movie. For the food, just use a big tray and arrange everything you have in the fridge and pantry for a charcuterie board. Leftover veggies, dips, nuts, crackers, etc. and some cute plates/napkins in a beach theme that you get at the dollar store will make your night breezy and fun!

Dinner for Two – Spread out a white sheet (or tablecloth) or black, whichever you have. That's your table. Light a couple of candles, and set out your finest plates (or nice paper ones) and cloth napkins. For dinner, consider ordering a delivery dinner from a nice restaurant, and then enjoy a romantic movie of your choice (We recently enjoyed *As Luck Would Have It* on the Hallmark Channel).

Fly Away – Set up your area like an airplane by setting your two dining chairs close together. You'll use trays on your lap for your food. Serve your drinks in the clear plastic cups like they offer on the airplane. And have your drinks in a small cooler to choose from, right beside you. Choose a variety of perhaps a soda, water, and a fizzy drink. In basket, set out airplane snacks like trail mix, peanuts, crackers, chocolates and all sorts of snacks. Provide one comfy blanket to cover your laps, and pick your favorite movie located in a destination far away...

Breakfast in Bed – Lay out a huge blanket and bring in your pillows. Set up a tray in the middle, with all the breakfast goodies like bacon, scrambled eggs, sausage, potatoes, etc. to make breakfast tacos. Prepare all of this together before you snuggle in. Even make some fresh-squeezed orange juice. Oh, and be sure to wear your pj's. How about an old classic movie for this date idea? And a dinner mint under your pillow after the movie is over?

Story Time – Who says story-time has to just be for kiddos? Stack all of your throw pillows around the floor, in three "stations." Provide a travel book by one stack, a book of poems by the second, and an inspirational book by the third. Remove your shoes and come in your socks, and provide crunchy veggie snacks and dips for enjoyment, while you move around to the different stations and read and share the night away...

If the floor is too hard or not appealing for a place to sit, be creative and move your ideas to the bed, or the sofa, or out in the yard at your picnic table, but be creative with all of the ideas and more - and enjoy each other as the summer begins!

For Better or Worse - Ten Years – by Kaelin Scott

Next month, my husband and I will celebrate our 10th anniversary. Sometimes it feels like a lifetime has passed since we said our vows, and sometimes I wonder how ten years passed by so quickly. I know that many of you readers have been married much longer than that. To you I may still be a newlywed. And that's the beautiful thing about this magazine. It connects people in all stages of life.

Despite feeling as if the past ten years have flown by, I have learned a lot about marriage in that time. And I have certainly learned much about myself, as well. Most importantly, I have learned a lot about God. I've seen parallels between His love for me and the love of a husband. I've witnessed what it means to sacrifice, compromise, and heal.

Marriage is a wonderful gift, no matter how long you've been married. But it can also be very hard at times. How on earth do you take two people and make them into one flesh? Especially when they have different opinions, feelings, and strengths. It seems nearly impossible at times, and it can certainly be frustrating as well.

But nothing is impossible for God, and I've found that to be the only secret to keeping our marriage alive. God has to be at the center.

Not me, not my husband, not our kids. God alone must be first and foremost in both our hearts. If we want to survive the obstacles and hardships thrown at us along the way, we have to fix our eyes on Him. It sounds simple, and sometimes it's easier than others. Just like Peter, when those dark, difficult days come, we tend to get distracted by the waves.

But when we start to sink, we have a choice. We can struggle to swim on our own, drowning in the weight of our problems. Or we can cry out to Jesus for help, and He'll pull us back up again. Nothing is beyond healing, fixing, or saving, marriage included.

My husband and I haven't made it through the past ten years without our share of struggles. We've hurt each other, we've made mistakes, and we've seen sorrow together. But Jesus carried us through each of those times. He never let the waves overtake us. Instead, He took our hands and walked us back to safety.

I'm sure the next ten years will have struggles of their own. But we will face them together, keeping our eyes on Jesus and trusting His love for us.

In This Together - Rain or Shine – by Marcy Lytle

I was asked to cover this month for this column, and I'm happy to, because it's what friends do. And when I said yes, I thought of how that concept applies to my marriage as well. Those famous vows we make in front of our guests to honor each other in sickness and in health mean that when one is down, the other one will offer a hand up. However, that's not so easy, when one is going through a hard time!

I remember when my husband had a deteriorating hip, eventually resulting in a hip replacement, and I had to be patient while he recovered. Patience is a virtue, and it's not one of my strong ones! I usually give him 24 hours to feel bad, and then I'm ready for him to rise up and go! However, I had to wash his hair, serve him and take care of him, much like a nurse, for a few weeks. I didn't like it, but it's what I vowed to do.

That was just a physical test, but what about the emotional ones? I'd say my husband has had to come my assistance way more than he knew he would have to, when he said "I do" those decades ago. I'm pretty sure he had no idea that I was such an emotional number line – going from 1 to 100 – all in one day sometimes! I might wake up cheerful and playful, and by the end of the day be drained and snappy...and he has learned to recognize and offer that patience that he definitely has more of than I do.

I've watched friends that have had devastating accidents, where one of them ended up in a wheelchair or completely lost mentally, and I've watched the care required by the other half of the couple. It's heartbreaking to witness, and yet beautiful all at the same time. We know a lady who had early onset of dementia, and watched her husband recently at a restaurant take her hand with the most gentle of care and walk her to their car. I wanted to cry for all sorts of reasons, and I gasped at the beauty AND the pain of it.

I've also had another friend that received a diagnosis of cancer early on in her marriage, and her husband ended up leaving her because he "didn't want to have kids with a cancer patient." I cannot imagine the pain she felt when he left her in the middle of her pain. And yet later, she remarried an amazing man and recovered from the cancer, and life was good again.

I could go on and on, reciting stories of my own marriage, and stories of others, of watching that sickness/health vow play out over time. No one wants sickness of any kind, or even to lean on the other partner so heavily when we cannot walk by ourselves. However, there's something about suffering that refines and makes glorious an image that reflects his love and his mercy.

We recently read a devotional that said to let your suffering be your sermon. I suppose that means that the way we handle these setbacks in our marriage, the way we rise to offer a hand, love beyond the physical, and serve without expectation, speaks volumes about the love of Christ to those who observe and see. And it also gives us the opportunity to lean on HIM to receive his grace and mercy to achieve the impossible that we never thought we'd face.

My friend needed a hand up for the story, this month. And I'm happy to help. My husband needed a shoulder this week, because he lost his brother. And I hope I've been patient and kind, because he will be grieving for a while.

And as for me? I need a hand up daily because I'm just wired that way, and I'm thankful my husband is with me in every season, rain or shine, and opens the umbrella for me to walk close so that I don't drown in the deluge...



ENCOURAGEMENT

My backyard feels like an oasis in the midst of a desert. Surrounded by houses in the middle of a subdivision, in the middle of a city—an oasis is the next best thing to being surrounded by forests, or a greenbelt. Sitting on the patio in the early morning, the dull roar of IH 35 traffic is usually an annoying backdrop to the gurgling sound of water fountains—but not today. It's quieter for some reason—so quiet that I caught the sound of baby birds chirping.

Several months ago I hung a bird house (most likely a thrift store find, but I have a dim memory of a garage sale) on the lattice screen at the back of the garden. It was mostly for show, because I didn't think a bird would actually use it, but a little wren must have thought it was a perfect nesting place. When I saw her actually going inside, my heart soared! This morning, a month or so later, I heard the chirping and watched as momma made several trips back and forth bringing food to the little ones. Each time she brings food the chirping frenzy begins, and then they quiet down until the next time. How many trips is she going to make? Do they feed all day long? I hope to find out.

There's one problem. I have a cat. If you read my story "Guardian of the Garden" (available in August 2020 archives) you know Jasper was an answer to prayer about my rat problem. I had serious reservations about a cat because I love the birds and encourage them with many birdfeeders (which also encourages rats!); but Jasper has proven to be pretty laid back. It seems his presence, made known by the scent of his private garden facilities (litter box au naturel), more than his hunting skills, keeps rodents away. I haven't seen one in months! He's intrigued by the birds, but he only killed a couple early on when survival mode was still on. Now, he watches them and only half-heartedly stalks them before they fly away; however, this birdhouse is near a bench and would be easy for him to get to, especially if baby birds begin to emerge. So far, he hasn't noticed the chirping or momma's activity, but I'm going to have to keep a sharp eye out—he is a cat after all. I really hope the babies make it.

Since the Big Freeze most things are actually coming back. Many plants were unaffected, but some didn't make it, so there were several holes in my garden space that needed to be filled. Plants are harder to find, and more expensive, because the growers lost plants too. My gardening buddy and I have made many trips to local garden centers hunting for plants, which has been so fun! We also went to a plant exchange in the neighborhood and got some surprise plants and met some great people. I hope to see them again.

The holes left in my garden have opened up the space, letting in some sun, which means I have more plants to choose from. I'm enjoying adding new plants and redesigning certain areas that needed a change. My boundaries have expanded, and I'm embracing the change. The Big Freeze was devastating to many....lost plants doesn't compare to the losses others suffered. I hope that those who suffered more than lost plants—damage to property and even lost lives—can see some sunshine come through. I hope that the "hole" created by devastation is being filled with new opportunities, new perspectives, and hope, that keeps us afloat.

Moving Forward - The Path to Peace – by Pam Charro

Peace is such an easy thing to lose! Life is full of challenges and difficulties, and modern times are certainly no exception. I could describe my current situation to you, and you would very likely feel I have every right to be losing my mind right now.

Fortunately, I've been in training, for many years, in finding the path to peace. In John 14:27, Jesus makes a promise to me that the path always exists, no matter how my circumstances appear. So I gave up my excuses and justifications for staying miserable and set my mind on finding it. I have learned that it's simple to do, but not necessarily easy. I often picture the path as a narrow trail going straight up a pine tree-covered mountain.

Sounds fun, right?

It takes good vision to see the path, and discipline and commitment to stay on it. But it's something that can be done, and here is how:

I have decided that I will believe God's word, lean on his promises, and spend time in his presence, no matter what. I will keep going back when I feel something negative. I won't stop until I receive that promised peace. It doesn't depend on what I see or think I know to the contrary, although I sometimes have to spend a lot of time with him before I feel the peace he is offering. But he has been faithful over and over again, so I know he will give what he has promised. And his peace surpasses understanding; it is more powerful than anything the enemy can do to steal it, as long as I commit myself to remaining surrendered to my God.

I have wandered around through trees and have even bumped my head on some of them. But my path to peace is becoming more and more worn from constant travel, and I always come down the mountain radiant.

I am grateful for God's promise that the path to peace is always there .. and that he walks it with me.

Rooted in Love - Treasure for Me – by Kaelin Scott

Do you believe that God hears your prayers?

Because He does.
Every single one.
Big and small alike.

Every year, we take our family on a weeklong vacation to the beach. We collect tons and tons of seashells, and we see lots of broken sand dollar pieces too. Last year when we went, I really wanted to find a perfect, whole sand dollar. I had never found one before, and I thought it would be so neat if I did. So on the first day of our trip, as I headed out with my boogie board, I said a simple prayer that I would find one. I didn't think about the sand dollar too much after that, although I did look around any time I got near the water.

Fast forward a few days. I was walking along the edge of the water with my little ones, watching and laughing as they ran after shells and other treasures. We had quite the collection going in our little bucket, but something about beautiful seashells is just so irresistible. We had gone a good distance down the beach and I knew their little legs would soon tire out, so we turned to start heading back. But suddenly, a flash of white in an incoming wave caught my eye.

Without even thinking, I ran over and bent down, reaching my hand into the swirling water. I grabbed onto the object and pulled it up, and my heart skipped a beat. In my hand was a beautiful, perfect, whole sand dollar. I immediately remembered the prayer I had said a few days before, and I knew God had sent that sand dollar just for me. After showing it to my excited kids, I tucked it away safely, smiling and thanking God for His little treasures.

As I walked back down the beach, surrounded by the sound of wind and waves and laughter, I was struck by the sovereignty of God. Nothing is too big for Him, and nothing is too small, either. If He is loving enough to bless me with something as tiny as a sand dollar, then surely He is faithful in the big things as well. Thinking about this encouraged me and bolstered my faith.

The struggles in my life that feel overwhelming – He's got them under control. My prayers and tears and heartache – He sees and hears them all.

I'm so thankful for this reminder of God's faithfulness and goodness. He cares deeply about me, and He cares deeply about you too. Nothing is impossible for Him. And He wants us to bring our hearts to Him.

Every fear,
every worry,
every dream,
every hope.

Nothing is too big, and nothing is too small.

Simple Truths – A Little Louder, Now – by Marcy Lytle

This year, for the first time ever, we hired a lawn service guy. And it's been fantastic. My husband was driving home one evening and saw this guy working hard on our street, in a neighbor's yard, stopped and visited with him – and he was hired for our yard.

A few weeks later, my husband saw Raul across the street in another neighbor's yard. After talking to him, Raul stated that the neighbor had seen Raul trimming our yard and invited him to start on his.

This all made me think how Raul didn't have to do any advertising on our street, because his work and his performance spoke for him. His actions and the result of them (the pretty yards) made people take note, stop and ask, and then hire him! How cool is that?

You know how we've always heard that actions speak louder than words. And while we do have to use our words, actions are really the best form of attraction to anything we're trying to "sell." If we want people to listen to us talk about a subject we know, maybe like home decorating, the best pitch is to let them see our own houses and how well we decorated our own walls. I remember as a child being frustrated when Mom took me to buy a pattern and cloth, because the ladies that worked in those departments often wore the ugliest clothes! That wasn't good advertising! Or what about when we step inside a salon and the hairstylist about to cut our hair has hair that is unkempt and unattractive. That's downright scary, right?

As I've lived, over the years, I've found that the best "witness" I can be to others regarding God's love is to love others, and live like I know that I'm loved as well. I can preach about his love and teach about it and talk about, but if I'm found hating myself or others – those words fall to the ground. If we're telling our little girls that God loves them, and yet we stand in front of mirrors and hate our bodies out loud, that's all the little girls remember. In fact, anything we talk about falls on deaf ears if we don't exhibit that in the "neighborhood."

I'm sure Raul perhaps leaves his cards on the doors of houses, or maybe he has a Facebook page. But the best he can hope for is that his work hires him. My husband saw his fine work, talked to him and realized his pleasant manner, and invited him to our yard. The neighbor across the street saw our yard, observed Raul, and invited him to his grass. So cool, isn't it, how a ripple effect starts when actions speak louder than words.

I'm pretty sure I've spoken louder many times and left actions behind, so then what I spoke about had no good effect at all. I can tell my husband how much I love him, but then run him down with my words, if I'm not careful. However, if I'm constantly serving him, or others, or giving or treating as I want to be treated, then trust develops and relationships happen, and questions are asked. And we can give good answers.

I often feel like I should be saying more to spread the good news about Jesus. After all, I profess that he is everything to me. But I'm pretty sure that I need to be doing more, instead. Serving, loving, giving, forgiving, going the extra mile – all the things that SHOW his love – speak much louder! And then, when that person sees and crosses the street to ask me

something about what I've just done, I can honestly answer and point to HIM. And they might just listen then to the good news that He loves them, too.

Unearthly Thing - Fixing My First – by Angela Dolbear

New things excite me. The rumble of the UPS truck as it pulls into my driveway makes my adrenaline rush.

An email that says a treasured item I searched out and purchased online has shipped makes me mentally say, “Squeee!”

But I hate this feeling.

Hate may be a strong word, but this fondness for material things screams to me that my priorities are out of order.

My flesh, my base, un-regenerated self, is in control.

The title of my monthly column is “Unearthly Thing,” a phrase I adopted after reading a quote from C.S. Lewis about treading lightly on this earth, because it is not our home, and Heaven is. I try to live by this.

Recently, my husband and I have started a mission to get out of debt. When we are stirred and motivated by acquiring new things, the justification for throwing down the credit card is easy, but the consequences are definitely not.

It physically hurts me to say “NO” to myself.

I mourn the cancelation of my monthly cosmetics subscription box. The thought of not experiencing that anticipation of opening the box to see what is new, and colorful, which I can play with, saddens me. I feel like I am walking around like Charlie Brown, with my head hung low, and shuffling my feet.

But this must change. It struck me this morning how much my flesh decides, how much it still rules me. And I don't like it.

One of the devotionals I read this morning was spot on. (God always brings me words of encouragement exactly when I need them!)

When pursuing a goal, in my case it's to be free of debt and materialism, “depend on Him for the strength to do it, and then go after your goal with everything in you,” Joyce Meyer's devotional says. “Be full of holy determination—not some kind of fleshly determination or willpower—but true God-given determination. You do have self-control. It is a fruit of the Spirit, and it is in you—believe it and begin walking in it.”

Yes, and amen.

It has also occurred to me that getting out of debt is not the primary goal. Of course being debt-free will be awesome, but the most important goal is to have that excitement I used to have for new things, instead be fulfilled with the things of God. His words, His wisdom, and His missions for me.

Telling myself “NO” will be good for squelching my fleshly desires, but it needs to be replaced with something trustworthy. I'm sweeping my mental house clean of harmful attitudes, but it's important that something bigger and better be put in its place. (For more information, please see [Luke 11:24-26](#), and [Matthew 12:43-45](#) .)

I think I have not been putting the Kingdom first. My first Love, my Lord, needs to be in that place that I have been filling with the need for new stuff. I am reminded of Jesus' words to the church in Ephesus in Revelation. It stings my soul to hear Him talk about those who lost Him as their first love. But the burning sensation lets me know He is working. (See [Revelation 2:2-5](#) for the story).

I need Jesus.

So simple, so true, and so peacefully right.

Jesus needs to be on the throne of me, of all mind, heart, and soul. Lord, please help me make it so.

Yes, and amen.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - The Family Walk

A few weeks ago, we all had dinner together at my son's home, and one of my favorite things we did was take a family walk after we ate. I have heard that walking after meals is a common practice in other countries, and I wish it were so here! There are so many good reasons to walk together with all the generations, around the neighborhood. Our path this particular day was behind my son's house where lots of new houses were being built. But we could have picked a trail, just as well.

Here's what made me so happy as we walked:

There were conversations about the homes being built, and my husband quizzed the family on certain aspects of building to see if they knew the terms (like a brick ledge). That was fun and informative.

The two sister-in-laws walked side by side telling stories and sharing life, and they looked like they were having so much fun just chatting.

We had two of the littles with us, and they climbed on rocks, picked up sticks, and wondered at the new homes – especially when we went inside one of them – with ooohs and ahhs.

One child was tired near the end and her feet hurt (notice the red boots – NOT made for walking), so she hopped on her uncle's back for the rest of the walk home.

I stayed behind a couple of times to snap pictures of the loves of my life.

Walking together as a family enabled us all to work off what we just ate, for sure. But more importantly, we walked together in the same direction for the pure pleasure of observing and noting and enjoying and wondering. And I don't know what could be better than that.

As we turned on the last street, I even found myself skipping a little because my heart was so full and light.

It's not often that the family gathers and takes a walk, because conditions have to be just right. We need the time, the weather has to be good, and there has to be a place to walk. And oh yes, everyone needs to be willing to go.

I enjoyed noting the different styles of houses going up in the neighborhood, I also marveled at the purple flowers spreading out and growing right through rock, and I loved the exercise it gave us all.

However, the best part of the entire time together was watching my family and listening and being outdoors and taking the time to move out of the house, into the streets and onto the sidewalks. I cannot explain it in words. But it made my soul sing.

Try it. Some may moan that they don't have the correct footwear. Tell them ahead of time to be prepared to walk. Others may whine that it's too hot. You can always provide hats and

sunscreen, or water bottles for all. And you may not know where to walk. Just take off from the point where you meet. Get up from the table and go.

The family walk. I like how that sounds, and I want to keep it around...

FRESH THYME - Give Me Both

As a kid, I learned bible verses. I hope your kids are learning them, as well.

John 3:16 is a must

Psalms 23 is a comfort

John 11:35 is the shortest verse in the bible – I'll never forget that.

Jeremiah 29:11 is a life verse

Many more come to mind, because these random verses that packed such power were read to me, quoted around me, or practiced in my learning as a kid. And I'd say that often, I run to those verses as a reminder of the truth and His goodness, and all the things.

I also learned bible stories, like Daniel in the lion's den, Moses and the burning bush, Noah and the ark. And our kids need to know these stories, because they tell of God's great power and provision and miracles and hope! So I love knowing these stories and having them sink deep into the fabric of my life. They are definitely life-giving.

As an adult, I have learned over the years that those verses and those stories are not enough for good and healthy sustenance. They are a support and a rock, but I miss SO MUCH without the context! And that's what I've been looking at these past years, the context of the verses.

Imagine reading a novel and pulling out quotes from the story. They might be awesome ones, as are quotes from past leaders. And they might provide food for thought. But if we don't actually read the entire book or the history and story of the person, we are missing so much. It's like eating one bite of an entire array of food spread out before us!

For example, the verses that say his ways are higher than ours has always been used in situations where we don't understand God's ways. So we just throw up our hands and say oh well, his ways are higher. But did you know that in the context of those verses, there is a call to abandon our anxious thoughts and elevate them to his thoughts? That's a world of difference in the meaning!

And if we don't know the entire story of the bible, the little verses we've picked out and learned as a child will be comforting and life-giving, but our framework will be full of gaping holes where wind howls loud and debris flies, when storms occur.

So I say, give me both. Give them both. Let's learn the verses and the stories, but let's then read the entire context around those verses and stories, and know the person and character of the God we sing about and memorize verses about.

I feel like just now, after living decades without it, the housing of my mind is no longer just framework, but I'm filling in with coverings and adding load-bearing walls, and windows that open and shut to let the cool breezes blow, and doors I now know how to lock and unlock to choose the guests that enter or not.

Next time a childhood verse or story pops into your mind, open the Bible and read the context, the commentary, and learn. And start with Genesis and read the synopsis of each book in the Bible and stand amazed at the story that started then and continues now, in the lives of those who are created to love and be loved by Him.

Make sure both are present in your family and in your life...as you grow in the knowledge and grace of the One you call Lord.

FRESH THYME - Hard to Decide

We have roses along our back fence that bloom profusely once spring arrives and then they last for a good while until the summer heats stunts their production. But right now, they're in full bloom and gorgeous. And I have this dilemma every time I look out the back window and see the color they provide in our yard. Do I leave them on the bush so they look pretty, or do I snip them and place them in a vase and bring that beauty into our home?

I used to leave them be. And while they grew and looked pretty and bloomed, they also withered and died over time, and the petals fell, and the bushes didn't prosper. It became clear to me that as I snipped and removed the gorgeous blooms, this allowed for other blooms to emerge and for the bushes to grow fuller.

Yes, for a bit the rose bush might look bare because I snip and transfer the beauty to a vase in the house, but soon there are always more buds emerging.

And guess what? I love looking at the roses in the vase in the house. The beauty is no longer just "out there." It's "in here."

I love removing the leaves from the bottom of the stems, also trimming herbs from the garden box, and picking other flowers for fillers, as I arrange them all in the vase. And again, these flowers and brilliant colors only last a few days, and it's time to discard, exit the house and start snipping again.

It's so hard to decide on leaving the beauty be...or snipping it to enjoy for me.

I suppose I could spiritualize this story by saying that we need to allow our beauty (love for others) to be transplanted, snipped and pruned, enjoyed by others. But I think you get the picture about that.

For now, I'm just sharing how it's sometimes hard to decide about things, and there's not always a "right" answer. I can stand at the window and deliberate all day and wish those roses were inside, but not want to ruin the beauty of outside, and I'm missing the point!

It's both/and.

Maybe one day I'll snip five roses and place them in a vase and smile at them all day long. Maybe the next week I'll leave the roses to adorn the fence and catch the water droplets from the sprinkler, so they glisten in the sun, and watch their petals drop in the mulch, being scattered by the wind.

The point is to enjoy their beauty. Inside and out.

The point is to gaze at their brilliance. Inside and out.

The point is to marvel at their appearance. Inside and out.

It's hard to decide sometimes about the fun and the beauty in life. Do we stop and enjoy it, leave it be, or invite it into our home? The answer is a great big YES to all three!

FRESH THYME - The High Road – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever heard the phrase, “Take the high road?” It pretty much means to not fire back when insulted. In other words, forgive and let go. It also means to do the right thing, even if it’s not popular. Taking the low road would involve taking revenge.

We recently saw a movie called *Wrath of Man*, starring Jason Statham. He plays a father seeking vengeance for the death of his son who was mercilessly killed by criminals. So throughout the entire film, this man with a mission sets about killing off everyone in his path until he gets to the one that did the deed. I’d say this character definitely took the low road. Oh, he was vindicated in the end, but dead bodies were left in the wake of his vindication.

When I got home, the phrase “take the high road” kept popping into my head. And while (thankfully) I don’t know anyone seeking revenge in the way this man did on the movie, I do know lots of us that think about revenge, wish for revenge, and don’t really forgive and let go. What kind of movie would that be, if the high road was taken and forgiveness was offered, instead?

Toddlers are born with the low road instinct, aren’t they? He takes her toy and she slaps him or crawls over to take his. We have to train and teach our kids to take the high road when insulted or teased or mistreated, but so often it’s a hard line to walk – especially if the insults or mistreatment keeps coming. And isn’t there a time to fight back?

Perhaps, our definition of fighting back is different among all of us.

- For some, if an insult is hurled, a fist is given. That might stop the insult, or it might result in a harder blow!
- For some, if a wrong is made against us, it’s only right and satisfactory to act wrongly back to the person that wronged us. If she pinches us, we pinch back harder.
- For some, if teasing occurs, we make sure to slander that person so that we hurt their friendship with others, thus making ourselves feel a bit vindicated.

It’s so tempting to take the low road....

There’s this beautiful lake we enjoy walking around, and on one end there’s a choice to walk a lower path closer to the water, or take a higher one up on a hill where the view is prettier. We almost always take the higher path because my husband likes the view, it’s away from most of the others walking, and there is also a field of wildflowers on the other side that can’t be seen from the lower path.

I’ve found in my own life, especially in my marriage relationship, that taking the low road never ends well. Offering back insult for insult only results in a huge boxing match, and in the end we’re both wounded and don’t even remember what started the first blow. I’ve also realized that it all comes down to trust.

Sure, we tell our kids to alert a teacher if they’re insulted or teased, and that’s good. But we have to tell our kids and ourselves that the higher road is one that starts on our knees. I’ve

seen many times (it's taken practice and I still fail often) where I've prayed about the situation or the person, kept my mouth shut (hardest thing to do ever...) and seen God work in the heart of the perpetrator...or often in my own heart first.

That road, that visual of presenting the case to a higher power that can actually change the root of the problem, enables us all to view things a little differently and observe beauty on the other side that we never knew existed, and would never have seen, had we chosen the low road with the masses.

Look for the high road and take it. And trust that He'll meet you there.



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

July 2021



TIPS

In the Kitchen – Three Ideas – by Marcy Lytle

We recently had a four day weekend with the family and three of our meals were served in three different ways, using three different vessels for the food. This month, I'm sharing those three ideas so you can try them if you wish! I'll include the dish idea as well as the recipe to go with. It's a great experience for the family, for friends, on your vacations or visits this summer as you sip and supper together in this season.

The bowl – I ordered this wonderful set of white dinner bowls from Amazon, so that our kids could take them home after our dinner, and have them to add to their dishes! Shallow bowls call for dinner in a bowl, and this night was a Spanish rice dish, which is super tasty and easy to make.

Ingredients:

White rice (I used Success Rice – boil in a bag – easy and delish)

- Ground sirloin
- Green olives
- Capers
- Roasted red peppers
- Red wine vinegar
- Avocado
- Romaine lettuce

Set the rice on the stove to boil, according to directions. In a large skillet, brown the meat and then add the peppers, olives and caper mixture. Slice the avocado, and the lettuce.

Arrange the rice in the bottom of the bowls, then top with the meat, salad and avocado. This combo is delightfully tasty and good!

Charcuterie Plates – I ordered a set of square bamboo plates from Amazon for this dinner that was so fun. We set out all of the charcuterie type foods in bowls or on trays, but not arranged...yet. The object is to have each person take their bamboo plate and make their own mini charcuterie plate using what you've set out. Then take pictures and ooh and ahh over each person's creation!

Ingredients:

- Smoked almonds
- Cheese cubes or slices
- Rolled up turkey/ham
- Large green olives, toothpicks
- Bunch of red seedless grapes
- Assorted crackers
- Raw veggies like broccoli and carrots
- Veggie dip

- Parsley or other herbs for garnish
- Tiny bowls for interest
- Flavored popcorn
- Pretzel mix
- Trail mix

Just invite the family to the table to pick and choose their food and garnish, then take pictures and enjoy your meal.

Jarcuterie – Have you heard of this? I purchased a set of small fruit jars, but you may have some in your home if you keep that sort of thing. You can choose snacks or dessert, and we chose dessert. We set out an array of small and tall sweets (that will fit in the jars) and invited the family to create their own jar of goodies. We refilled them, and put together a puzzle while we ate.

Ingredients:

- Tiny vanilla wafers
- Twizzlers
- Goldfish
- Dark chocolate covered almonds
- Sour squares
- Pirouelles
- Caramel popcorn
- Strawberries
- Dark chocolate squares
- Raisins
- Shortbread
- Ferrer Rochier

Just invite the fam to add and stack and create and eat!

https://www.amazon.com/ideas/amzn1.account.AFGMY23AF4JI2JNTTWLXIE3ZJVCQ/2UQOQY5CDAW0Q?type=explore&ref=idea_cp_vl_ov_d

Seven for You – Manis and Pedis

I am not a fan of either of these, but so many of my friends are! I sat for a manicure before my daughter's wedding and wasn't pleased, as I did not enjoy the experience at all. However, we are all so different, and I thought it would be fun to ask our panel of women to weigh in on their experiences and preferences when it comes to painting their nails! I was curious if they do paint them, and if they prefer to go to a salon, or if they like taking care of their nails themselves! Their answers are fun to read, offer us tips and insight, and reaffirm how the diversity of women everywhere – which makes this column so fun to read!

I don't do either. I don't get a pedi, mainly because my feet need the tough places (on my toes) for all the walking we do and if we play any tennis or other sports. And as for a mani, I just keep my finger nails short and trimmed. I think it's so fun to go to the salon, and my girls love manis and pedis, but my feet don't. - Melissa

My fingernails are very weak and thin. Many manicurists are too aggressive, so I choose to do my own manicures. I keep my nails painted with a strengthener and conditioner called Treat Love and Color. I use a tinted, light sheer color to fortify them and help them look clean and shiny. I do have pedicures done at a salon around the corner from my house. In the past, I chose bold colors. Recently, I have moved toward lighter colors so that when they are chipped or worn it is not as noticeable. (I love to go barefoot both inside and outside.) I also take in my own nail color so I can touch it up myself in between pedicures. – Shelley

I don't want other people working on my feet or my toes, and I'd rather use the money for manis and pedis on clothes shopping! So I opt to paint my nails myself. I use either a sparkly nail polish or a neutral color, because those two don't look horrible if chipped a bit. I'm not good at keeping up with the maintenance required! Sometimes, I let my nails "breathe" and don't paint them at all. I do wish it wasn't so time consuming to remove the old polish and paint on the new, and let it dry. Manis and pedis don't even sound fun to me, but I'm just weird like that... - Marcy

I love pedis, and I HATE manis because it seems too harsh for my nails. It causes them to split. Besides that, I don't like the feel of polish on my finger nails. It feels very heavy! However, I just got a pedi Saturday. I like short pedis, and lean towards nudes, pinks and corals. This time I got nude-ish color. It looks *okay*, but the girl did a great job. Tipped her really well. - Debbie

I get a pedicure just about every single month and I paint my nails about once a week! My best tip when getting a pedicure would be to get gel polish on your toes. This is because gel polish doesn't chip and by the end of the month will be grown out to a proper length to be done again! When it comes to painting my nails, I do them myself because they tend to not last as long as pedicures do and getting a manicure every two weeks definitely does not agree with my bank account! So what I find works best is Sally Hansen Miracle Gel polish with their top coat to pair. Each bottle is a tad pricy but this stuff is seriously magical! I'll do my nails about 30 minutes to an hour before I go to bed and they dry and look great by the morning! - Sofia

We live in the country, and I am always doing outside work, so I have never kept my fingernails painted. I do cut and file them nicely but at a shorter length. Now for my toenails, I like for them to be pedicured. I love to go to our local Rockstar Nails and Spa salon and have them trimmed, shaped, and painted. I prefer lighter pastel colors and natural tones but occasionally I have let my daughter and granddaughters talk me into a bold or bright color. And I love taking the girls in our family with me. It makes for such a fun outing! They always get both their toenails and fingernails done and we all agree that the best part of the experience is the massaging chairs we get to sit in. – Carole

Love manis and pedis. I don't get to get them regularly, so when I do, they are a treat. However, I never go without color on my toes. And to keep my feet soft, I use the PedEgg and finish with rubbing Aquaphor in my feet. My fingernails, I prefer the natural look and do not polish them much. I do not like the yellow look on my nails from wearing polish for long periods of time. I have started taking collagen, which has removed the roughness in my nails and leaves my hands looking younger. - Edith

The Dressing – Help for the Weary – by Marcy Lytle

For some, fashion is all that with a cherry on top, because we love it so much. For others, fashion is neither here nor there, because we just don't care. But I'd say that most women find themselves weary at times when shopping for certain pieces of clothing, like a dress for a special occasion, a swimsuit, shoes that are cute but still stylish, or even a bra or underwear or sleepwear! I know that as much as I love fashion, shopping and finding items that fit, look good, and feel good is sometimes a challenge.

I've found a few trick/tips/treasures that's I'm going to share, that maybe will help us all out. And if you have any to add, please comment at the bottom of the page!

Tuck or Knot – I once had a friend ask me why I partially tuck a shirt in at the waist. Let me tell you. A shirt that's too baggy adds pounds. Having it just hang loose (especially for those with larger breasts) just looks frumpy (is that a word?) So a one finger tuck in the middle or on the side of the pants, give a little shape and flare and pizzazz. Not a fan of the tuck? Tie your t-shirt in a knot, on the side!

Vest – I have several of these and snap them up when I find them. Maybe you have a t-shirt that is a bit too tight, or even your jeans are a bit snug. Adding a vest over that ensemble smooths and covers, and just makes the outfit!

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B078YBPTZT/?ref=idea_lv_dp_ov_d&tag=onamzmarcel05-20&linkCode=ic6&ascsubtag=amzn1.ideas.2TVKQTSKJZ8G6

Half tee – I've been promoting these for a while now, because they're genius! I often wear men's undershirts underneath blouses or tops that are cut too low, or the neck is cut too wide, to provide coverage. However, half tees do the same without the lower bulk of a tee. They are only long enough to cover your chest, and they come in SO MANY shapes with all different lengths of sleeves. These are also great to wear under spaghetti straps or sleeveless tops, if your arms give you grief.

<https://halftee.com/>

Swimsuits – I wish there was a swimsuit trend that fit to your knees. Can you agree? But there isn't. So instead of worrying over the way my legs and butt look in a suit, I opt to wear a pair of athletic shorts (I wear men's because they're longer) over whatever suit I buy, and I just swim in them. Not the knit kind, but the slick kind, that shed water. Black is always a good choice, with a drawstring waist!

Shorts – I just found these Royalty for Me high-waist Bermuda shorts recently that I love. They're stretchy and just long enough, and great for summer! I paired them with a gauze shirt in blue and white, a great color combo for the season!

<https://www.royaltyforme.com/category/missy/missybermudas>

Sleep bra, and body shapers – Both of these make me smile. The sleep bra by Hanes comfort flex (Target) is great. Comfy, fastens in the back, provides support, unlike sports bras

which give me claustrophobia when trying to put them on after a bath! Body shapers by Bali are my favorite to wear under all my clothing. The lace option is the best!

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0081TUKTI/?ref=idea_lv_dp_ov_d&tag=onamzmarcel05-20&linkCode=ic6&ascsubtag=amzn1.ideas.2TVKQTSKJZ8G6&th=1

Shoes – Let's face it. Heels aren't good for our feet! I still wear them, but for short periods of time. However, I've found some great shoes for summer that I'm wearing, one of which is from Amazon – recommended by someone else. They're super casual but go with all the summer outfits you wear to the park and outside. Check them out.

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B087D8H7NN/?ref=idea_lv_dp_ov_d&tag=onamzmarcel05-20&linkCode=ic6&ascsubtag=amzn1.ideas.2TVKQTSKJZ8G6

Three Moms – Time with Him

Mom of Three

If I'm being honest, date nights – going out – are few and far between. We were in a season for a long while where we really didn't want to leave the kids, because free nights were few, and we wanted to include them. Date nights are definitely important, but there is also a balance. For us, we do a good job of connecting on a daily basis – at night when the kids are asleep we chat and talk. Other times, we get a random night when kids are at a sports practice or with grandparents. This past season, while the kids were in school, my husband and I had lunch together because we both work at home! I do know that having time with him, dating him, is important. But only "date night" connections every so often is not enough, and we also have a budget, but day-to-day connections work as well. It's the day to day connections where we chat and spend time over coffee, or even a ride in the car to pick up the kids, that works for us! Our date nights don't have to be big or fancy or every week. They can be a simple lunch or a shopping excursion to pick out wood floors for the house!

When we do have a designated date night, we often stay in (to save money). We watch a show we enjoy together, and have dinner at home, and make it cozy. If we do go out, it's a coffee date for sure – and sometimes bowling! Our love language is coffee, and we sometimes play a game. We don't visit the theater a lot, because we watch enough shows at home. We like to go somewhere that we can talk and do something, or even just walk around!

Sometimes we plan our dates nights together, or sometimes we surprise each other – especially on birthdays.

So both – date nights out and daily connections – are a great balance for us! I've been so grateful for this season. Finding time with toddlers is hard, but now that the kids are in school we have more time. We also love to serve together, and call that connection, because we are super compatible that way!

Mom of Two

One of the blessings of working together is that we get to see each other every day. At first, we wondered if it would be too much time together. But it has been different and unique, and pretty awesome. Obviously, our days are jam-packed with patient care and business, but we often do for lunch, even if it's only five minutes!

At home, it's all about the kids. We also put work to rest, and focus on the kids and family, and not talk about work. After the kids are in bed, we do have that window to relax and connect. Many times, we just sit on the couch and rub each other's feet or shoulders, and not say a word. We talked all day! We watch television and just hang out.

I do believe it is important to also have "planned" time away with him, away from responsibilities. He's one of my top priorities! We love to go dinner together. We just got back from a 10-year wedding anniversary trip. One of our goals is to do a date night at least once a month, and

every few months have a night away. We have family and friends nearby, so they keep the kiddos. We are very thankful for that.

Day to day connections are found through little bits at work and in the evenings, and that quality time is planned either at home or away without the kids!

The last thing – the things we like to do are dinner, hiking, a car ride (and even include the kids while they nap in the car!), talk, etc.

Mom of Four

Official dates probably don't happen as much as we'd like. It's just the season of life we're in. We do take occasional nights out, maybe once every few months. Recently, my mother-in-law came up and my husband and I were able to go out to dinner. We love to explore a city nearby, a new restaurant, or even go shopping. We very rarely see movies. My husband is a big talker, so we usually catch up and/or explore! If we do go out for a date, it might be around a special occasion, or we just "need" alone time together.

We also have babysitters, which are great, and we use them. Our oldest is also starting to watch the other kids, when we go out nearby. This has been so nice.

Our daily and weekly moments are in the evenings, but our kids are now staying up later as they age. We do sometimes catch up for a little while, though, after the kids are in bed. We also talk during the kids' game and practices. My husband is so relational (I may be even less than he is!) and makes sure that we connect. He helps make it happen in the daily moments.

One thing we love – every summer my mother-in-law takes the kids for a mini camp. That's a whole week for me and my husband to focus on each other. And that's so fun!

More dates would be nice...

Tried and True – July Calendar for You – by Marcy Lytle

It's been a while since we published a calendar of ideas of fun things, food suggestions, activities, and more for you to print out and follow, just for fun. So why not do it for July? Below is a list of activities for this month, should you need inspiration. Hang the list on your fridge, pin it to a board, or just snap a screenshot and save it for future reference. I love lists of ideas, because they help me to let my brain rest for a bit. Enjoy!

July

1 – Make ice cream sandwiches for the 4th by placing softened ice cream between two cookies and then rolling the cookie in sprinkles, and freeze til you're ready to enjoy.

2 – Do you have something patriotic to wear on the 4th? Go buy matching (or not) tees for the family!

3 – Print out facts about freedom, to have to share with your group, or whoever you're with on the 4th.

4 – When's the last time you made a huge pitcher of lemonade? Today's the best day for it, along with your holiday fare of picnic food for all. Try a new topping for those hotdogs!

5 – Leave all the mess from the holiday and just relax with your feet up, and read a great new book! *Be the Gift* is a great choice, by Ann Voskamp.

6 – Check out the recipes on the TIPS page of *A Bundle of THYME* and try one of the ideas!

7 – Spend the evening planning your next trip away...even if it's just a weekend. Look at a local map and plan a road trip! Those are the best!

8 – Take in a movie at a theater you've not been to before, and enjoy a big tub of popcorn.

9 – Find a trail in your city that you've not walked, and pack up some water and trail mix, and go walking.

10 – Clean out one drawer, toss out the old, organize what's left...and smile.

11 – Invite someone to lunch, put it on the calendar, and decide now what you will wear.

12 – Read a story in *A Bundle of THYME* and leave the writer a nice comment, then SHARE

13 – Visit a couple of hotel lobbies and people-watch while enjoying a drink or snack. How fun is that?

14 – Think about Christmas in July — just a few goodies – a few snacks – crank up the AC – and watch a Christmas movie. Plan this and do within the next couple of weeks!

15 – Clean your car. Discard the trash, place an air freshener, actually vacuum the floors, and buy yourself a new something for the inside.

- 16 – Check your local drive-in movie calendar, pick one, and go. Invite a friend.
- 17 – Take time this evening to sit and pray and trust and gaze...at the beauty of the sunset from a restaurant patio while you dine...and give thanks.
- 18 – Search the internet for a good and new trail mix recipe or granola, and make it!
- 19 – Ask friends to meet you in the park for a picnic. It can be breakfast if daytime is too hot, or it can be after dark, around a fire pit.
- 20 – Bake a sweet treat and deliver it to a friend that could use a smile.
- 21 – Visit a local museum and stop for an ice cold treat afterwards.
- 22 – Take a country drive to a small town and walk the square. Visit a local diner for dinner.
- 23 – Pick a movie on Netflix, set up your TV room like a theater, make snacks, turn down the lights and “go to the movies!”
- 24 – Set up the sprinkler in the backyard (whether you have kids or not) and sit under the spray, sip on something cool, and laugh out loud.
- 25 – This is a good day (the 25th!) to have that Christmas in July that you planned. OR...go Christmas shopping and start now, so that you can spread out your spending!
- 26 – Look up local farmer’s markets near you and plan to visit. Purchase a cool cloth bag for shopping. Then plan some great meals with your purchases!
- 27 – Book a night away or an entire weekend. Look on the map, pick a city, find a few things to do there, and then reserve the place. Mark it on the calendar.
- 28 – Clean out your closet and get it prepared for fall...yes, fall. Toss out the old; make room, for the new. Donate. Then go out for dinner...because you’ll be tired.
- 29 – Just after dark, exit your house and sit outside, look at the stars, sip on your beverage of choice. Listen to the sounds of the night. Pray together. Dance to some tunes in the grass.
- 30 – Re-do one area of your house just by changing 3 things – like a new pillow, throw, lamp, item of décor, rug, candle, etc. – Shop for it or just repurpose or rearrange what you have!
- 31 – Make it a bar night – either a taco bar, ice cream bar, baked potato bar – or your own idea!



HOME

A Night to Remember – Backyard Games – by Marcy Lytle

We recently played some backyard games with the kiddos while away, and I thought it would be fun to incorporate those into a family devo time! There are always things to be learned and enjoyed about God, while we're also enjoying life. And our kids need to see and know that! And there's no time better than in the backyard on a summer night, when it's hot, there's lemonade and cookies nearby, and the evening breezes blow.

Preparation: Each activity below tells the prep involved, and the items needed. You could do one a week or all four in one night. And be sure to have lemonade and cookies (or other snacks) available to enjoy.

Water balloon volleyball: Just set up the badminton net, fill some water balloons, and grab a couple of beach towels. Two people stand on each side with a towel and one balloon and volley it across and the other two try to catch it in their towel and volley it back. Have a tub of balloons to keep using as you play.

After playing a bit, sit on the towels and share for a minute:

I Corinthians 12 talks about all the parts of our body and how each one is necessary. (Let the kids tell what each part plays in the body). In that game we just played, what if one person dropped their end of the towel? (The balloon popped). What if the two people moved different ways instead of together, to catch the balloon? (The balloon fell to the ground and popped). The only way the game continued - was for each group of two to work together with their towels and their feet, to catch and volley. It's the same in life. God gives us all a part and we are to work together for Him!

Tin Can Bowling: It doesn't take long to collect 10 cans from meals you've prepared during the month. Let the kids remove the paper (or not) and then provide spray paint and newspaper to color them! (Supervise, of course!) Set them up carnival style, grab one of the kids' small rubber balls, and let them see how many they can knock down, while the others cheer them on!

After a few rounds, talk about the cheering aspect of the game. Was it hard to cheer for someone that knocked down more cans than you did? How did it feel to win or lose?

I Thessalonians says to encourage each other, to build each other up. This means when one feels disappointed at not winning, we can say "Good job!" so we acknowledge their hard work. It doesn't help to make fun of a loser. And when one wins, we can equally say "Good job" as we give them a high-five.

Coffee filter flowers: You'll need the white round coffee filters, markers, pipe cleaners, spray bottle of water, a table to work on, and a vase. Let the kids scribble on the filters, then spray them with water to watch the colors bleed together. These don't take long to dry at all. After each person has colored three filters, stack them (after they dry). Fold the stack in half, then in half again, then back and forth like an accordion, just twice. Wrap the pipe cleaner around the point, and gently pull apart the petals. Place them all in a vase.

Revelation 7 says that when Christ returns there will be people of all colors and races and nations that stand before him, with us, who call him Lord. God loves all people of all colors, and so should we. Look how pretty these flowers of all colors look together in the vase. It would not be near as interesting or pretty if say...they were all brown...or all yellow. The variety of color makes the vase interesting and a great focal point of the table! God loves us all, and we are to love everyone as well!

Any outdoor summer activity, like catching fireflies, enjoying a popsicle, or even just watching the stars emerge as the sky darkens can be ways to engage our kids in the wonder of creation, His love, and ways to live and love others. Enjoy!

An Adage a Day - What's In an Age – by Carole Gilbert

I had one of those milestone birthdays this year. I keep telling myself age is a depiction of mind over matter. “If you don't mind, it doesn't matter.” This phrase, “Mind over matter,” means overcoming problems or obstacles with determination. It was first written in 1863 by Geologist Sir Charles Lyell in explaining the evolutionary growth in people's minds, and animals. It gives the depiction of prevailing over whatever we are going through. The way we view our age can become an obstacle or problem. Keep in mind, the Bible depicts “gray hair as a glorious crown,” Proverbs 16:31.

I may now be of a milestone age and not young enough for bikinis anymore, but another saying I have always heard is, “You're only as old as you feel.” This old saying has been around for a long time. Its origin is unknown, but it has evolved into many variations, like “You're as young as you feel,” and *As Young as You Feel*, which is the title of a 1951 film with Marilyn Monroe playing a small part. This saying in its many versions is quoted by lots of people including myself. I prefer the version, “You're as young as you feel.” I may not always look young when I see myself in the mirror, but I will keep in mind that I am not old, either.

I lead a Sunday school class of ladies aged 72-plus years old. We all feel that growing old is not an option, we are only growing older. Our class has officers, and we have a wonderful woman, Betty, as our President that starts us so diligently. She wears that glorious crown of gray with dignity. And she too just had a milestone birthday. She was a little concerned about passing the eye test for her driver's license renewal. That is what she had on her mind as she turned 95! And that is not a typo! I can only imagine what I might be concerned with at 95 if I make it to that age!

I asked my ladies about getting older and if they had wise words to share. We all decided that we are of an age that we do not have to be concerned with blending into this world. We can do what we want, wear what we want, and say what we want, as long as it gives glory to God. Judy replied with the wise words, “If you don't use it, you lose it.” And “I'm not fixing my hair at 6:30 to go walk the dogs.” Upon that Barb added, “You get up and get dressed in case someone calls.” Betty threw in, “But they never do.” Then Pat injected, “People like it when you don't look so good, it makes them feel better.”

Our fierce leader, President Betty, finished out our discussion of wise words from the gloriously crowned, by saying, “I spend time doing my devotion every morning. It just takes a really, really long time.” These ladies inspire me, and I hope and pray I am inspiring like them when I am 72-plus years old!

If you have not gotten this far along in your life or maybe you are in your prime and not sure where you are going from there, set your heart on persevering in letting God mold you toward your older age and that glorious crown He has for you. Wherever you are in age, remember it is just mind over matter. Like I said before, if you don't mind, it doesn't matter.

And to keep in conjunction with another old saying, "You're known by the company you keep," I love keeping company with these ladies! In closing, I would like to add that Betty did pass her eye exam and renewed her license. And I decided to live by mind over matter, keeping my mind as positive as these wonderful ladies...and not letting my age matter.

Chipped China - Keeper of My Treasure – by Jennifer Lytle

Tonight, I cleared out some clutter that had accumulated in my closet. I found several Mario figurines and trinkets. What were my son's treasures doing in the bottom of my closet?

Throughout the years, this scenario has repeated as I have gone throughout the house and picked up different areas. I have found an unattached arm of a soldier, or a tiny Battleship game piece, or the front cover of a beloved paperback book and thought, "*These things could go in the trash bin. They are inexpensive and replaceable.*" Sometimes, I have thought, "*Maybe I should save these until he can appreciate them.*" Often, what I simply do is re-organize them into their designated bins and carefully tuck the item back into place.

I'm not sure whether it's better to take care of my son's treasures each time I find them laying around or to put them away until he can better care for them himself. Am I doing a disservice to myself and him to continue to allow him to possess items he is unable to look after properly?

When I think about some of the still-unanswered prayers that I hold in my heart, I wonder if God is like myself in this scenario, except that He is perfect. He knows what I can and cannot properly take care of and He understands what I can and cannot manage. Maybe if He gave me some of the things I have asked for, I would let them lie around until they were broken. Maybe the lavished gifts would momentarily bring me happiness but later become a wall that kept me from running to Him to be my Jehovah Jireh.

I think about the father in Luke 15 who was asked by his son for an inheritance. The son quickly moved away from the family to enjoy his goods. After some time, he had nothing left and began to work feeding pigs. He was so hungry, he wanted to eat what the pigs were eating but no one would give him anything.

Surely, this father knew that his son would likely waste the inheritance. Quite possibly, the father from this story was aware that the son would even leave home quickly. The father in Luke 15 did not try any tactic to delay the request of his younger son. He affirmed the desire and, ultimately, it turned out for the son's good. Perhaps the son could have grown bitter if he was unable to leave the family home because his father refused the request. In this case, the son was given the freedom to have all that was his, immediately.

After it was all spent, the prodigal son made his way back home to ask for a servant's job. He knew the servants were fed and cared for well at home.

Are there unanswered prayers in your heart? Trust our Abba. This Papa is good. He knows just what we need and just what will bring us to our knees . . . so whether your treasure is physically something you can see, or something you simply hope for, His answer is always good. He is the keeper of our treasures.

Jesus, thank you for keeping my treasure. Thank you for holding my heart. Thank you for holding the heart of every member of my family. Keep their treasure and reveal it to them when they are able to acknowledge you as the giver of all good gifts.

I Don't Do Teens – Prep for the Exit – by Marcy Lytle

Kids grow up fast, don't they? When they're small, we think they'll never grow up and we will get our lives "back"...and then when they're about to exit our homes to go to college or get married, we can't believe that time has flown by so quickly. And then the emotions start to rise. I've talked to a few parents that are so ready and can't wait for their teens to leave, but most parents are really sad and dreading that fateful day. Is there a way to be prepared and experience the exit without falling apart? At least there are ways to be prepared, which I was not, but wish I had been.

Talk to other parents. Ask that mom how she dealt with the loneliness after her son's room was no longer filled with her son's things. Be open to share your feelings and ask for prayer and stay connected to others that have experienced these things before you. It helps to know that you're not alone in your fears and your feelings.

Think about the good. Plan for the first visit back home, or the first drive to see them. If that's too far away, then plan something else good to do and mark a few activities on your calendar. Maybe a road trip, a shopping excursion, or a weekend getaway can be penciled in for those first few months after your teen leaves. Having something to look forward to is helpful!

Try something new. When my son left, a few years after my daughter married, I was faced with these bedrooms that stared me in the face every day – screaming "Empty!" Right away, I began plans to re-do them with paint, a new bed, or wall décor, etc. If your child is away at college and coming back frequently, this is probably not a good idea. But if they're gone and married, go for it! Creativity chases the blues away.

Turn to him and Him. Don't shut out your spouse. I did for a bit, and I saw that he had a look that said, "I'm still here to love and be with." Focus on your marriage and the fun you can now have, as you start this new adventure without kids in the house at all times. Pray together, ask God for comfort, and turn toward – not away.

Treat him/her kindly. It doesn't help to sob and cling and relay to our kids our deepest fears, how we're going to be so lonely, and make them feel bad right along with us. They're sure to have a bit of fear as well, and they may call at night saying they're lonely or miss us, and we'll hang up and cry buckets of tears. And it's okay for them to know we'll miss them, but don't send them off with harsh words or unkind looks or heartbreak on your sleeves. Once they're out of sight; then cry away. Crying helps. Tell them you miss them and you love them. And welcome them any time they drive up.

I thought having my kids move out was one of the hardest experiences as a parent. A good portion of your life is over as a parent – daily cooking and cleaning and caring for this individual. And they they're gone. The heartache hurt worse than anything, and it was not pleasant. But all of the above things are little suggestions that help. Time keeps rolling, and life keeps going, and it won't be that long before they show up, and you're happy to tell them bye because your house was wrecked, and your new life was altered. But you'll be standing at the door awaiting the next visit, without tears, but only waves of joy at the adults that are still your kids.

Practical Parenting – At the Table – by Marcy Lytle

I've noticed that quite often kids don't get talked to at the dinner table when there's a bunch of adults seated. Usually, the conversation is among the adults, and the kids are either left out, only talked to when they're misbehaving, or occasionally snickered at if they're funny. Oh sure, it's good that adults have the chance to visit, but having the kids enter our conversations is one of the most fun things...ever.

We go every year with our family on a trip and each night we have dinner conversations that include the kids. Not only are their answers and participation so fun and hilarious, the kids seem to love the activity and the fact that they're included at the table!

Jokes: Just search the internet for printable jokes for kids, print them out and cut them apart, and have them in a jar. This could be a once a week activity, say on Friday pizza night. Just pass the jar around and let each person read a joke, while everyone laughs. If one kid is too little to read, you can whisper the joke and let him say it out loud. This activity is fun, because often the kids (and adults) like to guess the joke's answer before it is read!

Getting to know you: Tell each person that they have to ask a question of the person two seats over, in order to get to know them better. They might ask, "What was your favorite game as a kid?" to an adult. An adult might ask a kid, "What's your favorite summer activity?" They can even be deeper questions about friendship, love, and family. The kids get to think up questions, and adults get to gain insight on each other and the entire family!

Under the plate convo starters: Search the internet for family conversation starters (printable) and often they will show up on a page in cute little squares you can then cut out and place one under each plate. These are so fun, because they range from questions about animals, trips, colors, and more. If one particular question doesn't fit your family, just discard it. The kids enjoy looking under their plate to find their starter.

These are just three ways to include the kids in conversations at the table, instead of the adults talking over the kids. Maybe, if they're included in the dinner conversation, they'll sit still and enjoy the meal as a family instead of whining and fidgeting and throwing food. Then when they're finished, they can exit the table and the adults can linger a bit longer to talk a bit more.

We really enjoyed these activities because kids are funny! And it's great to gain insight into their little minds and worlds just by family conversations at the table.

Tiny Living – Summertime 2021 – by Leyane Enterline

Four fishing poles
Three shot guns (unloaded)
Two bow and arrows and...
A lasso!

And where might you find these items? In our tiny home, of course! I never considered us hillbillies, but now when I look around I might say that's just what we are! We live in a trailer in the woods and the kids toys are just not normal, city kid toys. Fishing, hunting, baseball, and anything outdoors are our boys' passions!

We have a target set up on a hay bale for the bow and arrow practice and of course to try out their lassoing skills. One day, a baby cow across the street escaped, and my kiddos were out there with their lasso ready to wrangle that thing back in! Backwoods, country, or just being boys? I don't know! But the outdoors sure does keep these guys busy!

With the heat coming on though, the boys want to come inside more. However, it's just to look up what lure they can make next, or what new fishing or baseball gear they'd like to add to a wish list.

Fishing and baseball are definitely the focus right now. The boys go out every day and practice their hitting and throwing in the morning before it gets too hot. Then, we usually have a fishing buddy that comes in the afternoon to head to my parents for a bit, before some type of baseball activity in the evening.

With all the rain here in Texas, the lake has come up a lot! Praise the Lord, my grandpa's dock is back in the water and ready to roll for all the crappie fishing! It's a win-win for the generation of the Clearman guys. It's all they talk about and it's an activity they all get to enjoy together!

Tiny living has definitely got me, the mom, going crazy at times, but I try and look at all the positives and what we do have. We have the land where the boys roam and play, parents close by and on the water where the boys can fish and explore, and a small space for all of us that is less to clean! (Just a little jam-packed!)

Thankfully, with only two kids in tow, the top bunks have become the toy storage space, and for now that will do...for the summer of 2021.



YOU

Healthy Habits – Where You Sleep – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever considered that your bed, where you spend perhaps a third of your day, is the most unhealthiest of places in your home? It could be. This monthly column always focuses on one area of health, and this month it's our bed! There are all sorts of scientific articles about getting a good night's sleep, but this isn't that kind of story. It's just practical and simple:

Make your bed – I know, this is debatable, because lots of folks leave their beds unmade. I'm not one of those. I think making a bed says all kinds of things about order and creates a bed that's inviting once night falls again. It needs to be done first thing, or yes – it will be easier to leave undone. Making the bed is one of those things, those disciplines, that makes the day start out aligned and going in the right direction.

Enjoy good sheets – We recently purchased a set of sheets by Threshold from Target. They fit great (loose and baggy sheets feel awful!), they don't wrinkle (wrinkled edges are annoying), and they come in pretty patterns! You don't have to spend a fortune for good sheets, just find a brand and stick with it. And have at least two sets for changing out; and make them inviting and coordinated with your comforter! Good sheets make you smile as you drift off to sleep.

Shop for a pillow – I read that there are pillows for all sorts of sleepers – whether you sleep on your side or back, etc. However, I'm thinking most of us sleep all sorts of ways! Some prefer soft thin pillows and others full and firm. If your pillow constantly wakes you up at night because it's too flat or too lumpy or too firm, then toss it and get another! There's no reason to not lay in comfort so that you can truly rest.

Hug a while – I know, this isn't part of the actual bed, but did you know that if you hug your spouse before going to sleep, it settles your soul? Seriously, rather than just plopping into bed and turning over to sleep, we can spend time hugging and snuggling. Hugging boosts our serotonin levels and lifts our moods, which ensures a better sleep. It also says to him "You're important, and I love you" and settles you both from a long, hard day.

Decorate it pretty – There might be "discussions" at home about the number of pillows on a bed, so I hear. But take time to decorate your bed with a pretty comfortable and at least a few throw pillows, and maybe even a throw across the corner! Yes, it takes time to arrange it all and remove it at night, but the number of times you'll walk past your room and smile a day is worth the arrangement. Don't close your bedroom door during the day because of a mess – that just makes your room musty and stinky. Open it up, make it pretty, and smile. Smiling is good for your health, too!

Keep things Neat – Not just the bed, but the entire bedroom, needs to be presentable and nice. It often is the last room in the house that gets our attention, because it's private and visitors don't enter. But you do. And it's important to have that resting room look appealing and inviting. Clear the desks, put away the clothes, dust those shelves, clean up the clutter, and do it daily with the same rigor that you clean your kitchen sink. Dirty dishes are unsightly and uninviting, and so is a messy bedroom. Keeping it neat will also keep you sane and excited to enter at the end of the day.

On the nightstand – Is there a devotional near your bed? Just those one-page devo books are a great bedtime piece, maybe under a candle, by your lamp. Take it out and read to each other a good reminder of His love and faithfulness before you close your eyes. This truth, sinking into your psyche, before you drift off to sleep can help alleviate the backpack of worries you're carrying while lying there on your pillow. Share his Word with each other, and truly rest...

Life in a Nutshell – Hope and Hydrangeas – by Jill Montz

I have always loved hydrangeas, but they have not always had the same feelings in regards to me. They basically have chosen to die a withering death rather than cohabitate at my house. It's tragic really. And it has broken my heart and my plant budget every year.

For the past 15 springs or so I have spent hours reading internet posts on how best to plant and care for hydrangeas. I studied the cards attached to the plants at our local nursery and even spoke with the expert on staff at length in regards to the best location and soil for hydrangeas to grow in. Each time I loaded the beautiful plants with tiny green buds into the back of my car I had hope they would take root and grow and bloom where I planted them.

Some years they died within a week; breaking my heart with a quick and sudden blow. Other years they lasted a month or more giving me hope that soon was dashed as the leaves turned brown and drooped. No matter where I put them in my yard, no matter how much fertilizer, water, and love I gave them, no matter how many times I chased the expert down at the nursery to probe his mind about what was happening, hydrangeas just didn't love me the way I loved them.

One day a few years back the nursery expert simply patted my shoulder and said some varieties just don't do well for some people. He suggested other plants to try that he assured me would be just as lovely and colorful as the hydrangeas and he quickly added, as he walked away, that another staff employee would be happy to help me select and load whatever I decided to go with.

I did give up on hydrangeas for a couple of years. I would lovingly look at them as I strolled through the nursery each spring and summer and sometimes I would gently touch their delicate petals, but I never put one in my cart. I had to accept that I just wasn't able to grow them. I did well with other plants and I enjoyed their beauty but still my heart longed for a hydrangea.

Growing up in agriculture and especially in the pecan industry I know certain plants like different climates and soil. While there are over 1,000 different varieties of pecans in the United States, pecans grow mostly in the southern states where it is warmer and not all states grow all the same varieties. For example, certain varieties of pecans like the Desirable grow better in Georgia than they do in Texas. Not that Desirable pecan trees can't grow and produce pecans in Texas, but they are more popular and tend to do well in Georgia.

At our farms, the pecan that does the best for us is the Pawnee. Just down the road a few miles we have friends who have more success with the Cheyenne. Perhaps the soil is a little different. Perhaps the ground drains better there. Perhaps the farmer just has a knack for the Cheyenne. It's sometimes hard to tell.

Hydrangeas are not the only things I have loved and worked hard at and yet still failed to succeed with. I have attempted dozens of painting classes of all kinds and each project has barely made it home before it hit the large green dumpster outside my house. I have tried cooking on many occasions only to hear from those who were supposed to eat it and my smoke detectors that cooking is not what I am best at. I have attempted many sporting endeavors only to find I am a better spectator than participant. Regardless of the hours I spent practicing, studying, or perfecting my skill, I highly doubted I would ever become an expert at any of these and probably not even remotely good. Some things in life are like the hydrangea, they are just better suited for others.

Or so I thought.

When I moved to my house in Iowa Park three years ago it was a hot July weekend. (Who moves in July in Texas? Not my best idea but we all survived.) Once I got my house set up inside I set to work on the landscape outside. The house had lots of shrubs and very little flowers out front. As I pruned and hedged the shrubs into submission I discovered the roots were so intertwined and deep I would not be able to put much in the ground in those flower beds. So I added a few pots, then a few more, then a couple dozen more. Today I have probably 50 or so pots scattered around the front of my house overflowing with colorful flowers.

And just as you approach my front door on the left you will see a beautiful, thriving and blooming hydrangea! It's gorgeous!

Three years ago in July my local nursery was having a plant sale and I just couldn't walk past the hydrangeas one more time without picking one out. Even though several friends and plant experts told me hydrangeas would do better in the ground than in a pot, I didn't have that option. So I threw caution to the wind, chose not to dwell on past failures and potted that hydrangea with the same hope and care I had a dozen times before. And you know what...it worked!

For whatever reason, this time, this location, this pot, this plant loved me. It has thrived through Texas summers, late spring freezes, and even the crazy cold we had last February. I smile every time I see it! I have tried to show its picture to the nursery expert but I haven't seen him around the last few times I have been in. He seems to be taking more vacations these days. Good for him!

This hydrangea reminds me that sometimes you just have to try one more time. Sometimes you just have to have faith that the "next time" will be the best time. I still doubt I will ever make the Olympics in any sport or have my own show on the Food Channel or even draw a straight line with a ruler but I might get BETTER at those things! And who knows, one day I might not embarrass my kid at a sporting event or I might cook something edible or I might even hang up a painting or two (even if it is just in the garage).

I know some things in life will never work out (I gave up my dreams of singing a long time ago...I barely even hum in church now) but some things just might when you least expect it. And those days are the days that keep hope..and hydrangeas...alive!

Life Right Now – Not Too Much – by Hannah Bouck

Have you ever known God loves and sees you and doubted it in the same breath? Well, then welcome to the show that is my brain. I'm sure we'll be great friends!

So, if you didn't catch that, I doubt a lot and I have always believed that my doubting was wrong. But lately, I've learned that doubting or asking questions... is okay. It's not wrong and it doesn't mean that I'm lacking in faith. It actually means that I'm looking for answers and asking for understanding from the safest One I know.

*Take note that many times,
my questions aren't answered in the way
or time that I hope they will be,
but that is where my faith comes in.*

There are times, even in the midst of my questions, that God's love shows up for me in tangible ways. Most recently, one tangible way was when I unexpectedly got to see two of my best friends (who were also my bridesmaids), days apart, after not getting to see them for almost a year. There's a lot of behind the scenes unnoted here, but I definitely felt all the emotions come to the surface of one who misses her friends/core people. But geez! My heart was fuller than it's been in a while.

Yes, the time together was brief. And I cried when I had to say good-bye, because my love for these ladies runs deep. However, I also knew in that same moment that just the fact that they are even in my life shows He loves me deeper still. All my doubts faded for a time, and I felt tangibly loved and known.

*My questions aren't too much for Him.
I'm not too much for Him.
I'm seen by Him.*

You or your questions aren't too much for Him.
He sees you and loves you deeply, as well...

Holding you close,

Strengthening Your Core – The Dance – by Marcy Lytle

We watched a really great heartwarming movie called *Finding You* recently, about a young violinist who travels to Ireland to find her passion for playing. One particular scene stood out to me, as we left the theater. This young woman began dating an actor, famous for his films in Ireland. The young woman also had a friend that was often passed over by boys, and she felt less-than, put down, and unattractive – as she could never get a guy.

Fast forward in the film to a small town festival where the guys ask the girls to the dance. The young woman and her actor boyfriend show up and everyone, of course, knows who this actor is and finds it thrilling to have him at their festival. He knows of the other girl's insecurities and he takes a turn with her, causing her to gasp when he takes her hand for a round on the dance floor. It was heartwarming to see this man of status look out and see this lonely girl, and invite her to dance.

But then, when the actor went back to the young woman he came with, that's the scene that stuck with me. All of the guys that didn't even notice that girl the actor had just danced with suddenly came to her side and offered their hand. They had seen the actor, the man of status, take her around the floor – and now they noticed her over to the side as someone that must be important. About five guys immediately showed up, and she again gasped, as she then had to decide who to pick for a dance!

My husband and I talked about this when we got home, and we both agreed how sad it was that these guys only noticed the girl after she'd been on display with the actor. Before that, she was just a wallflower. But then again, we agreed that it was cool that once the girl was adored by a man of status, that adoration lifted her to a place of prominence and importance.

Then I realized that when we are experiencing a round of dancing with Jesus (i.e. sitting in his presence and rising to our feet in love and worship), this too makes us attractive to the masses. We have a sort of "glow" about us after we spend time holding his hand and experiencing his goodness and reveling in his love. Those that may not have noticed us before suddenly become aware that we're different and they're attracted – not to us – but to that which is making us shine.

That girl dreamed of a guy asking her to dance and it had never happened. And once, just once was all it took, the guy of her dreams took her hand – she suddenly felt approved of, cared for, and delighted to move her feet and smile. It was that movement and that reaction that caused the guys watching to open their eyes to this new prospect of beauty among them.

I keep thinking about that scene. I often think about my own relationship with the masses, with God, with my own thoughts, and I don't want to stand against the wall in the world. I want to enter the world, after having had a private and intimate dance with Jesus. And instead of having the world want to dance with me, I want to point them to him – so they too can dance and be swept off their feet in wonder and adoration.

Sometimes, certain scenes of movies stick with me. And that one certainly has. I bet that girl in the story will never be the same and that the one dance where she was chosen, picked and

taken will change her confidence level for a lifetime. Little did the actor know what he was doing when he noticed her against the wall and invited her to dance.

If you don't feel noticed or picked or loved, just look up and see his eyes across the room as he's approaching you. Jesus loves you and desires you and is always extending his hand for a round on the dance floor. It may look like falling against his chest as he slowly moves and heals and restores. Or it may look like leaping and twirling and stomping as joy wells up in his presence.

And then when the dance is over, be prepared for the approaching "others" that want to know what it is that made you dance...and you can then point to Him.

Under Pressure - Another Dream – by Debbie Haynes

The story this month starts out with the same king again, and this time he's doing pretty well. King Nebuchadnezzar (King Neb) relays a story to his people and starts out by giving praise to God for his wonders, his kingdom and his dominion. He tells them how he had a troubling dream and how Daniel was the only one able to interpret the dream. The dream was a dire warning and a command for the king to "break off" sin and to instead show mercy to the poor. The words of the dream came to pass, it was a hard time for King Neb, and at the end of that hard time he lifted his eyes to heaven and praised the most High.

This king was stubborn and hard-headed. He had a head-knowledge, but not a heart-knowledge, of God. This means he knew "about" God but didn't really know God. King Neb was stripped of his sound mind, his dignity, his kingdom and his family for seven years! After that time, he finally acknowledged God and had a change of heart. It took this position of debasement and quietness to get King Neb's attention. It took losing the trappings of his former life to recognize God's provision.

Why does God do this to men to teach us lessons, and what other stories are like this?

God gave Noah instructions to build an ark in the middle of a drought.

God gave Zechariah the gift of being mute!

God gave Jonah an uncomfortable lodging place, in the belly of a fish.

God gave Job trial after trial...and loss after loss.

These men were all forced to be STILL to see, know and consider and acknowledge God. Isaiah 41:20 says we need to know and consider and understand that the hand of the Lord has done this.

Done what?

God stops the normal processes we create or those created around us in order to reveal and remove corruption in our lives or in the lives of those around us. His plan includes exploding his body to have freedom, delivering those most innocent, and preserving those that belong to him so that we are pure and without shame.

We can pray for our leaders, and for ourselves, that we will hear and recognize God's voice and give him honor at all times, trusting that what He says and does is best. We can be still and know that He is God, rather than just read about it in His word. And we can do all of this gladly, instead of remaining stubborn and causing years of sorrow due to that stubbornness.

Another dream, another warning, and another lesson...to give honor and glory to the one true God who is in us, for us, and with us forever!



MARRIAGE

After 40 Years – Time Away – by Marcy Lytle

We recently returned from a four-day vacation with our grown kids and their littles. It's a yearly tradition to all meet up at a huge house and stay for several days, to play and be together. It's one of the HUGE joys of family, and I always end up arriving back home a bit sad but so very thankful that we were able to go, once again.

One thing I've noted as we've taken these trips is that I also get to observe my husband in a different setting than the everyday home/work setting that consumes most of our existence. I have the privilege of watching him serve his family.

He gladly spends time outside the place where we stay, setting up a badminton net, creating games for the kids, and then cleaning all of that up again once the long weekend is over. I really think he is the most handsome when he's serving others. It's who he is – a servant hearted man – and when he's living in that identity he shines. And I love it when I see it, catch a glimpse of it, and pause to notice.

He also plays with the kiddos and gives them big hugs. Our oldest grandson has the sweetest hugs and warmest hands, much like my husband. So when the two of them hug each other, it's quite breathtaking. I often wonder if that grandson has the best of his own dad and his Mister, the heart of faith and love and a servant's heart as well. It seems that he does.

Jon does another thing that makes my heart sing. He knows that I can't stand an unmade bed, even if we are on vacation away. Since we usually stay in a big farmhouse where there is no daily housekeeping, he gets up and makes up our bed for the day. It's a little gesture, but it's one of love, and it's one that makes me feel honored and special. Maybe I'm too picky, but he gladly serves others...and me.

Sure, there are a few tense moments sometimes where we snap at each other or feel frustrated, even on vacations away. But for the most part, both of us need the time away from just being together to being with our kids and their kids, to observe each other in a different light. It's a light that shines bright, as we both give thanks for these amazing gifts that God gave – ones we didn't even know we wanted – the gift of kids and their kids.

We don't sleep all that well on other beds, we work hard to provide fun and food and family time, and we're often tired when we get back home. But it's the good kind of tired, if you can relate. It's the kind of tired that makes one smile when the head hits the pillow after the time is over, and everyone is back home in their own homes and their own beds. It feels as if we've made an investment of the best kind, with the greatest return. And it feels like we've connected in a way as a couple that we cannot do, when we're just here – us two.

We've got bags and bins and boxes to unpack and put away until the next family gathering and getaway. And I always feel sad, deeply sad, when it's all over because I love being with my family SO MUCH.

Whether we have grandkids or kids or extended family, we all have people in our lives. And we can all make time to get away and observe each other in a different place with different surroundings to visualize that light that shines through a different prism on the ones we love.

When we return home, I feel so grateful for this man that loves our life together as much as I do. And I cannot wait until we get away again soon, because time away is not only necessary for rest, but for marriages to thrive, as well.

Date Night Fun – Movie Time – by Marcy Lytle

We go to the movies so much, as it's the one place I can escape and not feel compelled to clean or organize, but rather sit and relax and be escorted away to another story, another time, another place. It's definitely not a conversational place for couples to connect, but watching a movie together can bring romance, fun, and conversation when the credits roll, and even during the movie itself. July is a hot month, and it might be that movie time will be just the "ticket" to date night fun for all. Here are five ways to change up the way you watch movies, so that you can call it a date night for sure!

The Setting – If you're watching a movie at home, create a setting that's like a mini theater. Use small tables or trays for your goodies of popcorn and candy, and prop up your legs on stools. Include a blanket and turn the AC to a cooler temp, so snuggles happen. Darken the room completely, and then watch the movie. (Be sure you choose the movie ahead of time so the anticipation is there before your date.)

The Food – Consider having a meal during your movie, instead of popcorn and candy. Perhaps copy one of your favorite meals from a theater that serves food. Nachos, or tater tots, loaded with toppings is one choice. A nice black bean burger and fries might be another. Peruse a theater's menu and pick a fave. Maybe include milkshakes, too. Part of the date will be preparing the food, before you sit down to watch the movie. Be sure to include fun plates/napkins too (Dollar Tree has both!)

The Experience – During the winter, my husband moved the TV to the back of the car and used an extension cord to plug it in. We watched Casablanca while snow was falling out the back window – it was truly an experience! It's probably not snowing in July for any of us, but we can watch the movie in a different way to make it an experience to remember. Move the TV to the patio after dark, make s'mores and watch the show. Lay out a blanket on the floor with a picnic basket, and watch the movie as if you were in the park. Light at least 10 candles or tealights, dress up in vintage clothing, and watch an old movie while sipping tea and enjoying shortbread. The possibilities are there – just make it happen!

The Story – Find a film that's unique and different from the norm that you watch. Maybe a foreign film or a documentary, if you're not used to either of those, will work. Watch the movie, and then talk about the film and search for information on the actors and the origin of the story, and the places mentioned in the story. This idea is good for a double date, with another couple, so that the conversations are plentiful and interesting, and the coffee is hot while you visit. Go ahead. Invite them over now...

The fun – We recently had a jarcuterie bar where we set out all sorts of snacks (tiny ones, like mini vanilla wafers, chocolate covered nuts, etc. and tall ones, like twizzlers and pretzels). We used small fruit jars (you can order them from Amazon) and we all created our own jar of goodies. This would be a great and fun idea for movie night with several friends. Provide different Italian sodas, as well, and coffee. Invite them to graze and refill as they want, while you all watch a series of short films (choose several that are no more than 30 minutes each).

For Better or Worse – Be the Change – by Kaelin Scott

I often hear a common complaint among women – they want their husbands to change.

Maybe he's neglectful, or lazy, or he says hurtful things. Whatever the issue, the question remains: How can I make him change?

The answer is simple. We can't.

There's something I tell my five-year-old when she gets upset because her little brother won't cooperate with her ideas: The only person she can control is herself.

And the same is true for me and you. We can't change our husbands – only God can do that. But we can choose to change our own attitudes and behaviors. We can't control their choices, their words, or their habits. All we can do is focus on ourselves.

And let me tell you something else. Nagging is pretty much a surefire way to guarantee he *doesn't* change. If anything, it will make matters worse. Nobody wants to be nitpicked over and over again. I know I don't.

If you want a positive change in your husband, start with a positive change of your own. Sometimes life has a domino effect, a chain reaction. One good thing may just lead to another. And if it doesn't, at least you'll have your own progress to show for it.

The best way to encourage our husbands is to love him like Jesus does. In Matthew 7:5, Jesus tells us to remove the plank from our own eye before worrying about the speck in someone else's. As aggravating as it might be, that includes our husbands. Instead of focusing on the things they do to irritate us, we're called to become better wives. Maybe we consider ourselves to be good wives already. That's great! But there is always room for improvement.

And perhaps when he sees us changing, he'll want to change as well (although, that shouldn't be our only motivation.) We should genuinely want to become more like Jesus.

Marriage can be difficult, and it can definitely be hard spending infinite amounts of time with someone. Feelings are bound to be hurt. Annoying things are bound to be done. Disagreements are bound to be had. But the beauty is that we can always grow. We can always forgive. We can always love. And that's because love is a choice - one that must be made every day.

In the words of Mahatma Gandhi,

“If we could change ourselves,
the tendencies in the world would also change.
As a man changes his own nature,
so does the attitude of the world change towards him.
We need not wait to see what others do.”

In This Together – To Tell the Truth – by Bekah Holland

If I was a betting woman (which I'm not because I have never won a single prize, contest or slot machine attempt in all my life...know your strengths, people) I would bet that you can barely open up social media these days without seeing an article about women, especially moms, being tired. And I don't mean the normal I ran around sweeping up cheerios and breaking up fights around whose turn it is to use the remote. I mean like kicked in the face-never ending lists-dirty floors-overflowing sinks-drowning in laundry-crying in the closet kind of tired. And it's true. We are running on empty. Trying to be everything to everyone while contributing to society and hopefully not raising serial killers is exhausting.

I have a pretty continuous loop running through my head about how to get my kids and my husband more involved. And up until lately, I'd just given up. Because it was just as much (or more) work for me to figure out exactly what I need them to do and then ask 27 billion times for them to do it, and watch the dishes reach a staggering height, trying not to cave in, than if I just keep running around on empty doing to all myself. And it's not just the upkeep and cleaning and feeding and cooking and laundry (that I swear grows exponentially). It's also the running hamster wheel of the kids' doctor appointments, who's up for vaccinations this year, and how much am I going to have to bribe them to not go full on hulk out of fearful anticipation. And orthodontist appointments, dental cleanings, are we out of cereal, what am I going to cook or am I going just keeping giving Door Dash all my money, whose toothbrushes need replacing and when was the last time anyone ate an actual vegetable. I'd need a much larger column to even touch on all the things we have on our minds every second of every day.

So the last time my husband asked me, "What do you need? How can I help?" I decided to *tell him the truth*. Not about what I needed help with, but that it's actually more stressful to think of and divvy out tasks. That it adds another plate to the mile high stack I'm barely keeping from crashing down around us. So you know what he did? He started looking for things that I've left undone for ages. Things he knows matter to me, but that have had to take a backseat to higher priority items, because you know, kids are kind of demanding about that whole having food to stay alive thing. So pictures that had been leaning against walls for a month (two years) were magically hung. The front porch was washed off. Towels that had taken up a semi-permanent residence on our dining table were put up. And the list went on.

When I stopped trying to protect him from the stresses I was trying (failing) to manage, he showed up. He tried to look at things through my eyes. And it's exactly what I needed. Now he understands better, because I was honest instead of carrying on in my (typically failed) super hero fashion.

I'm a protector by nature. I try to shelter my people from things that hurt, or are hard or painful, and I'll still do it, because it's part of how God made me to be. But I also need to remember that sometimes, I need protecting too. I need to be seen and sheltered so I can fill up my own tank. Running on empty for too long isn't just damaging to me, it can damage the people I love, too. Because if I don't pay close enough attention, I can allow my protector/helper/nurturer nature to start tip toeing into something that looks a lot like resentment. And that is an avalanche I try to avoid at all cost.

Each day, I'm working to find something that gives me rest. And my husband is looking for more ways to take things off of my leaning tower of responsibilities by just doing them. And little by little, my cup overflows...

“Let her rest, for when she wakes she will move mountains.”



ENCOURAGEMENT

Firmly Planted - A Surprise Gift – Dina Cavazos

The cool wet weather we had through May has been a gardener's dream—green lushness and flowers all around is heavenly. But enough is enough. It's time for some sunshine, because plants (and people) need that too. Planting is pretty much over until next Fall when I'll see how everything has filled in and decide where I can tuck in something else, but it ended with a grand finale-- a surprise gift from God, or so I choose to believe.

For some time I've been admiring smoke trees. American Smoke Tree and Purple Smoke Tree are two varieties I'm aware of, but haven't yet researched the differences. All I know is that their billowy plumes immediately catch my attention. When in bloom, they appear to be in a cloud of smoke, thus their name. A little while back, I decided I definitely wanted one. I started looking, but they aren't that common and can be hard to find. I decided to wait for Fall when nurseries get more trees because it's the best time to plant them. But there is a verse....*The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps (Prov. 16:9)*

Just a week ago, I saw a post from someone wanting to trade plants to replace what he lost in the freeze. He listed the plants he wanted to trade. Can you imagine how my heart leaped when I saw *two* smoke trees listed?! I sent him some of what I had to trade (not really what he was looking for) and invited him over to see. He brought the two smoke trees and found a couple of things he wanted and we made the exchange. He said it was worth the smoke trees just to see the prayer garden. Hearts and smiley faces!

These were Purple Smoke Trees, which is really what I wanted because of the purple leaf color. He had gotten them from an herbalist who had had them in pots for *years*...would this stunt them? How would they do? It's certainly worth a shot. They were less than two feet tall and the pots didn't have a lot of dirt in them. They weren't root bound as I expected and were fairly easy to plant—I say fairly because my soil is pretty much rocks held together by clay. I take out a container of rocks for every plant and have to amend the soil. But since the pots were small I didn't have to dig a large hole. This really was perfect! So like God, the giver of every perfect gift.

I can't wait to watch them grow. I have a feeling they're going to take off like rockets, now that they're in the ground, released after years in their pot prison. They must be tough little guys because they look quite healthy for all that neglect! You can't see them in all their smoky glory in the picture—it will take awhile for them to mature and develop to their full potential and splendor. I imagine God has a purpose for them—to be the Royal Purple brigade in His garden! And I'm filled with thankfulness and awe that my Lord knows my heart and directs my steps even in small, seemingly insignificant, details.

Moving Forward - Safe – by Pam Charro

In Matthew 18:3, Jesus says, "Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

There is a lot to ponder here. How am I currently not like a little child?

I have often heard adults idealize childhood. They say things like, "I would love to be a kid again. No bills to pay, nothing to really stress about, not a care in the world." But the truth is, being a child is not always easy. Children have very little control over their environment. They fall down and get hurt. They get picked on by other kids. They long to fit in and measure up. They depend almost complete on fallible adults who often neglect and mistreat them. And, usually, there is very little that they can do about it.

So why would Jesus tell us to change and become like one? I think part of the reason is that children feel safe until they learn otherwise. It isn't because life is perfect and they never get hurt. If you have children, you have watched them fall down and get right back up and charge out there without hesitation.

They are too busy going toward something to worry about what just happened.

I can't help thinking that's how Jesus wants us to live as adults. And one of the keys is, when a child gets hurt, the first thing he does is run to Mommy or Daddy for comfort and assurance. Because once he receives that, he's okay again, as though the incident never even occurred. He knows he will be all right.

I am pursuing this childlike view of life now. I am learning to receive God as the Father-haven he longs to be for me so that I can get out there and charge at life, even though I live in a world where I will sometimes get hurt. There is too much to be excited about and look forward to for me to be immobilized by fear.

Because being a beloved child of God means that I am safe.

Rooted in Love - Being Different – by Kaelin Scott

My oldest child will be starting kindergarten in the fall (totally not bawling my eyes out), and we are going to homeschool. This is something God has been placing on my heart for several years now, and I'm really excited about it. Since we live on a ranch, it fits in well with our lifestyle, and it will give us extra memories to make together. Plus, I'll get to teach my kids about Jesus every day, which is most important of all. It'll be a challenge, especially since I also have a toddler, but I'm looking forward to this journey.

As excited as I am about it, though, there is also a little bit of sadness. Seeing all my daughter's friends register for kindergarten, I can't help but feel left out. It's hard not to focus on what we'll miss out on by choosing to homeschool. Being different is hard, and that's something I wasn't fully prepared for when we decided to do this.

But there's a lesson for me in this, and it's one I want to pass on to my kids.

Sometimes God calls us to be different, and that's okay. We aren't always supposed to be like everybody else; sometimes we're meant to stand out. During certain seasons in life, it feels like we're swimming upstream, but that doesn't mean we're doing the wrong thing. It's just different. It's scary and hard and, yes, lonely at times. But following God's call in our lives is so much more important than fitting in. Our goal is to please Him with our lives, not make anybody else happy or adhere to what's "normal." When He places a call on our hearts, it's up to us to follow it. Even if that means being different.

And you know, maybe being different will be good for us. We'll get to explore the world in our own special way, together as a family. We'll get to see how God fits into everything and talk about Him as we study math and reading and science. I'll get to spend extra time with my kids as they grow before my eyes. We might get left out of some things, and we may even face some criticism, and that might hurt at times. But it won't steal our joy, because we know that God is with us.

If you're struggling with feeling different – or maybe left out – know that you're not alone. Everyone feels that way sometimes, kids and adults alike. But no matter what we face in this life, we are never truly alone. Listen to God's voice and follow it, then leave the rest up to Him. He will provide everything you need, and probably a little bit more because He's awesome like that. Don't be afraid to stand out. Don't be afraid to be different. Keep your eyes on Jesus and march to the beat of His drum.

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will.” Romans 12:2

Simple Truths – Everything – by Marcy Lytle

Everything. I'm learning to take everything to Him in prayer.

One of the little "everything's" I take to him in prayer is shopping. When I need a certain item or I'm looking for a discount, I just simply ask Him to go with me while I look. I love that he cares about the matters that are fun and necessary. I think it's so easy to pray for the needs in life, but he's already promised those to us. So why not invite him along on our next shopping excursion? I've been so blown away by turning the corner and – there it is – the item I need (and at a discount!)

One thing I'm learning to do is to lay everything that concerns my future at his feet. Sometimes, my mind can become overwhelmed with what if this – or what if that. What if we haven't saved enough, or my kids' cars break down, or we experience a health crisis, or all of the things this world brings to stir up fear. And it feels so good to take this to God and ask him to help me listen, obey and walk in what I need to do daily, and no more. I can't solve the future by worrying about it all today.

One personal frustration is my own shortcomings that I deal with on a daily basis. I try to do better, I try to have a good attitude, I try to be kind...but then the tiredness or the rudeness or the short fuse appears...and I fail. He doesn't mind me falling into my desk chair, placing my head in my hands, and asking him to forgive. And guess what? He's so gracious and kind and loving, just because I took that to Him to solve.

*He knows our weaknesses and he asks us to just admit them,
and then He swoops in and holds us and gently lifts us on our way again.*

I love that about Him.

The point I'm driving here is that nothing is off limits to him. After all, he knows us – he formed us – he's with us – and he cares for us! It's easy to become accustomed to only praying the "big prayers" for the nations, our families, those who are sick, those who need Jesus, etc. and those are so important. But it's the daily "everything's" that end up breaking our backs and causing us to end the day tired and worn out and without joy.

There are some days when I wake up with a full mind of a bunch of little things, and I think that's common among women. Moms, wives, workers, givers, and all the hats we wear include lots of details and lists that seem to get longer by the minute. And when we pause to transfer all of those little weights onto his shoulders, one thing at a time, every single thing as it pops up and stares us in the face, we walk lighter. Our days are filled with less stress, and we end up going to bed full instead of empty.

I seriously note a HUGE difference from the days when I've hurried through everything that a day brings on my own, trying to juggle all the balls, to the days when I constantly just bow my head and simply pray, "Father, I need you here at this moment." I visualize turning over *the*

everythings to the God that loves me more than I can even imagine, and then I breathe a sigh of relief.

I'm in the process of doing this right now, because today is too full, my worries are too many, and I'm overwhelmed...but more overwhelmed at his goodness and mercy. If he cares for the flowers in the field, knows the number of hairs on my head, then I know He cares about EVERYTHING else as well.

Unearthly Thing - Dependence Day – by Angela Dolbear

I love big, way-up-in-the-sky fireworks. The bigger and more multi-colored the better.

My family used to go camping in our RV on Mission Bay, near San Diego, CA, almost every Fourth of July. I would rollerblade around the RV Park (I was in my 20's!), go sailing with my brother in his tiny sail boat, and then in the evening, we would watch the spectacular fireworks at Sea World, which was just across the bay. The fireworks reflecting on the ocean was so beautiful.

All to celebrate freedom.

George Washington described freedom as, "Liberty, when it begins to take root, is a plant of rapid growth."

I never thought much about freedom back then. My life was consumed with college, and what my future held. I was a new believer in Christ, so my only take on freedom revolved around what I learned in my American history classes.

But I'm thinking about true freedom...not just freedom from British rule.

As a child of God, the more I learn to depend on God, the more I learn about actual freedom. Deep dependence brings a broader scope of freedom.

God's promises teach me about my true freedom. Knowing these promises by heart makes freedom more tangible, so I can live and breathe my freedom daily. They also help me keep a peaceful perspective about the blessings and burdens of everyday life.

God's promises to His people are abundantly abundant! Various internet sights list the number of promises in the Bible from 3,500 to over 8,000. Regardless of the actual number, God's promises are in the thousands. *Thousands*. That's a lot.

And that's a lot of attention and interaction between the Creator of the Universe and you. And me.

So out of the thousands of promises, here are seven of my favorite freedoms we have in God:

- **Freedom from confusion** = my identity is in Christ. John 8:32 -- "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."
- **Freedom from guilt** = Christ paid for all my sin, I am forgiven and free. Romans 8:2 -- "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death."
- **Freedom from hopelessness** (and eternity in hell—that's a big one!) = Again, Christ paid for all my sin, I am forgiven and free. Hebrews 2:14-15 (Amplified) -- "Therefore, since [these His] children share in flesh and blood [the physical nature of mankind], He Himself in a similar manner also shared in the same [physical nature, but without sin], so that through [experiencing] death He might make powerless (ineffective, impotent) him who had the power of death—that is, the devil—and [that He] might free all those who through [the haunting] fear of death were held in slavery throughout their lives."
- **Freedom from fear** = Psalm 118:5 (Amplified), "Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free."

- **Freedom from loneliness** = God is always with me, He will never ever, ever leave me or forsake me. He spoke those exact words to me after I had a stroke in March 2018. (Please see [Hebrews 13:5](#)).
- **Freedom from purposelessness** = God has a plan for me, and it's good! Isaiah 61:1 -- "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, Because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners."
- **Freedom from failure** = John 8:36 -- "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (Praise You, Lord.)

These are just a few of the thousands of promises God has for us, but these seven freedoms fill me up to overflow with gratitude. They inspire me to press into learning and taking hold of all that God has for me.

I included a picture of a Joshua Tree that I took in Joshua Tree National Park, in the Mojave Desert, in Southern California. Joshua Tree is one of my all-time favorite places because of its stark yet serene beauty. Joshua Trees are slow-growing in their fiercely harsh environment -- like me, as I learn about God's freedom for me. (Fun Fact: The band U2 named their album *The Joshua Tree*, one of the best albums of all-time, after the tree, since it seemed to them like a symbol of faith and hope in the midst of dryness.)

I don't think I will be able to fully realize all God's promises during my days here on earth, and what real freedom looks and feels like. I depend on Him to guide me through this journey, and through every day.

I believe we will know all He has for us, on the day of Redemption, when we are set free from the confines of humanity. We will know, when we see Jesus, face to face. How glorious! And free.

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!



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - All the Things – by Marcy Lytle

Aren't you sometimes curious why she wears that, or he walks that way, or they live there, or those folks eat that, or all the things? I think people are interesting creatures, with all of their quirks and individuality. And yet, most of our culture tries to copy and be like someone else! One of the perks of aging, I suppose, is feeling comfortable in what we've chosen to do and going with it, whether anyone else does or not.

So, to start us off, I'm going to share all the things others find odd about me, and maybe you will, too. But I'm hoping it will free you up to embrace your oddities and be you, and smile and keep your head high. After all, not much to see below our feet except dirt...and so much to see above...like stars.

Here I go!

- I cut my own hair because I used to come home from the salon and hate the cut, and do it over. So now I just do it!
- I don't go to nail salons because I hate spending the money and time, when I'd rather spend it on clothes and other things.
- I drink water 95% of the time because somehow I think it's a cure-all for so many things!
- I often skip just to lighten my load, because it's fun, and I'm happy that I still can.
- I love following the weather forecasts because it's fascinating, except when it's over 100 degrees. That's depressing.
- I despise coffee because it tastes like dirty water to me. Don't like flavored or sparkling water, either.
- I keep my windows closed at all times, because once a lizard got in behind a screen and we smashed him in half (by accident) when we closed the window. Don't want creatures in the house.
- I feel 100% better if I get in a long walk each day. I'm in a better mood, totally. My husband knows this.
- I don't understand why anyone would eat inside when the option to eat outside is available.
- I must have a bath before bed, and he feels the same, or we aren't allowed to touch the sheets.
- I don't drink wine or beer, but if you do that's fine. I just find the taste repulsive, and again – I'd rather spend my dollars elsewhere.
- I don't like pie or cake. Not tempted by either. But homemade chocolate cookies only appear once or twice a year in my kitchen, because those I love.
- I can't stand jokes of any kind about women or marriage or men. I'll walk away if one is said.
- I struggle with fear, like random intrusive thoughts, and I daily have to lay those down at His feet.
- I've never had an operation or a broken bone, and if you do – don't call me – I'll faint beside you in the room.

- I get offended easily, but I'm working on that. And I hope I always keep working on that which holds me back from peace and rest.
- I roll my towels, I roll my clothes, and I have rolls on my tummy. But I don't like cinnamon rolls.
- I enjoy the discount stores like Marshall and Ross way better than the big department stores. It's like a treasure hunt for me, and I usually find a real deal.
- I might hear a new song that prompts me to dance in the kitchen. You should try it.
- I am sarcastic and rude when I'm tired or haven't felt the breeze outside. I try to recognize this and rest or exit the house, before I speak.
- I have so many more quirks, I could probably write another hour, but I'll stop here and say...

All of the little oddities and eccentricities and quirks that make you unique and amazing are worth celebrating. Don't be ashamed to be unlike the crowd when you wear a "color" that's noticeable and eye-catching. If your oddities are offensive, ask Him to help you and he will. But if your uniqueness is who you are, then smile and enjoy today and skip, hop, wiggle or giggle your way through the house in your bare feet or heels...whatever makes you, you.

FRESH THYME – Everything – by Marcy Lytle

Do you pray about everything or just the big things? Since he tells us to give thanks in everything (good or bad), I'm thinking he'd love it if we pray about everything. Take it all to him in prayer. Prayer isn't just unloading the worst on his shoulders, it's conversation, acknowledgement, praise, adoration, petition, etc. In other words, it's relationship.

Pray about that dress you need to find for a wedding.

Thank him when it's there, it's on sale, and it's yours!

Pray about the friend that seems to be making bad choices.

Leave that worry in His hands and in His time.

Pray about those lost keys that seem to be nowhere.

If they're not found, and you have to get new keys made, give thanks anyway.

Pray about that lovely sunset that causes you to pause, and praise Him for the beauty.

Likewise, smile up at Him when that same sun peeks in your window the next morning.

Pray about your day that was too full and too sad and too long.

Rest against his chest, as you breathe and lay your burdens at his feet.

Pray about that job your kid just got, the one you prayed he'd get, and now he did!

Dance in the kitchen in response to his provision over you and yours.

Pray when you messed up, gossiped about that, or said that unkind word.

Receive his forgiveness and give thanks for his mercy, and listen for his gracious words spoken to you.

Pray about your uneasy feelings, your worry about tomorrow, and your sorrow over that.

Know, know, know that He cares and is at work on your behalf, for you and not against you.

You see, prayer is everything. It's how we connect with the God that made us, the Savior that loves us, and the Spirit that is with us at all times. There's not a prayer too small or too big or too silly or too long that he doesn't welcome when we couple it with faith in who He is – bigger than all of our worries and fears.

His promises are true, that he will listen, hear, and act. It may not be like tell Him too, but it will be like He knows to do, to work all things together for good.

Go ahead. Pray now. About everything.

FRESH THYME - Good Intentions

Is it really the thought that counts? People say that when a friend says I meant to call you the other day but I got busy. Is it really the thought that we want, or do we want a follow-through with the intentions? Marriages, parent/child relationships, jobs, and more will never last with just good intentions, will they? An intention is something aimed or planned for, but it's not always acted upon. Here's a list of life's little things that need a plan, a date, and an occurrence, not just an intention:

Acts of kindness. These are great to think about and wish we'd have time to do, but what if we marked them on our calendars? Sure, it's great to be spontaneous with these, but being purposeful can work, too! Mark on your July calendar a time to bake cookies for them, a date to visit an older neighbor, and a night to invite neighbors into your yard for a visit.

Thanksgiving. It's great to give thanks when we feel like it or remember it, but what if we were intentional to give thanks together over a meal for something from the day, at least once a week? Or perhaps we could journal our thanks or write it on a chalkboard in a room, on a wall! Intentional thanks might encourage us all!

Dates with him. If we sit and wait and whine at him to ask us, we will miss the opportunity to ask him. Plan a date night, be intentional to ask him out, place the date on the calendar, and make the fun begin. Search out a new coffee shop or trail, and make that date, night or day or morning, happen.

Cleaning that closet. Set aside a date this month to focus on that one closet or drawer or room that needs an overhaul. Ask for someone to help you. Gather the bins or boxes you need, or purchase that new item that will help you organize well. And then also include something fun on the calendar to do after your hard work is through, like a movie in a cool theater!

Words of affirmation. Maybe we think kind thoughts about something that person did or said and it makes us smile, but we never actually tell them. Set aside some time each week to just email or call or text words of affirmation to someone you love. It will make their day!

Reading that book. I take books with me to read all the time, but often never open them because I get sidetracked or do something else. But I need to slow down and read and pause and escape. Intentionally setting aside time to read might be a good thing for me...and you!

Exercising. Some people love to workout, others hate it. Some would rather sit on the sofa and chill because work days are long. And others might like the thought of moving, but it just doesn't happen on a regular basis. I get it. But maybe our goals are too lofty or we think we have to join a gym, or wear the right clothing, etc. Having the intention of walking maybe 3-4 days a week, or running, or following a YouTube dance video might be easier. Mark it on the calendar, and do it. Don't go for muscles and beauty, go for fitness and fun.

What else do you have good intentions for, but it just doesn't happen? There are so many areas we can improve on, but it just starts with one thing, doing it and feeling good about it, and

then other things follow suit. Start with the first one and do something nice for someone. Heck, print out this sheet and just follow it daily, by choosing one. That might work great!

FRESH THYME – That Blah Feeling – by Marcy Lytle

I was chatting with a friend today and we realized we both feel the same exact feeling after returning from a vacation or time away. We feel sort of blah, sick to our stomachs, and just so sad that the fun time is over and we're back to routine. I know that some folks like to return home, don't really enjoy staying away, but then there are those like me and my friend. Even though we're grateful for all things fun, when it's over it takes a day or two to shake the blahs away.

There are a few other instances where I feel blah, as well. There are days when work is so intense that I'm at home all day on the laptop and I feel as though I'm going to scream if I don't get out of the house. So if nothing is planned, there is nowhere to go, the blah feeling sets in and I step outside to try to shake it loose from my body and soul.

Feeling blah means to feel unmotivated, without purpose, bored, dull, or unexcited. And I'm here to admit that I don't like feeling blah. I'm sure there are some of you reading that don't deal with these feelings, because you are the contented type to sit and relax and chill, more than go, go, go. But I'm not made that way. And I'm learning that it's okay.

Another time I feel blah is when I have a list of things to do, chores to take care of, errands to run, but I don't want to do them. I have a new book to open and read and escape into a story, but I just can't turn to the first page. I can only sit for so long and watch television, lay back and rest, or chill at home or even in the backyard, looking at the beauty of nature. I love all of that, but I then become very blasé about even all of those wonderful blessings!

So is feeling blah and blasé and bored and dull with life, when there is really no reason to feel so, a bad thing? It's a real thing, I know that much. And gratefulness, stating my thanksgivings, does help. But here are a few practical things I've found to chase away the blahs, so that they don't lead to depression and despair...

- Have something planned after the fun ends. Maybe another trip, a shopping excursion, a visit with a friend, a date night out...something on the calendar.
- Step outside into the sunshine and take a walk. It's amazing how the sun on my face, the sweat on my brow, and the movement in my body all chase away the blahs and give me energy and make me smile.
- Journal the trip or the experience. Recalling what took place, the places you went and saw, and the food you ate – it's fun to categorize it all and place it there on paper, on the screen, and into your memory forever so that you can then move on.
- Take time. It's usually 24 hours or less that I feel blah and then I start to feel better. I know that time helps, and the shock of being back into the norm takes a while to sink in. I just have to keep telling myself this, and it helps.
- Tell yourself it's okay. Even if your list of to-dos is long and you feel bad about yourself because you feel blah, and others tell you to be thankful and suck it up, cut yourself some slack. You are who you are. I've been this way since I was a child, and I guess it's part of my makeup, to have energy to go and go, and then crash and burn.

I don't know, but feeling blah is real to some of us, maybe to all of us, in different seasons. It can turn into a no-care attitude and even depression if left to linger at the tables of our mind, but usually with a few ideas like listed above, the blahs roll away like clouds when the wind blows. They may show up again in a few days, but the wind always comes right behind them and the sun shines again.

So, where are you headed next to have some fun?



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

August 2021



TIPS

The Dressing – A is for Accessories! – by Marcy Lytle

I'm pretty sure we've talked and shared accessories before, but fashion accessories are always changing and so fun, so here we are again. For the month of August, we're looking at accessories for now...and later...when the seasons start to change. Maybe you're not quite ready to shop for fall clothes, it's way too hot to stop wearing your summer outfits, but you just need a little inspiration on how to add a little "something" to your ensembles! I hope you are inspired with one of these ideas!

Belts – I just recently purchased a set of stretchy belts, which I'm loving, from Amazon. They can be worn now with those maxi dresses or long tunics, and even later in the fall over sweaters. Belts are a great accessory for pulling in something that's loose to give it more shape!

Half tee – I can't say enough about these, and this company is always creating new styles for every outfit. The tees are fitted, hit just below the chest, have all sorts of necklines and sleeves, and are THE BEST accessory for filling in gaps in your clothing. A must-have, for sure.

Scarves – Not just on your neck, but everywhere! Have you tried tying two scarves together for a belt, twisting and wearing as a headband, or doubling over and tying on a loop on your pants? Scarves are so versatile, and I really love the pack of 12 I recently got on Amazon. One for every outfit I wear!

Bags – This is my favorite, and has been since I was a child. I always bought a bag on a vacation, and I often still do! It's a pain to change out purses unless you keep everything inside in a couple of pouches, and then it's easy! And purses are maybe the most fun accessory to shop for, and to style – from cross body, to handbag, to tote, and more!

Hats – I have more bad hair days than good ones, it seems. August heat and humidity are not a girl's friend! Whether you choose a straw hat or a cap, wear it and enjoy the cuteness and how it hides and tucks away all the hair you'd rather not mess with!

Sneakers – Have you ever seen so many options of sneakers on the shelves? Every color and style is available, and why not have several in your closet that will take you on into fall? One with a bit of animal print (Marley Lilly), one in a pop of color (Timberland) or just a pair of new slip-ons from Keds. You pick.

Seven for You – Organizers – by Marcy Lytle

Organization. It seems we're either obsessed with it and are constantly reorganizing and rearranging, or we're completely lost when it comes to keeping things together and neat. Or maybe we're somewhere in between those two, depending on the season! I love to see how others organize their things and discover new products or hints on how to keep things tidy. So I'm thinking you might like it, as well. We asked our panel this month to share their faves when it comes organization.

My favorite organizer that I have is my jewelry organizer! I've never had my jewelry displayed out of fear of it being messy or unorganized, but having it displayed like this really forces me to keep it looking nice. I got these organizers on Amazon by Keebofly as a set for \$30 and they come in white, grey, brown, and black. – Sofia

https://www.amazon.com/Keebofly-Organizer-Necklaces-Bracelet-Earrings/dp/B07V1RJRvQ/ref=sr_1_3_sspa?dchild=1&keywords=keebofly+jewelry+organizer&qid=1626349910&sr=8-3-spons&psc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUEzTFhZV1Q4SkFaWTFNjMvUyY3J5cHRIZEikPUEwNDE3MjM5QjdYR04yU1BUN1NIJmVuY3J5cHRIZEFkSWQ9QTA4OTQ1ODczTEVaUlc2MU5FVDg3JndpZGldE5hbWU9c3BfYXRmJmFjdGlvbj1jbGlja1JlZGlyZWNOJmRvTm90TG9nQ2xpY2s9dHJ1ZQ==

I love trays for organizing, in different spots around the house. I have one by his coffee maker for his cup, honey and coffee grounds. There's another tray in a corner in the kitchen with three clear canisters that hold granola, pasta and popcorn. Trays are great for grouping three items and making them look neat on a counter or shelf. I've bought them at Target, and even at the Dollar Store.

A cute rope basket is great for corralling magazines or mail, and looks SO CUTE on a shelf...from Target. I've seen these everywhere lately, sitting below entry way shelving, on kids shelves in their rooms, or atop a bathroom counter to hold rolled up towels.

<https://www.target.com/s?searchTerm=rope+basket>

I just recently found this purse organizer at Marshalls, but I'm using it to organize by book tote, and it works great! It gives a bit of structure to the tote, and keeps the books/magazines/pens, etc. organized as well. Yay! I'm including a link for a similar one from Amazon.

https://www.amazon.com/OMYSTYLE-FASHION-Organizer-Neverfull-Longchamp/dp/B07SCN46GZ/ref=sr_1_6?dchild=1&keywords=purse+organizer+insert&qid=1626350147&sr=8-6

I found these hanging cloth organizers at Target and decided to use them in my laundry room on the wall. They're great for holding cleaning supplies and I think they're cute! They even have little pockets on the side. I like keeping my weekly cleaning supplies in one place, easy to access.

I love to organize, but one probably couldn't tell it by looking at my closets or pantry. Everything in our home has a place and is usually in that place. I have two main items of organization, and both can be found at Bed, Bath, and Beyond. *First*, is my Lazy Suzan tray for my spices. I actually have two because I have a lot of spices. This tray is a great invention and is so helpful! I just twirl it around and pick my spices. *Second*, is my jewelry box. I used to have one big box, but it got so heavy with all my jewelry. Then, I found this wonderful set of jewelry trays. I love them because I can set the trays beside each other to pick what jewels I want to wear each day. And I can buy more trays to add on, as I get more jewelry! The price is right, too. – Carole

https://www.bedbathandbeyond.com/store/product/ampersand-reg-large-stackable-jewelry-trays-set-of-3/1016838012?skuld=16838012&enginename=google&mcid=PS_googlepla_brand_brand_loca&product_id=16838012&adtype=pla&product_channel=local&adpos=&creative=233266395762&device=c&matchtype=&network=g&gclid=Cj0KCQjwub-HBhCyARIsAPctr7yXG4R3uNOhUbBV_4NkkJea3FQT-EsVbtdxzgIRESSVFIZXXpkow8oaAnVsEALw_wcB&gclid=aw.ds

I like to stay organized when I bring off season clothes to my main closet. When I first hang my clothes up in my main closet for the new season, I hang them with the hangers *backwards*, the opening facing out (see the first photo.) The hangers on the left are facing out which means I have not worn those items, yet. You can see the two hangers on the right are *facing the right way*, which means I have already worn those two items. As the season progresses, I will pull items from the rod, take the clothing off, and hang my empty hangers in one section of the closet. Having one section of the closet for empty hangers makes it easy when I do laundry and need to hang something up, since all of my hangers are in one place. When it is time to move summer clothes out for my winter clothes, I can easily see what items I did not wear all season long because the hangers are still backwards on items I did not even touch or consider wearing! I then evaluate the usefulness of that item and usually put it in the donate pile. If I did not wear it all season long when there was an opportunity to do so, I do not need it in my closet anymore. This keeps my closet from being crowded. – Anita

A spice drawer rack is also my favorite. And everything in mine is alphabetized. Each spice is easy to get to, and it's easy to know what to grab for any meal that I'm creating. – Edith
https://www.amazon.com/Lynk-Professional-4304142PK-Adjustable-Expandable/dp/B07V59FGV4/ref=sr_1_5?dchild=1&keywords=spice+drawer+rack&qid=1626350772&sr=8-5

Three Moms – The Serious Stuff – by the Cousins

Mom of Two

The way that we talk about larger issues I think will change as our kids enter into different stages of life. When they were infants, we felt free to be able to talk about all issues, knowing that their little ears could not comprehend. We did watch our tone, as we could tell that even at an infant age they could feel our anger or hurt.

Our girls are currently ages two and four. They are at an age where they soak up everything. They listen to every little word, they repeat us, they want to be just like us, and their knowledge is growing at a rapid speed. We try to save our deeper conversations for a time when it's just us two. Not only to protect their ears, but also it is harder to get through deeper conversations with our girls vying for our attention. This usually occurs on date nights, when we put the girls down for bed, or sometimes when we are in the car and the girls are napping.

However, we are human. We can have arguments in front of our kids, we will make mistakes, and topics will be brought up that our kids will question. I think the most important part of that is how we respond. Showing our kids that Mommy and Daddy can disagree but showing them even more how we love each other through it, how we have to apologize as well, and how wonderful forgiveness and God's grace is!

As our kids grow, I feel it will be important to include our kids in some of the deeper conversations and larger topics. They need guidance on how to navigate through this fallen world and the importance of love and grace!

Mom of Three

When the kids were little and slept in the car, we discussed the serious matters. Those were the easy days. But now, if it's something frustrating or serious that needs a "now" discussion we either text or have a phone call. At night, after the kids go to bed we've tried to discuss, but we're tired. Emotions and tiredness make for "mountains out of mole hills" and result in talking again the next day. So that doesn't work.

Currently, our kids can occupy themselves and my husband and I can go to another room and talk and even sometimes say, "Dad and I need a moment," and that is helpful. In the school year; since we both work at home, we can talk while the kids are away.

The other night the kids wanted to do something and my husband said okay, and I didn't want that.. Since we didn't agree, he told the kids to go in the other room so we could discuss. That was a little thing, but had to discuss and then answer. It's always important to have these conversations away from their ears because kids pick up on everything (especially our daughter.) And if they do hear something, we tell them we need to discuss things for a moment...

It is important to converse with my spouse, especially on matters where we differ, so that resentment doesn't form. That makes for "blow ups" later.

“Little” matters, such as where to go out for dinner, that’s one thing. But if I’m frustrated with him or we need a “big” conversation, that’s another. And personally, I don’t think date night is the place for these discussions. In the past, we had put off a frustration and so when we were by ourselves the topic arose and ruined our time together. Date night is to enjoy each other, not for deep conversations. It is hard to find date night time, so it might be tempting to use it for serious matters, but it’s not a good idea.

So texting, a phone call, or asking the kids to go play a few minutes seems to work. But late at night, or date night with him, is never a good idea.

Mom of Four

It’s so important to us to talk through everything. And there are definitely “private” issues. We then tell the kids that mom/dad need to talk and send the kids to their rooms. Or we can talk in the car or after the kids go to bed. However, our kids are very curious and like to be involved in family issues.

If we are in a family disagreement, like kids’ activities or where to go out to eat, etc. we talk. We try to let them know that we listen to each other and we love each other, and we try to work through our emotions – for sure. We encourage and try to model talking about things. We do apologize, we encourage our kids (when they want to hide) to take space or a breather, but to come back and talk through it all.

I’m so thankful for my husband because he is a great communicator, and he pursues conversation and emotion with each of us when life is hard. We aren’t perfect, but we do talk a lot openly as a family, and acknowledge that conflict is normal and expected. Individuals might not agree, but we can compromise as family at the end of the day.

Really serious things like extended family (illnesses or struggles) or church conflict, or heated issues with us as a couple – we ask for privacy to chit chat. And my husband and I talk a lot!

Regarding world issues that affect our family, like Covid, gender issues, etc., we want to be the filter for our kids and talk with them openly. We want them to feel comfortable to come to us with their questions. The hope is that in the teenage years, we will have established a healthy communication and not ignored the hard.

Finally, we often talk about highs and lows of the week, hard things, things that made us smile, and we pray together. One of the hard topics we’ve started is a healthy view of sex, since the kids are exposed to so much through media, and were recommended *God’s Design for Sex*. It’s a great resource with age appropriate information for families.

In the Kitchen – Take a Dip – by Marcy Lytle

Dips are great for the end of summer fare, because they're cool, they can be eaten with something crunchy, and they're easy to pack and take on a trip or over to a friend's house for a visit! When asked to bring a side or an addition to a picnic, any of these would be great. Or even for just a snack for friends that stop by for a while...

Corn Cheese Dip (this recipe makes a ton – so I halved it – and it was still a lot!) – We made this ahead of time, as it's a great dip to chill and then take. Great for a picnic.

Ingredients

- 3 (11oz cans) MexiCorn
- 1 (7oz can) chopped green chiles
- 1 (6oz can) chopped jalapeno peppers (drained and liquid added to taste)
- ½ cup green onion chopped
- 1 c mayonnaise
- 1 c sour cream
- 1 t pepper
- ½ t garlic powder
- 1 (16oz) package sharp shredded cheddar cheese
- Fritos scoops

In a large bowl, mix all ingredients, except chips. Chill two hours to overnight. Serve with the scoops.

Mango Guacamole – We made this on the 4th and took it with us to watch fireworks in a park. We even shared it with a couple of strangers! It's so cool, tasty and refreshing.

Ingredients

- 3 medium ripe avocados
- 1 large mango peeled and chopped
- 1 large tomato chopped
- 1 small red onion chopped
- ¼ c chopped fresh cilantro
- 3 T lime juice
- 1 t salt
- Veggies and/or tortilla chips

In a large bowl, combine the first five ingredients. Stir in the lime juice and salt. Serve.

Tray of Dipping Cups – You can use whatever dips you want on this tray, but the key is to serve the meal deconstructed on a tray. Our choice this night was turkey sandwiches.

Ingredients

- Slice turkey
- Cheese
- Mustard
- Salsa
- Pickles
- Avocado
- Cucumbers
- Tomatoes
- Nuts
- Chips

Just take out your favorite tray and arrange all of the ingredients for a sandwich on the tray, with some in cups (the dips). That's it. You can include whatever dips you like from Ranch, to mustard, to salsa to Onion Dip – to suit your taste!

Skewers for Dipping – Caramel sauce is the dip of choice here. It can be drizzled or provided in a small cup for dipping...your choice.

Ingredients

- Wooden skewers
- Strawberries
- Bite size Snickers
- Caramel sauce

Wash the strawberries and halve the snicker bars. Thread them on the skewers. Take the sauce and drizzle, or squeeze into a tiny cup for dipping. Enjoy.

Chicken Avocado Salad – This recipe is called a salad, and I suppose it is. But we took it as a dip of sorts, to eat with tortilla chips. And it was so delicious!

Ingredients

- 2 T olive oil
- 1 T lime juice
- 2 cups rotisserie chicken, shredded
- ¼ cup cilantro, chopped
- ¾ cup salsa
- 1 avocado

- Salt and pepper

Combine oil, lime juice, salt and pepper in a medium bowl. Add chicken and cilantro, and toss. Gently fold in salsa and avocado. Serve with your favorite tortilla chips.

Tried and True – Baskets – by Marcy Lytle

Baskets were a thing decades ago, when that country style of decorating was popular, way back when. And now...they're back. Only they're styled differently, made differently, and look so cool on shelves, walls, and even as functional organizers in our homes. Have you purchased and used any of the cute baskets out there, right now? I'm careful about the ones I choose, because some still remind me of a general store. But then there are others that are so good for just the right space!

On a shelf. I see young moms use these to capture toys or books, and I use one to hold magazines, on a shelf. These baskets are the rope style, woven round and round, and come in cute patterns. This one is from Target.

As a statement. We recently lined the top of our bookshelves with all sorts of baskets, and some even have lights. I saw this on the web, and loved the idea.

To hold cords. Another one of the same rope baskets is great on the floor next to our desks, to hold the electrical cords and strips, to hide them out of sight, and to serve as a small trash can for paper.

Up against a wall. It's fun to have a few of the flattering style baskets that can serve as a double purpose. Leaning against a wall, they look pretty. And used on the table, they look even prettier!

As a plant pot. Just place your potted plant inside a basket to give it a whole new look. There are so many pretty options!

By the sofa. For a rolled up magazine, a throw, or a catchall until you have the time to tidy up later.

For gathering. Do you snip herbs and/or flowers or branches from your yard? Keep a handled basket somewhere in your house to grab to gather the pretties that you cut, as you bring them in to arrange.

Part of a trio. Grab a pretty shallow basket and place inside it a vase, a candle, and a book. You've got yourself a table setting! Or books, a mirror and some jewelry!

In a group. This idea reminds me of the 80's, but I see they are now arranged in a pretty design which updates the look of baskets on a wall.

In your creative space. Smaller baskets can look pretty on a desk holding pens, paper, crafts and more.

Got any more ideas for baskets? Leave a comment below!



HOME

Practical Parenting – Your Umbrella – by Marcy Lytle

I had the pure pleasure of shopping with my daughter and her daughter recently, and when we stepped out of the car at the mall, it was raining just a bit. Not really much at all was falling from the sky, but Ayla (age 8) wanted to carry the umbrella in case we needed it. And, of course, she wanted to open it and walk under it on our way into the mall. I happily gave her my large umbrella popped open; she then raised it and walked, covered and dry into the building.

I was able to snap a picture of her under this umbrella, and in fact, she's always liked umbrellas. What kid doesn't? There's something fascinating about opening this skinny thing on a stick and seeing it fly apart in this huge circle of color. And there's something even more magical about getting underneath it to sit or walk or to twirl it around above our heads.

I was looking at this photo and thought how important it is to offer our kids our umbrellas. The things that have covered us throughout our lives from rainy days are important to share with the kiddos. Just like we hand them a physical umbrella to carry in their own hands, we can offer them other types of coverings as well:

Offer them the Word. Think of the words that have covered you in stressful times and write them down in cards, on paper, or wherever – and leave them in their lunch boxes, on their desks, or under their pillow. This covers them with truth and hope.

Offer them Markers. The times when God showed up just in time, met a need, or healed an illness, are great stories to share with our kids to cover them with hope when they walk out in their own storms in life.

One such story occurred just while we were shopping! Ayla found a dress she really liked on a clearance rack, only it was missing a tie (it tied in the back) and there was no price tag on the dress. She and her mom went to the bathroom while I talked it over with a clerk and tried to pay for the dress, of course asking for a discount because of the missing tie. About that time, another clerk nearby heard my discussion and went to a “junk” type of drawer under the register and approached me and asked, “Is this the tie?” Apparently, someone had found it and placed it there, and it was the one lone tie for this one lone dress, the one that Ayla wanted! And then the manager emerged and marked the dress down from \$34 to \$7 for all our trouble!

You can bet that I told Ayla the entire story of that miracle that enabled me to give her the cute gingham checked blue sundress she wanted so much. That story will be a “marker” next time she can't find something she desperately wants.

Offer them Joy. The kids need to see us skip with them, laugh out loud at absurdities in life, and giggle over funny shows on TV beside them. Joy is an umbrella like no other, the biggest and most colorful one of all.

Offer them Love. The umbrella of love is surely the biggest. Our kids need to know that they are loved for who they are, period. We need to bless them for no good reason on days when they least expect it, we need to have our arms wide open to cover them with hugs on days that

make them cry. And we need to offer them His love when hate is what they see in the world around them, so that they too can offer the umbrella of love to their friends.

Umbrellas. They're so much more than skinny sticks that open and twirl. They're protection from the rain.

I Don't Do Teens - Teach Them – by Marcy Lytle

I learned nothing, in the way of housework, when I was a kid. Mom felt like if we were studying and doing homework, that was enough. And I so appreciated that! Maybe your kids will know it all by the time they're grown, but just in case, let me suggest some practical learning that might be handy...once they leave the house. It might even be advantageous to have them learn it while they're still home, to help Mom out, just a bit!

Sewing on a button – Grab the sewing kit (Don't have one? Get one) and show her/him how to thread a needle, tie a knot in the thread, position the button, sew it securely, and tie off the thread. If you don't sew on buttons yourself, learn how – and do this fun task together!

Folding a sheet set – It's a challenge, for sure. And I've seen so many tutorials for this home task, so it must be something people are frustrated with! I find that folding the fitted sheet, with corners tucked in each other, and then placing that folded sheet inside the folded flat sheet (along with the pillowcases) works well. If the fitted sheet is a bit uneven, it's hidden because it's between the folds of the flat!

Washing a load of clothes – I heard someone the other day say that they don't separate whites from colors. Is that true for most people, now? Well, it's a must for me, because I like my whites to stay white! Grab a stain stick and show your teen how to treat spots, before washing, how to use the washer and dryer, and the importance of putting away clothes as soon as the dryer buzzes. (They can set their phone alarm as a reminder).

Planning a menu – Let him/her be responsible for a family dinner as often as time allows. Show them how to pick the menu (it can be themed, there can be a main entrée and two sides, or it can be a variety of small dishes, etc.) and then how to make sure all of the ingredients are available.

Storing food – I knew none of this! Cucumbers and tomatoes sit on the counter. Otherwise, in the fridge they get watery. Milk and dairy products are not stored in the door of the fridge, because they need to stay the coldest – not where the door is being opened and shut. Glass containers are better than plastic and keep food fresh longer. Labels are key for knowing how long leftovers have been sitting. Nuts last longer in the fridge. All the things...so they're ready when they have their own kitchen.

Cleaning the toilet – Check the product ingredients (show them how to make their own cleaners if you do that), use gloves when cleaning and using products, and be sure to wipe under the seat and the base and behind the toilet. Kids can surely clean their own toilets at an early age, right?

Folding the towels – Some like to roll the towels, some fold in halves, and others in thirds, and then there's the place where they go – with the folded edges visible and not the raw. Show them your method, and see if they have one of their own for their bathroom. Towels can be visible (in baskets or on open shelves) or tucked away in cabinets, and that might determine how you roll...or fold.

Learning the lingo – Zest, julienne, chop or dice, pinch, fold or stir – all the terms when cooking and baking that are helpful to know when making a dish. And show them the gadgets you use and what they are – the zester, the lemon squeezer, the pasta spoon, the apple slicer – or whatever ones you love.

Setting the table – Maybe you don't actually use nice dishes or actually "set" a table, but it's nice to know these things for when you do! Show them what a charger is, where to place the flatware, how to fold the napkins, what a runner is, the different between a salad and a dinner fork. It might be fun to look up dinner etiquette as a family and let the kids set the table according to what they've learned!

There are SO MANY household chores that some kids learn and others don't, for all sorts of reasons. Maybe parents don't have the time, kids show no interest, or we've become a society that doesn't even clean or fold or cook or organize. However, it's something to think about...what he or she knows or doesn't know...by the time they become an adult in your house.

An Adage a Day - Once in a Blue Moon – by Carole Gilbert

Once in a blue moon, I get a crazy idea. How about you? Once in a blue moon, I think of something I want to do and start to plan it. How about you? “Once in a blue moon...”

So, what is it about this blue moon that makes me feel ambitious or melancholy or ready to run with some idea? They say people act differently when it is a full moon, so what is it about a blue moon?

I have always enjoyed learning about the stars, sun, and moon. At one point in my childhood, I wanted to be an astronaut. And I really enjoy writing this column. Maybe that is because I can write about all the things that interest me like the moon and the adages of old. Although, I am always praying about what to write next and I let the adage, saying, or quote come to me. I believe this is the Holy Spirit putting a whisper in my ear, “What about this one?” Of course, I never say no to the Holy Spirit. Well, maybe, once in a blue moon I do. At least I hope it is only once in a blue moon.

This idiom, “once in a blue moon,” began in a similar form in 1528 in a pamphlet published by William Roy and Jeremy Barlowe. It has evolved into what we know today as meaning “rarely” or “almost never.” It is like having a dream to reach for the stars. It rarely happens that you can reach for the stars but there is always that one possibility.

One weekend, when my son was in elementary school, he spent the night with a friend. He came home the next day telling me of how they had stayed up all night outside and watched falling stars that were everywhere in the sky. I told him he must have fallen asleep and dreamed he saw so many falling stars. He disagreed, but life went on and we did not think any more of that weekend.

After my kids were grown, I heard the weatherman talk of the meteor shower that would be going on later that week. He encouraged everyone to get up in the night and go outside to watch it. I thought, “What? Could that have been what my son and his friend saw that night all those years ago?” When the night came, I set my alarm and got up, went to my lounge chair on my back patio and laid down to watch for this meteor shower, or “the falling stars,” as my son had called it. I saw about five before I fell asleep there on my back porch, but that was four more than I had ever seen in one night. And it was worth getting up in the middle of the night to see. I can only imagine what my son saw. Maybe I should not have questioned what he told me but we moms don’t always get everything right.

This month we have a “Blue Moon” scheduled on the 22nd. These only happen about every 2.7 years. And we also have the Perseid Meteor Shower on August 12-13. This is the one I started to see when I fell asleep. I hope you will look at these wonders from God.

Psalm 8:3-5 says, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor."

I love this verse!

It tells me how special the moon is, blue or any other color. It tells me how special the stars are, even those falling in the sky. And it tells me how special we are, and that God cares for us even more than the other wonders He made. I will remember this when I look up to see the Blue Moon or the Perseid Meteor Shower. And I will thank God for all He placed in the sky.

Picture courtesy of Pam Chapman.

Tiny Living - Back to 2019 – by Leyanne Enterline

Pre-pandemic life begins...

I feel like I blinked and now it is 2019 again...a second chance. I don't really know what that means. But for Brian and me, 2020 was a bizarre year. There were so many emotions, like one would experience when riding a roller coaster, with all the ups and downs of life in a pandemic – in a tiny home. Even that word – pandemic - was new to all of us.

And then one day it was just over, and we are back to where we started. Not many changes, just back to 2019. It's like 2020 was just a dream/nightmare. I could use so many words to describe that year.

So now what?

Do we go on like nothing happened?

I feel like we really need to take some time to reflect and think about how we will do things differently this year. Or what things were great about the pandemic “era” and what we should continue to do. I think we thought coming through 2020 *something* would have changed. We were looking for something different to happen. But it didn't. And we're back to pre-pandemic life.

So from here, we will move forward and see what the rest of 2021 has to offer.

We are back on the road more than ever. Brian's line of work has found him busier than ever and we'll try and go with him as much as we can. In the past month, we have been through seven states. It's been a blast, and we look forward to many more adventures. We will embrace this opportunity God has provided for our family to travel and enjoy time together.

So for the second half of 2021, I pray we continue to grow and learn together. Maybe we will learn more about each other's personalities, learn more facts about each state we visit, or smile at whatever God places in front of us, whether we want it or expect it, or not. We can embrace the journey and look forward to what's to come!

I suppose that's what can change for all of us, post-pandemic. We can note how life changed in an instant for the bad, and it can also change in an instant for the good.

Here's to the good...

A Night to Remember – Whadda Ya Know? – by Marcy Lytle

There's a big fast food restaurant in Atlanta, Georgia where the workers yell out, "What'll ya have?" as customers enter the door. They then proceed to take orders and deliver good burgers! I was thinking about that phrase and changed it to "What do ya know?" in regards to family. What do we really know about each other and what do we really know about God? It might be a great thing to actually find out...

Preparation: Set out a large array of snacks (maybe six) like pretzels, cookies, fruit, granola, or whatever you have in your pantry or fridge. Then cover it with a cloth. Have a stack of small plates nearby for serving, later.

Start out by asking the kids to answer the following dozen questions and see how many they get right.

1. What was Dad's first job, ever?
2. Where was Mommy born?
3. What is your brother's favorite color?
4. What is your sister's favorite candy?
5. Where did Mom go to college?
6. How does Dad like his coffee prepared?
7. Who is your brother's best friend?
8. What size is your sister's shoe?
9. What sport did Mom/Dad play as a kid?
10. What kind of car does the family drive?
11. How much are groceries each month?
12. What's Dad's middle name?

Now ask them these few questions about God and see if they know the answer, using the phrase in the title of the devo.

What do ya know about God's forgiveness? How many times does God forgive us for the same mess-ups over and over again?

I John 1:9 says *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

What do ya know about God's faithfulness? Is there ever a time when God is not with us?

Hebrews 13:5 says he will NEVER leave us. That's an awesome God!

What do ya know about God's commandments? What is the greatest commandment and the second one, in the New Testament?

Matthew 22:36 says, *Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*” Jesus replied: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.*

What do ya know about how God views others? How should we treat our friends?

Read the second half of that greatest commandment again – love others as we love ourselves.

John 14:27 says, **Peace** *I leave with you; my **peace** I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*

What do ya know about God’s peace? Can we have it, even when we are afraid?

Sometimes, we live with people for years and don’t really KNOW them, their likes and dislikes, their history and their jobs, or even their full names! Isn’t that crazy? And sometimes, we can follow God and not really know his character unless we stay in his Word, read it and believe it.

Uncover the snacks and yell “What’ll ya have?” as you serve each person in the family their plate of goodies.

Chipped China - When I Embrace Her Wonder – by Jennifer Lytle

Last summer, a pipe burst in our front yard. My little girl raced to play in the stream after getting her swimsuit on. She danced while I stood on the sidewalk fretting about the possible water bill. When I spoke with the firefighters and assessed the mess made by their digging out the sidewalk, she screamed with elation and laughed.

Being a parent has offered me a spectacular view of the beauty of embracing the gift of the present. My little girl is such an illustration of finding joy in all times and all places. She is one of the most lovely souls I have encountered. There is much she has already taught me about experiencing a fulfilled life.

Several years ago, after she underwent three surgeries, we spent the night in the hospital together. I tried to create the perfect sleep environment with mood lighting and quiet sounds. She wanted to explore the area and stay up until morning. Instead of me checking on her breathing through the night and startling awake in my chair bed every few hours, we rode around the wing in a wagon. There was chocolate pudding and popsicles and funny hospital equipment to discover.

When schools closed down last spring, my daughter gladly embraced the opportunity to sleep in late during the week. While I was concerned about the added household responsibilities, she wondered which friends would be willing to play in our backyard. She found that she could pretend her computer was glitching during virtual lessons and made us all laugh with her robotic moves and stutters.

While I tabulated the number of hours of sleep she was getting and compared it to pediatrician recommendations, she would spend evening hours with a flashlight, string, and miscellaneous crafting materials. During those hours, she configured three pulley devices. Each device delivered her a cup of water, nighttime reading materials, and stuffed animals.

There isn't a thing my daughter cannot design or do. I have the joy and privilege to sit back and observe her metamorphosis. Here are a handful of lessons I have learned from my daughter.

It is a perfect time to dance.
Go-bags should include a swimsuit.
Sleep is for the weary.
Joy is NOW.
Making toys is better than buying them.
The best boot is a used, muddy boot.
A messy room may indicate a bright mind.

My prayer is that we will notice and celebrate our gifts at this moment, being thankful for them ALL: even the burst water pipes or a new pair of muddy boots.



YOU

Strengthening Your Core – No Tears – by Marcy Lytle

I woke up early today with fears pounding in my chest about all things uncertain. Do you ever do that? Just yesterday I was concerned about my husband's doctor's appointment to check on his knee pain, and it was a great report, but now it was a new morning and other uncertainties raced through my mind. After all, life is full of uncertainties of the worrying kind, and if I'm not careful these things will plague me and destroy my peace of mind. Can you relate?

I sat up and got up, decided to not try and sleep some more, and I entered the front room of the house in the early morning dark hours, fully prepared to unload my angst on Him in prayer. That's a good thing to do, right? I do this often, because he says to cast our cares on him, to come to him when we are weary, and to pour out our hearts in prayer. So that's what I decided to do...cry my eyes out and hopefully feel better.

However, this particular morning I was exceptionally weary and didn't feel like praying, and was just SO distraught over no particular thing, but rather over every single things from kids, to church, to the future, to health, etc. You name it. It was on my mind. Seriously, what we all want is to be assured that all things will work out okay and be good. Isn't that right?

I entered the kitchen and thought maybe I should read a scripture, an encouraging book (I have several on a shelf by my desk) or...and then I stopped. I felt him tap me on the shoulder (no, not literally, but I sensed his presence) and say, "I am your shepherd...you shall not want."

I felt like this day, this Tuesday morning, I was not to pray or cry or list out my woes or linger and wail, but I was to settle my own soul by trusting in that one word, that one Person – Shepherd.

I've never met an actual shepherd of sheep on a farm. But Psalm 23 gives me a great picture of what it's like to be led by The Shepherd, and it's a pretty cool one.

Not wanting is to not be lacking, and if he says he's my shepherd and I shall not want, then it must be true. I could stop on that first verse alone and not even read the rest of the chapter. And that's what I did that Tuesday morning.

There's a time to pray and weep and release and give it all to Him, and I do that frequently. But there are days when I just need to be still and trust in who He is and who I am, and trust in the fact that that combo is the best one, the blessed one, and the only combo I need today.

I was frustrated and burdened and ready to spend time crying, but instead I spent a few seconds choosing...to trust in that pressure on my shoulder...that gentle reminder of who it is that's leading me and how there's peace in just following...because he knows where the still waters and green grass are.

I don't like how we find these places of rest and then the very next day we need directions again. But I guess that's why we're called sheep. We need a guide, and a good one. We need his staff and his rod, and they're both gentle yet firm. And we need repeated assurance that in

the darkest of valleys, goodness and mercy are pursuing us at all times. In fact, my cup that I see half empty is actually full and running over. I need to think about that for a while...

The tears dried up quickly that Tuesday morning, because He knew that instead of crying I needed to be reminded...

The Lord is my Shepherd

I shall not want

Life in a Nutshell – Traveling Lighter – by Jill Montz

I have never been accused of being a packrat. Very few things hold sentimental value to me and I take great joy in purging closets, drawers, garages, and storage sheds...my own and others...just ask my mother. On second thought, don't ask her. I think she is still a little miffed that I donated all her Rocky Mountain jeans and threw away all those TV Guides from back in the 90s!

While I love to part ways with things in my home, I tend to try to pack everything in my house when I travel. I was never a scout of any kind, but I pack for trips like I am hoping to be awarded a merit badge (or five) when I return. I want to be prepared for anything that might come my way.

For example, when Dotty and I pack for a two-day softball tournament I give her the following checklist for packing:

- All her softball gear (better check it twice)
- Both softball uniforms (along with extra socks, pants, belt and sliding shorts)
- Two water jugs (in case one cracks or gets lost)
- Bug spray, cooling towels, and sunscreen (spray and lotion)
- Rain poncho and umbrella
- Gloves, beanie, jacket, hoodie, and blanket
- 2 Swimsuits (in case one has a strap that breaks)
- 2 sets of pajamas
- 3 everyday outfits
- 4 extra pairs of socks
- 5 extra sets of undergarments
- Tennis shoes, flip flops, crocs, and Ugg boots (unless we are past mid-May)
- A book (just in case she loses her phone privileges)

Some of you might think this is crazy. Some of you have not been in north Texas or Oklahoma in the spring. We have played in tournaments where I was wrapped up in several layers of clothes and blankets on Saturday morning and by Sunday afternoon I was getting a good base tan going on, while sweating profusely.

As the mom, I pack all of Dotty's list and more:

- Two lawn chairs and a stadium seat (never know where I will want to sit)
- Two extra blankets and extra sets of gloves and hats (in case things get wet or dirty)
- More sunscreen, more bug spray, more cooling towels (someone might have forgotten theirs)
- One ice chest full of assorted sports drinks and another full of fruit and snacks
- Paper towels, trash bags, wipes, hand sanitizer, and even a couple rolls of toilet paper (those ballpark bathrooms can get pretty scary!)
- Travel first aid kit with extra Band-Aids, Tylenol, and Ibuprofen
- Extra hair rubber bands, head bands, brushes, and combs
- Extra phone chargers, battery packs, cords, and even a paper map (just in case all technology fails)

For two people going to a weekend tournament, my car looks like we are fleeing the country with no hopes of returning someday. Even my cat, the first few times we left, kept trying to get in the car for fear she was being left behind. Now she knows the drill and barely looks at us disdainfully as we pull out of the garage.

I pack like this for vacations, too. Even when we fly. Most trips, Dot and I each have a large suitcase, a carry-on bag and a backpack. I will divide our clothes and necessities into each suitcase just in case one gets lost in transit, so that we each have some clothes. My grandmother also taught me years ago to pack my carry-on with a change of clothes, pajamas, a bathing suit, extra shoes and all my must haves. That way if all the checked luggage is lost, I still have some items to start my vacation. I never carry a purse. It goes in my backpack so I can pack more items which are usually more books or charging devices. And last, but not least, I always wear a hoodie or jacket to the airport (even in the summer in Texas) so I don't have to pack a bulky item (and I can always tie it around my waist if I get hot.)

As each trip progresses, I slowly start putting items we have worn in one suitcase and items that are still clean and unworn in another. More than once, Dotty has causally mentioned we usually have an entire suitcase full of unworn outfits on our flight home. More than once she has gotten the "mom look" from me.

This last June, we took a trip to Florida. We were meeting friends at Disney World and then had plans to visit Universal Studios. Travel before Covid could get a little stressful, but I had been hearing horror stories all year about flights and lost luggage and all kinds of issues involving flying.

So with a deep breath and a quick prayer, I told Dotty we would each only be taking a carry-on bag and backpack this trip. After Dotty finally got over the shock of my new traveling light mindset, she easily packed her two items for the trip. We carefully planned each outfit and toiletry item. Considered what we had to have and what we could purchase when we landed. Then it all went in the bag. Thanks to those handy dandy packing cubes, (if you have not used them they are a game changer!) Dotty still had a little more room in her carry-on, so of course I did what any good mother would do. I threw in more underwear and socks...just in case.

Even though I was still a little uneasy about our sparse packing lists (only a poncho and no umbrella, only one extra set of clothes, no crocs, no gloves or beanies, and only one battery pack...not even an extra cord) it was so nice to sail through the airport without having to check luggage or go to baggage claim. We had more than enough and still had a few unworn items. We even managed to squeeze in some (very small) gifts for a couple of people back in Texas. It was a fabulous trip!

On the flight home, Dotty and I were separated and no one was willing to switch seats. While I was sad I wouldn't have my sweet girl using me as a pillow/couch as she tried to get comfortable enough to sleep on the plane, I did manage to enjoy the flight and some time to think as I stared out the airplane window.

I was so proud we had made it an entire six days with less than half of what I would have normally packed. I felt less burdened and stressed knowing that all of our luggage was tucked safely in the overhead bins just above each of us. It was a lovely feeling. And like I do so often, I started to compare all this to pecan trees and life itself.

In the summer months, the pecans on our trees grow and fill out as they get closer and closer to harvest time in the fall. Some years, the trees might put on a very large crop of pecans (also known as a bumper crop). Those years can be very stressful on the trees as they use so much of their resources to making pecans. This can cause them to make inferior pecans when the resources are simply spread too thin over so many clusters of pecans or it can cause the tree to not produce any pecans the next year, due to being drained by the bumper crop.

When this happens, sometimes trees will naturally start dropping pecans in the summer as a way to lighten their load, especially if they don't have enough water to sustain themselves during the hot, dry summer months in Texas. Other times we will thin them mechanically with our pecan shakers to keep the trees from becoming overly stressed and thus hurting the current crop as well as the next one.

Pecan trees and pecan farmers both know that being burdened with a heavy load is not good. If we want to have well filled out and tasty pecans this year, as well as a crop next year, we sometimes have to lighten the load of each tree. And if we want to have a more enjoyable and less stress filled life, now and in the future, we too must sometimes lighten our metaphorical loads.

The whole flight home I wondered what I could unpack and leave behind in my own life and a few things came to mind:

Regrets, missed opportunities, and mistakes
Self-loathing and hatred
Unforgiveness for myself and others
Past hurts and old wounds that I often pick at to see if they still bleed
Words I never spoke and words I wish I could take back
Anger, vengefulness, and callousness that I wear around like heavy armor
Judgement and self-righteousness I use to cover my own sins
Anxiety and stress about what I can control and what I can't

There are more, I am sure, but these are the big ones that weigh me down on a daily basis. They fill up my life not with joy or gladness but with pain and sadness. They make going through life bulky and hard to maneuver. They are constantly weighing on my mind and my heart and forcing me to pay extra to bring them along on the journey.

So perhaps with a little better planning and a little more evaluating, I can take another deep breath and say a few more prayers and be able to unpack some of these items that have been weighing me down for so long. I have a feeling God will be okay with me handing them over to Him. He seems to have a big enough suitcase to carry all my burdens (and yours, too.) And I highly doubt He worries much about the lost luggage.

1 Peter 5:7 is one of my all-time favorite verses.
Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.

And I love it when Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30,
*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

Rest for my soul. Now that sounds like a heavenly vacation indeed.

Healthy Habits – Those Hot Words – by Marcy Lytle

Most of us wouldn't think about sleeping on dirty sheets. We learn to change them often, wash them, shake them out and place them fresh and crisp on our beds. Just the thought of soiled sheets underneath our clean bodies makes us shudder, so we make sure they're cleaned often and changed. And yet, we let the same old soiled words come out of our mouths, ones that damage and hurt others, and never think to change those. But changing our words can be a healthy start to changing relationships with those around us.

How so?

With the kids. Yelling demeaning words to our kids when they disobey wounds their hearts, and this doesn't make for a healthy relationship. It seems impossible NOT to yell when we have kids that are underfoot, making messes, making noise, and creating chaos. It seems the only way to jolt them and get their attention is to yell, and to yell meanly. However, most of the time we're way past our limit in tiredness and tolerance, and that's why those words spill out.

We can take care of ourselves and ask for rest, create disciplined rest times for all, and ask for forgiveness when the words hurt.

With him. It's easy to fall into critical dialogue with our spouses. We sit by him and he's doing some annoying habit, so we tell him he's gross. He didn't do that thing on our list we asked him to do, so we sigh and make him feel two inches high with our words of disdain and approval. He emerges wearing that shirt that's way too small so we tell him words we'd never want him to say to us, "You look fat in that!"

We can stop and think about the words that spill out to create an unhealthy relationship with him, and pause before we speak. We can ask for a visit with him to talk over some concerns, in a manner that's conversational instead of critical. OR...we can let him be in some areas and learn to quit saying everything we think. It's hard, I know! But we can do it!

With others. Usually, we're guarded when we're with other people, because we wouldn't dare say exactly what we think to their faces. However, when we return home, we often spill out judgments and nasty opinions about the way they acted, what they said, or more. It makes for an unhealthy outlook on friendships in general, and often plants seeds of bitterness in both of our hearts. Maybe that friend could have been more attentive, actually showed up on time, or a number of other expectations.

We have all been hurt in the presence of those we thought were friends. We can pray and ask Him to give us an allowance of grace for others, when we truly don't know the why of their actions or inactions. We can think of the good in those friends, and only talk about that, and let go of even the hurts friends inflict. It does not feel healthy or good at all to hold on to anger at them.

The best thing we can do with all of the above is to *pray*. We can ask God to stop us when those words spill out, to realize what we've just said and ask Him to change us. We can *practice affirmation*. We place those entrusted to us in this life in His hands to deal with them,

when they act in hurtful ways. And we can *give thanks* for the good, good, blessings we've been given.

I find that I personally spill out ugly words solely due to being tired. Changing that one thing has been a focus lately, to realize my tiredness and rest, before engaging in activity or conversation or any interaction. Rest is hard for many, especially if life is way too busy. So we may have to start with scheduling rest in our daily routines, including the kids resting with us, asking our husbands for it (and offering it to him, as well) and stepping away from relationships for a bit...in order to be refreshed.

It's only then that gracious words can spill out like a gentle waterfall, instead of explosions of hot lava that burns...

And we'll all be healthier for it.

Life Right Now – Summer Peaches – by Hannah Bouck

Let's talk about dropping the ball.

Before 2015 I would have considered myself an EXPERT juggler. Watch your kids, turn homework in on time, help plan a church event, work two jobs, and add your load of laundry to mine? I'm your girl!

But it was around that same year something changed and I lost balance.

Cue a 7-year journey with crippling depression, anxiety, loss, familial addictions, eight moves, medications, failed health, amongst other "fun" things and you have a wonderful recipe for an expert ball-dropper.

All of a sudden, I couldn't/can't keep up.

Everywhere I look, I see healing and hope in the lives of those around me, but then I turn to my circumstances and all seems lost. Each time a step toward progress happens a bowling ball hits my face. (Shout out to the student loan lawsuit I'm currently navigating.) But the impact of the hit is silent. I lay in waiting; bruised and tired, wondering why I'm still unseen in my grief. Thoughts creep in that tell me how somehow it's all my fault and I deserve every last bit of this. That I need to believe harder. They tell me the things the mean girls said in high school were right, that I don't matter and the world (including those around me) would be better off without my pain clouding their vision.

record screech

(And praise the Lord for people around you that speak life into your veins.)

As soon as those thoughts come in, I have people I can call and immediately *dirty* cry to. Even though the ball that smacked my face moments before is heavy still, I have people that can balm the bruising. And I have a Jesus that takes my tears and uses them to water what I don't yet see.

I used to think I was an expert juggler....but now I know I'm an expert ball dropper. I've dropped it so many times that most days I can't even pick it up. And if there's one thing I've BEGUN to learn on this journey, it's that I'm not meant to pick it up on my own. I'm meant to tell my bestie that I can't pick it up, I'm meant to let my husband help me clean off the dirt covering it, and I'm meant to ask those who care for me better ways to handle it on my own.

(I know, Enough with the analogies. You get the point!)

All of this to say; life is really hard sometimes. Seasons we think will be quick last for 7+ years. And it sucks.

I don't know what will ever come from my story and season. Fruit, I hope? Preferably some juicy peaches your girl can make a pie with. Or maybe empathy; the ability to walk with people in the mud of their tilling and tears and just be.

Either way, fruit is the end result and highlight we see; the cultivation is what happens in the mud.

Find your people to be with you in it all.

You're not alone.
You may feel unseen, but...
You are not unknown.

Under Pressure – Stay Motivated – by Debbie Haynes

When I was working full time, every year when spring arrived and flowers bloomed and trees leaved, I felt trapped. A boredom set in with life and I experienced a hunger to get out and do something different, but my job was too demanding. It was a global job, so I had early morning and late night meetings, and I could feel the mundaneness of the patterns in my life of working, cooking, eating and sleeping. I read the Word and attended church, but I still yearned for the “different” in order to jump out of the rut for something exciting.

I wanted an escape from the unchanging familiarity; from the harder parts of life.

I didn't dislike my job. I loved its challenges, the diversity of it, and I was rewarded for my work. I loved my family and enjoyed everything I did to serve them. And I even enjoyed hobbies and music and visiting with others, but I STILL wanted something different. Maybe we'd take a quick trip or I'd embark on a new project, but then I continued on...

I did recently reseal my granite countertops all by myself, and could barely move the next day. I also now have a new tankless water heater, two beautiful security gates on each side of the house, so I'm thankful for all of these things! I even was gifted a sourdough starter from which I baked pizza dough, biscuits, muffins and more (all delicious!)

So what's the point to this story?

Some “new” things have also begun in my heart. I've written three songs and started to hear God's voice in new ways. I've let go of some judgments I've had about others, and surrendered windows of my heart I had never opened to Him. And I've seen His faithfulness to me in ALL of these things.

In Galatians 6, Paul says we should restore anyone who has fallen and bear one another's burdens – thus fulfilling the law of Christ. In other words, there is a place in Christ where we stand alone with Him, where we cannot depend on an escape valve, on other people for a rescue, or look to “deserve” something better than what we have. In verse 5, we are reminded to not be deceived because we will sow what we reap. And in verse 9, we read to not grow weary in well-doing because in due season we will reap, if we don't faint. And we are encouraged to “do good” to all...

The Message Bible says it this way:

So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up or quit. Right now, therefore, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith.

We are called to keep working, keep moving forward, and keep doing good.

In Ephesians 4:20-24 we are told that anything connected with our “old way of life” has to go. We are to get rid of it. And we are encouraged to take on a “new way of life” – a renewed one where we conduct ourselves in a manner that depicts God's character being reproduced in us.

That's how we maintain, and stay motivated, even in the dog days of summer...when we're tired of the same old thing, we don't see evidence of fruit, and everything feels routine. We willingly cooperate with Him and we reap a great reward where others see His fruit in our lives.

I remember a time when I was a teenager, trying to learn to play the piano and making gross mistakes. But then there were other times when I was called to play the piano at the end of a church service and I prayed, "Lord, what shall I play?" and he answered me!

So here I am again, trusting the Lord to enable me to not become weary in well-doing, or give up when things seem terrible. I'm realizing that He – God himself – is my reward. Deeper walking with him, experiencing his goodness, and understanding his Word, are all making me more like Him.

Be encouraged to keep on, stay motivated, and do good works – even if every fiber in you is screaming for change! You may need to play those awful, bad notes a while longer, to stay faithful...to allow his character to emerge as you stand.

Simple Truths – Never Left Empty – by Marcy Lytle

Recently, I read something that said God will not leave us empty. He's always in the business of filling us up. This encouraged me, and I'm hoping it will brighten your day, as well. Feeling empty happens for any number of reasons, and while it's good to empty the watering can...it's not good to leave it empty for long. Why? Because then all the plants that the can watered will die. Here's more...

We become empty when we pour out with no refill.

We become empty when the heat is on, and we're dry and exhausted.

We become empty when our kids leave, or a spouse travels, or a friend moves.

We become empty when a season is over and our flower beds are bare.

We become empty when we've spent all we had in store, and we don't see anything more...

Feeling empty just occurs from time to time, because we give, we pour out, we nurture, we plant, we spend, and we end up at the end of the day with a backache, a headache, a heartache and dry as a bone.

Back in February, the freeze completely stunted so many plants, and many of our bushes or blooms were lost for good. They froze to the root. And we have this one small flower bed in the middle of our front yard that housed a beautiful Indian Hawthorn for the entire time we've lived in our house (25 years.) It was rooted deeply, required little care, and bloomed on point each time it was supposed to. I really liked it.

After the freeze, the leaves turned brown and we trimmed it back and we waited.... March, April, and June we watched it. And most of the limbs barely had any new shoots, so the decision was made to empty that flower bed. And now it sits, with nothing planted, just an odd-shaped bed full of dirt and a few scraggly roots that still need to be ousted. It's an ugly empty spot now, where there used to be lovely stately hedge full of bloom and color.

However, as we've begun to think of the new plants, it's been sort of fun to envision a newness in this empty bed. And I'm quite sure we'd never have planted anything new had the old plants not died. That same bush would have sat there forever, and that would have been fine with us. But the freeze came, the hard freeze of the century, and emptiness has now resulted. I'm sure you can relate...

You've always had children in your house, and now suddenly the hallways are quiet. You were always with that group of "best friends forever" and you're not quite sure what happened, but they're gone. You served and you gave to this and to those, and life has changed overnight and those opportunities are gone. And here you sit looking out your window at an empty bed full of dirt, wondering what happened and how it happened so quickly.

A few weeks ago, we finally made the decision to replant this bed and we started shopping and dreaming up our new "look" and driving around neighborhoods for inspiration. The empty bed is

now going to be filled with something new, take on a whole different look, and provide us with something fresh that will fill the void.

I'm always learning from the everyday things about how life works in the spiritual setting as well. Sometimes it just takes a hard freeze to knock out the old, empty out the pot, and provide an empty bed for replanting. It's not pleasant, it probably never would occur without outside forces, but the emptying is not always a bad thing.

In fact, like I said back up at the top, God doesn't leave us empty. In Ephesians 3 we are told that He fills us with the fullness of Him. Romans 15 offers us the hope of being filled with joy and peace. And Psalm 126 speaks of mouths filled with laughter (I'll take that one!)

Here's a prayer I read from Rachel Wojo for all of us who are staring at an empty flower bed, wondering what's next, and sighing over what was...

A Prayer for When I Feel Empty

Dear Father,
I humbly come before you
With hollow heart and barren soul.
Wondering how life can be so full
And I can feel so empty.
I poured out all I had today...
and left no reserves of my own.
But I'm exactly where You want me to be-
Empty of self.
And now I'm asking you to make me
Full of you.
I need you to flood the dry places
and fill the vacant spaces
So that I can overflow with your love
And give again.
Amen



MARRIAGE

In This Together – I Pick Us – by Bekah Holland

By the time you're reading this, I will have just celebrated my 15th wedding anniversary. 15 years? Really? It seems like just yesterday and also like 3.7 billion years ago. We have lived what feels like many lifetimes in our years together. In some ways we have.

These days, I find myself remembering back to that 25-year old girl who walked down the aisle toward the rest of her life. She was so bright and shiny. She'd had her share of pain, heartbreaks, yes, but still, she walked straight to that handsome man waiting for her, and saw only his perfect smile that gave her butterflies and eyes that looked at her like she was the most beautiful person in the universe (for the record, he still does both of those things). The future was theirs for the taking. Full of promise, adventure and dreams.

That girl was an idiot. I had seriously read at least two dozen, too many novels about happily-ever-afters. I didn't know what it would feel like to get pregnant three months after our wedding when we planned to wait a few years. I didn't know what it would feel like to live through miscarriages, addiction, depression and anxiety, job losses, picking and choosing which bills we could skip for a bit so we could eat and have electricity. I didn't know it would hurt so bad to be unable to fix things that were out of my control. I made a lot of mistakes at the beginning (and middle, and probably future) of my marriage. We both did. We said things that never should have been said and couldn't be taken back. We pulled away when we should have walked toward each other. We dealt with things on our own, just trying to fight our way through to a little bit of sunshine. Add a couple of kids and a mountain of bills, we lost our way from time to time. Unmet expectations, pain from the past and an unsure future left us existing in two different worlds. And I'll be honest, there were times I did not think there was any way we were going to make it. But somehow, every time we hit another tough place, we'd eventually start crawling our way back into the light, and toward each other.

Could we have done things differently? Most definitely.

Did we learn from any of our (many) mistakes? I hope so.

Where are we today? Somewhere easier to navigate.

We ask for what we need. "I need space. I need a hug. I need you to stop chewing so loudly so I don't have to find a place to bury a body." We listen to each other talk about the same stories, or topics and still laugh in the right spots. We sometimes watch the same shows on repeat because the characters make us feel connected (or old recorded games because LSU football is life for half of us). We finally realize we are not dress-up and go-out-to-a-fancy dinner kind of people. We are order-food-from-a-local restaurant and eat-it in-our-sweatpants on the couch kind of people.

We cut each other and ourselves some slack when life gets messy. We grab takeout after a crappy day and tell each other that queso is, in fact, a healthy choice, given there are vegetables in it, and that cupcakes count as a breakfast food because there are eggs in them. We try to remember what fills the other's cup and find ways to do that more. We quit with the expectations of what this life we've created is supposed to look like. In fact, if you would have asked me years ago what we would be doing on a milestone anniversary like number 15, I would have told you we'd be on a trip, a long overdue honeymoon, or giving lavish gifts. What

are we actually doing? Well, my husband is getting vaccinated and I'm taking our 10 year old on an overnight trip with his Cub Scout pack. *Romantic, right?*

Romance is great and all, and I still swoon over a good love story, but I'll take a partner who works endlessly to become the best version of himself over bouquets of flowers and expensive dinners any day of the week. I love walking hand in hand with him on a romantic stroll through Costco, and I love it when he presses pause on whatever is going on just to drive me to the store so I don't have to walk from my car in the rain. He makes a killer margarita when I've had a bad day (they are also delicious on good days, in case you are wondering) and sends me up to take a bath when I get snippy.

We are far from perfect. We still have to work through things. We sometimes still say the wrong thing at the wrong time and have to remove our foot from our mouth. But in our work-in-progress life, the one that we'll be working on for the next however many years we get together, he's the one I want to work along side of, find missing socks with and sneak snacks upstairs with, even though we've forbidden food outside of the kitchen. He's the one I want to argue over the best vacuum cleaner with and sit in separate rooms and send snarky texts with when UT and LSU play once a year.

And it's because our mess, our family, our life, is ours. And I'll pick us every time.

"Marriage is not just spiritual communion. It is also remembering to take out the trash."

Joyce Brothers

Date Night Fun – Find a Game – by Marcy Lytle

It's August. It's probably hot. Patio dining might not be ideal. Neither is a game of mini golf, because of humidity and mosquitos. And even picnics are not inviting, because the weather just isn't that kind of weather for picnicking. Finding a game to play/enjoy might be just the thing for date night fun this month. And these can be played at home, at a coffee shop, by yourselves, with another couple, or whatever fits your lifestyle and desires! Make sure you give and take with this option, and discuss what kinds of games you like to play...before you choose.

Simple Trivia – We were gifted a box of trivia cards called Bless Your Heart. We recently took them on a weekend trip and enjoyed reading the cards and playing. We just picked 20 cards each, read the question, and if we got it right, we went again. First person to finish the 20 questions wins. This is an easy game to play while sipping on lemonade and shortbread cookies. Any trivia set of cards will do. Choose options for each month!

<https://www.amazon.com/Bless-Your-Heart-Questions-Southern/dp/1984826085>

Battleship - Remember this game as a kid? Why not play it as adults, as couples? It's a fun, no-stress, type of competition, and it can be just as fun as a couple, as it was when you were 10. Set up the game, place your ships, and start guessing. It might be fun to watch a war movie after the game is over. Be sure to include a tub of popcorn for the game and the movie night!

https://www.amazon.com/Hasbro-A3264-Battleship-Game/dp/B00C0ULS3G/ref=sr_1_6?dchild=1&keywords=games+for+two&qid=1625733800&sr=8-6

Video Games – If you don't want to stay home, visit a local arcade at an off-time when the teens won't be there, and enjoy. It might be a Sunday afternoon. Decide before you go how much you'll spend, and then enjoy every minute. I love Skee-ball. He loves tossing the basketball. We both love the old game PacMan. It's not cheap, but it's a fun way to spend the bucks on something different than dinner and a movie. And spend the tickets you earn together to buy yourselves a treat in the store – even if it's just a bag of candy.

A Puzzle – “How is a jigsaw puzzle a game?” you might ask. Make it a game of sorts by using a few strategies as you begin. We recently took a 300 piece puzzle on a trip and were able to put it together in one evening. We turned all pieces over and grabbed the edge ones (I suppose most people do this.) But then we somewhat sorted scenes. And then we divided the picture into his half and mine. Once we had the frame of the puzzle, we then worked on specific scenes. And part of the time we talked, and another part of the time we listened to tunes. Check out this nostalgic puzzle for an option and figure out your own strategy for putting it together. You could even time yourselves! Enjoy a tray of snacks while you puzzle!

https://www.amazon.com/Bits-Pieces-Friendly-Service-Americana/dp/B01LX47WJL/ref=sr_1_28?dchild=1&keywords=riverboat+puzzle+350+piece&qid=1625734570&sr=8-28

Four Game Fun – Pick four games you have (maybe a card game, a board game, a video game, and a game with dice like Yahtzee). Set up a card table and prepare four different snacks (popcorn, dark chocolate covered nuts, sliced peaches, and carrot sticks/dip – one snack for each game.) Figure the time you have for the date, say two hours. Then you'll play each game for 30 minutes and see who's winning at the end of each game – then start the next. Fun!

What's your favorite game to play as a couple? When's the last time you played it? Maybe it's time to play it again...

After 40 Years – Breakfast Outside – by Marcy Lytle

We rarely eat breakfast together. I'm an early riser and a hungry person at 6am, and he's a sleeper and not in a hurry to eat at all. So most days, we eat breakfast separately. However, when we travel on vacation or even just a weekend away, we eat breakfast together. But here's the deal...

I am not a breakfast lover. I don't like eggs, and most menus include eggs on breakfast entrees. And when I then choose pancakes, I feel too full. So I'm not one to choose to eat breakfast while we're traveling. I'm happy with a small muffin and a piece of fruit, or granola. He, on the other hand, loves all of the entrees from which to choose, enjoys his coffee (I despise this drink), and breakfast out is one of his favorite meals of the day!

On a recent getaway, we had two mornings where we had breakfast together outside on the back deck of the cabin where we were staying. I had brought a blueberry loaf which we sliced and had with watermelon the first morning. And the second morning, we cubed that loaf and made parfaits with granola, blackberries, apples, and Cool Whip.

Yes, I got up early as per my usual habit, but I drank a large glass of water, read a few magazines and tamed my routine-driven self to wait another hour or so for him to wake up, so that we could eat together. He didn't mind not having any eggs, but was happy to help prepare what I'd brought, and help me set up our breakfast "date" out back each morning.

Here's the beauty of our having breakfast together. It was out of the norm, and it was a refreshing change from our work week routine that we follow all the time. We sat outside before it got too hot, and we just listened to the birds, observed nature, and took our time with each bite. We talked and chatted and even played a game for a bit, as we lingered over this first meal of the day.

Our pause, our change of routine, our both compensating for the other's likes/dislikes made for a favorite memory for me, from that weekend. Sure, the excursions, the sightseeing, the couple of meals out, and the shopping were all fun. But those two mornings on the back deck alone with him were priceless. They were what one might call Kodak moments.

Maybe you have breakfast with him often. But perhaps there's another activity you two rarely do together because of your differences. Maybe he enjoys strumming the guitar, but you have a hard time sitting still to listen. Or you really like watching a romance movie and he'd rather see action. We all have differences. But laying them aside, coming together with a give and take, makes for a really pleasant connection once in a while.

We are back home now, and I'm back to rising early for my daily granola/cereal before the sun comes up, and he's back to rising a bit later and making his coffee, and his simple fare of yogurt and a banana and pomegranate juice at his own pace.

But we always have another weekend coming up or a getaway, and we will for sure connect again over breakfast at the table...or outside among the breezes...and create more memories for sure. And I can't wait until we do.

For Better or Worse - Love like Jesus – by Kaelin Scott

LOVE.

What comes to mind when you hear that word? A warm, fuzzy feeling? Flowers and romance? Hearts and fancy dates?

Love can be all those things. But it's also so much more.

We all know that Jesus died on the cross because He **loved** us so much. But do we really stop and think about what that means? Because it wasn't a warm and fuzzy feeling that held Him there. It wasn't a romantic gesture. It was a deep, passionate desire for you and me to be free. It was a willingness to put us before Himself, because He couldn't imagine a future without us. It was a giving over of Himself, because He didn't consider His life more important than ours.

Wow. What a picture of love.

What would happen, I wonder, if we loved our husbands like that? What if we gave all we had for them, each and every day? If we poured ourselves into cherishing their hearts? What a difference a love like that could make.

And aren't we supposed to use Jesus as a guiding example in marriage? Of course, we are. Yet how often do we fall drastically short of the mark? Nobody will ever be perfect. Not you or me or our husbands. But we can choose to radically love each other. We can choose to put our spouses before ourselves. Not because it's easy or convenient. Not because it feels good. But because that's what Jesus did for us. And that's the kind of love He wants us to have.

It's not enough to *doodle* hearts around our names or plan a special date. That's wonderful, and marriage definitely needs those kinds of things. But we have to love deeper than that. We have to *choose it*. We have to *be it*.

Love is a verb. It's not just a word we say before going to sleep every night. It's an action.

A way to live.
An incomparable gift.

When we choose to love like Jesus, we bring heaven to earth.

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” John 15:12



ENCOURAGEMENT

Firmly Planted - Close Encounters – by Dina Cavazos

Do you remember the 70's movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*? UFOs appear and people all over the earth experience it. Several people, including the main character, played by Richard Dreyfuss, have a vision of a mountain but don't understand why. He's driven to replicate this implanted vision, including with his mashed potatoes during dinner. Hilarious scene! I can relate to that...

I've been creating a prayer garden in my back yard since 2011. The idea started before that, but (ironically) the first "concrete" step was when the concrete was poured. I used all my savings on the slab and pergola, a kind of "all in" statement to God. Over time, my barren back yard has become a haven of shade trees, fountains, plants, art, and messages for little creatures (if they can read!), and people who spend time here. But how, when, and even *if* the *real* purpose—God's purpose—will manifest isn't clear yet. It's a work of faith.

Faith is defined in the Bible as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen". The prayer garden started as a thought, and then blossomed into a vision, but I had to act on it. With prayerful consideration, I believed that God was speaking to me. I decided I would rather stand before him and say "I heard and acted in faith" than say "I heard but didn't have the faith to act." I still have to choose to hold on to that: to believe and act. As I've done so, I see evidence all around me of things that were once not seen except in my God-given imagination.

Through the years, I've had doubts. I've wondered if it was just my own idea after all. I've wondered if the garden is just a place for me and God to interact personally and nothing more. My enthusiasm has fluctuated, and my creative energy has stopped flowing for periods of time; but then something sparks, and the conviction that I "must do this" blazes again. I find treasures for the garden that call my name, and my love of words and plants combined seem to merge together into a harmony of garden praise. It's a story coming together, but the ending is unknown to me.

My heart's desire is for the prayer garden to be a place of close encounters, with God. A place where the boundary between heaven and earth is thin; where beauty and peace allow the reality of God to penetrate the shell we've become accustomed to in our everyday lives; where the Savior of the world touches the need of the world one person at a time. How, when, and if this happens is in God's hands.

In the meantime....I'll keep doing what I do. I just made a frame-like holder to hang a poem in the garden. The materials shown are things I had on hand. Now I get to stroll around looking for the perfect spot to hang it!

Moving Forward - The Zoe Life – by Pam Charro

Life is hard and we all get tired. It can be challenging to feel hopeful and excited about the future. But did you know that God has made it possible for every one of us to be more alive than we've ever been?

Think of it this way:

Jesus' sacrifice made him victorious over everything that steals life from us. Everything that makes us tired or discouraged or faint-hearted or depressed or less than enthusiastic. He conquered all of that, so all that's left is freedom to live in excited, childlike wonder. Now the Zoe Life is ours!

But what is the Zoe Life? It is much more than being biologically alive. It is rich, abundant life that is full of hope and promise. It is deeply fulfilling and free of fear because we know we are here on purpose and we have a right to be here. The curse of negativity has been broken off, and our good, good God has a meaningful and exciting life for us.

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/zoe.html>

Jesus puts it this way:

"But whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." John 4:14

Bubbling over with joy. Brimming with promise. Goodness that just keeps getting better, not just now, but forever. This life has been given to us, a constant hope that whatever lies ahead is going to be amazing. God walks with us into this fulfillment as we continually learn to embrace this truth. Nothing can take away our access into the Zoe Life. It's the highest kind of life God can give. Vibrant. Rich. So, so good.

"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people (that's us, his saints!), and his incomparably great power for us who believe. - Ephesians 1:18

Rooted in Love - Celebrate Your Tribe – by Kaelin Scott

You know those life-changing experiences? The ones you know you'll never forget?

I had one recently. I got to attend a writing conference hosted by my favorite author.

It was an amazing trip. I learned so much about writing, but that wasn't even the best part. The biggest blessing of all was the sheer amount of love I experienced.

There were authors from all over the country at this gathering, and some from farther away. And each one was so kind and encouraging. It was so humbling and inspiring to be in the same room as so many wonderful people. Not only was I in the company of people who love to write, but I was surrounded by people who love Jesus. Behind each of their stories, each of their dreams, He was the driving force.

None of these beautiful people thought they were better or more important than anybody else. We all shared a common passion, and we supported each other's dreams. It was an awesome reminder that everybody's life is different. We can't compare ourselves to each other or compete with each other. There's plenty of success to go around. It's so much more rewarding when we celebrate our tribe. Cheer for each other's victories, knowing that our turn will come.

So many lifelong friendships were cultivated during this trip.

Friendships that have less to do with hanging out and having fun,
and more to do with cherishing each other's souls.

These are my brothers and sisters in Christ, and knowing them means more to me than any bestseller list ever will. I may never see my new friends in person again, but I know without a doubt that I can count on them to be there for me. And that is the most beautiful thing.

While the week was filled with tips and advice geared toward writing, I walked away with something more valuable. I walked away with a heart full of love. At the end of my life, looking back, those are the things that will mean the most to me. Whether I sell 25 books or 25 million, my friends will support me. They will root for me. They will pray for me. They will love me.

Everyone should have friends like that. If you don't have that tribe, I pray you'll find it soon.

“A sweet friendship refreshes the soul.” Proverbs 27:9

Unearthly Thing - Permanent Goodness – by Angela Dolbear

“God is good.”

A phrase I repeat regularly. In emails, social media posts, and requests for prayer.

And I mean it. It's not meant as a flippant feel-good phrase for me.

I truly believe to the depths of my soul that God is good. And He is good all the time.

There isn't a single day that goes by where I don't catch a glimpse of God's goodness. Most days, His goodness overwhelms me, in such a wonderful way.

It's good to know that even when things go wrong, God is still good. Circumstances have no bearing on His goodness. His goodness is part of who He is, it stems from His tremendous love for us. God is love (please see [1 John 4:8](#)).

I am not merely spouting off sweet words here. I can testify to His constant goodness. Here are just a few examples:

- There was a time when our finances were so tight that I had to use the money in our change jar to buy a carton of eggs and laundry soap to get us through the week. But God provided, because He is good.
- I have lived with chronic illness in the form of a not-yet-cured auto-immune disease for the past 25 years. Every morning I ask Jesus for the physical and spiritual strength to get out of bed and have a productive day; hence, I have learned the extremely valuable lesson of dependence on Him. He is good.
- Because of this illness (Systemic sclerosis, or Scleroderma), I have survived a heart attack and a stroke. I have new physical struggles, almost like enemies to me, as a result of these incidents. But they too, are more lessons in dependence on God, pushing me closer to Him, stripping away the lie of self-reliance. He is good.
- I lost my singing voice as a result of the stroke. I have been singing my whole life, and then in an instant, a couple of blood clots in my brain took that away. But only with God's guidance to good vocal teachers and much prayer and persistence did I develop a new voice, which is stronger, more resilient, and with a harder edge to it, which is handy when singing songs my husband and I have written about our experiences. So again, God is good.

Since moving to Tennessee a couple of years ago, I have been unsure about my purpose in the Church. Big “C” church, meaning the body of Christ. The Kingdom of God. This is hard for me to deal with, and feeds my depression like an insatiable dark monster.

I woke up with a heavy heart over the matter a few days ago. As I was taking the kitchen trash out to the big trash container that morning, a beautiful large dragonfly fluttered near me.

I love dragonflies. When I was a little kid, my grandfather used to take my brothers and me fishing at the Lake Oroville Dam, in Northern California. There were always bright red and blue dragonflies flying around. Since they didn't bite, I was okay with them. I became quite fond of them. Like sweet, winged companions.

When I lived in Austin, TX, an unusually large dragonfly with iridescent magenta wings would fly around me whenever I was outside watering my flower boxes, and praying. Usually, by the time I had finished giving the flowers a good soaking to survive the Texas heat, I had received answers to my prayers, or much needed comfort, or both. And then the dragonfly would fly away.

I believe the dragonflies are God's unique marker to remind me of His never-ending presence.

It was the first time I had seen a dragonfly in Tennessee when I saw that one the other day. It had clear shiny wings that were tipped in black. I knew this little creature was a cue to push aside the depression and listen.

I heard God say in my spirit, "Let not your heart be troubled...trust in Me (please see [John 14:1](#)). This is a verse I speak to myself often.

My worry was lifted, and my heart became lighter.

I am grateful to God for His Word. I hope I never fail to hear Him speak it to me.

And I am grateful for His uniquely intimate signal to remind me that He is near, like the dragonfly. I pray God gives you a reminder of His goodness and nearness, something that is special between you and Him.

He never ever leaves you, or me. He is good.

God is always good. Yes and amen.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - I Thought (by Marcy Lytle)

I thought they would have called us to do something, since we initiated last time.

I thought she would have responded by now, I guess she doesn't care.

I thought he would realize what he said was unkind, what a jerk.

I thought she would never stop talking, she's such a nuisance.

I thought he'd call me and let me know, but he never did. That hurt me.

How many times a day do we have thoughts similar to the above? I'd say way too many! And the thoughts don't stop with our fellow humans. We have the same sort of process in our thinking about God.

I thought God would bless me with that. After all, I've been so faithful.

I thought He would have answered me by now, He must not care.

I thought He would speak instead of being silent. Why's God like that?

I thought He was mad at me for my mistake, I feel like a loser.

I thought God would never let that happen to me. I'm so bitter.

Thinking and reasoning and analyzing are all great things we can do with our minds. And of course, thinking about the why and the how and the what-for are normal processes of these minds we've been given. However, as we all know, the mind is also like a runaway train and can be off in a dark forest to never return if we're not careful. Untamed thoughts, thoughts that are embedded in lies or half-truths about others or God, or even true thoughts that leaves us angry, can cause all sorts of woes. Namely, the woe that we can then be lost in that dark forest forever, alone, lost, and unable to turn around.

I've done it. I've gone there. I've often judged someone and found out later my judgment was unfounded and based on partial knowledge about the situation (always a dangerous road!). I've spent a full 24 hours thinking about God and how he "must be" and completely discarded the truth about who he really is!

I suppose that thinking and reasoning is what sets us apart from the animals. But thinking and reasoning is addressed so many places in the Word. And in Philippians is the most common passage I've heard that invites us to think on good things, true things, honorable and noble things, praiseworthy and excellent things. If he tells us to think these things, then it must be possible to do so. But these thoughts will be obscured and hidden behind the dark trees of the forest to which we've run, if we're not careful.

So what's the solution to the runaway thoughts we have on a daily basis?

Just don't think so much. Observe, raise your eyebrows if you must, but stop the train before it leaves the depot. And fill your boxcars with all the good thoughts they can hold before pulling out for your day's destination.

I promise you, the track of thinking will then lead you to the light, and the view out the windows will be glorious.

FRESH THYME - Out of the Way – by Marcy Lytle

Maybe you've already seen the series *The Crown*, as it seems I'm way late in watching it. I'm really enjoying the story, and it's one of the few shows that keeps me so intrigued with every single episode. And the episode today was maybe one of my favorite episodes in a series of all time, as it was so moving and beautiful.

The young Duke of Edinburgh has been sent on a world tour for five months away from his wife, the young Queen, and he did not want to go. He didn't want to leave his children, and he thinks quite a few things that are "required" in his position are just preposterous – especially this tour. However, The Crown thought it best that he go, and his wife encouraged him to go as well.

Fast forward a few months and he's tired of the travel, the speeches, he's even been drawn into things he shouldn't be, and the Duke is feeling quite empty inside. The Queen, too, is regretting that he's gone for so long, and she too seems forlorn and sad. And then there's the scene, the part of the story that took my breath away, and the visual that is still with me as I'm writing this piece.

The Duke is on board the large ship, bound to complete the tour on schedule, being run by the Flagship Officer. It is discovered that a tiny boat nearby with a small crew has lost its members, except for the captain, who is in dire need of a rescue. The Duke perks up and states that they must rescue this man, and they do. That alone is heroic, but then the Duke states that they must transport this man back to his homeland. This would take the large ship off course for a few days, and delay the last leg of the tour.

The Flagship Officer states that it would be too much "out of the way" to do this, and they'd done enough already by rescuing the captain of the small boat. That was surely enough, and they could just deposit him somewhere and he could find his own way back home. But the Duke stood firm and made sure that the man got safely home.

Watching the people greet this man when he arrived was beautiful. And seeing the face of the Duke as his empty soul was somehow being refilled as he gave of himself to help another, by going "out of the way" to do so, was so good.

This made me think of the people in my life that have gone out of their way to bless me at different times, take care of my needs, minister to my wounds, and love on me when I wasn't lovable. And I stopped to think about how it's hard to get folks to go out of their way to do much, these days. I feel like it's for one big reason:

We've come to only give when we think we will be rewarded for our giving, noted and thanked for our generosity, and only if the time involved is convenient. I'm among those in this category myself, so often. Giving a little, an hour or so, or a few dollars, isn't bad and doesn't put us out. But going out of our way to disrupt our schedules, help someone "beneath" us, and then go the extra mile to do more than what's expected...well that's a rare thing indeed.

We are told often by Jesus to go the extra mile, out of the way, give our all, and do more than what's expected...actually expecting nothing in return for our labor of love...except the pleasure of knowing we obeyed the Father.

It's something to think about. Life can feel empty and mundane at times, or chaotic and scary. And we often become insular and brooding, like the Duke was. But then, an opportunity arises right near us, one that involves a little muscle and a lot of caring, and we have a choice to help, to reach out, and to do more.

That's all. I'm just still chewing on this scene. I want to watch it again. The actor that plays the Duke (Matt Smith) is really amazing at his facial expressions, and it was evident that something took place that day. A shift, of sorts, and a good shift it was.

All because he stood firm to insist that the larger boat go out of its way to help the smaller boat, and take care to complete the mission of caring for another fellow-traveler in need.

FRESH THYME - Sounds...of Summer

I go for a walk often, down several streets in my neighborhood. And sometimes (more often than I'd like to admit) I talk on the phone, think about a million things, or hurry to get the exercise done so I can get back to work or whatever... until recently. I was walking and felt like I should listen to the "sounds of summer." Here's what I heard:

Birds chirping – they chirp all the time, don't they? It can be so annoying, or it can be a reminder of the One who cares for all living things and gives them daily songs to sing.

Dogs barking – In the distance, behind that fence, over on the other street, someone has a pet that's alerting the owner that they are hungry, someone's near, or they see one of those aforementioned birds.

Squirrels scampering – They rustle hurriedly through the branches of the trees when I walk by, to escape my nearness. That's okay. I don't want to be near them, either. Those pesky things dig in my plants and destroy my backyard cushions.

Wind blowing – I love watching the effects of the wind when it blows through the trees and knocks the dead leaves loose. That sound of leaves rustling from the wind is reassuring that the air is not stagnant, and a new season is near.

Neighbors chatting – Two guys were in a driveway talking car stuff, and one of them waved as I passed by. The voices of people outside their homes, having conversations, means people are connecting, and that's nice.

Lizards scurrying – A pretty big lizard skirted under a bush when I walked by one particular house. I don't like lizards and I'm happy that the noise of my feet made him run the other way. Most creatures are more afraid of us than we are of them. I must remember that.

Rooster crowing – There's a farm just a few blocks from our house, and the path I walk leads me right by it, where a rooster might crow. It's a familiar sound and one that somehow brings comfort that country animals are awakening to the new day and alerting the neighborhood.

Cicadas - Oh, those summer bugs that buzz around in the trees. I guess that's what they are, and one can hear them any afternoon. They remind me of those old movies with kids walking down dusty lanes toward town to get an ice cream cone.

What have you heard recently? I could have listed cars honking, trucks passing, and other city noise, but I chose to focus on the sounds of the summer from nature and people. When I walked and listened, instead of talked and wondered, I came back from my walk smiling instead of weary.



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

September 2021



TIPS

The Dressing - September Sweaters – by Marcy Lytle

It's time to start thinking about sweater weather. Maybe you live where it's already cool enough to wear them, but here I'm still just shopping for new ones and thinking about wearing them! I love sweaters of all kinds, and actually keep a stack for all year – because I freeze in side when the air-conditioning is on. A month or so ago, I purchased several sweaters on Amazon, and a couple from Urban Outfitters, and really like them...so here they are!

Gray and Fuzzy – Gray is a neutral in my closet for winter. It can be worn with SO MANY things, and this comfortable fuzzy one might be a sweater that I live in all season. A simple front tuck is an easy way to wear it for a day at home working, or a shopping spree in town.

Pink tunic – I only like pink in small doses, but the sleeves and the length of this tunic made me order it. It's going to be so fun to style this with brown, gray, navy, denim and more.

Cross front – This criss/cross sweater allows me to wear any number of graphic tees underneath, a half tee, or a tank, depending on my mood and the rest of my outfit. A pretty necklace will elevate the look for a date night out.

Cropped and belted – This one cropped look, with a tank under and belt over, is sporty, cute, and fun. I'd wear this with the jeans or a skirt and booties. I think it's so versatile!

Orange block – What a fun long cardigan style sweater in this fall hue of orange. This sweater is a bit heavy and super cozy. It's cute over a t-shirt for a sporty look, but really elegant over a dress with a belt, for a dressy look.

Caramel waffle – I LOVE this color in the fall, and I LOVE waffle weave fabric. This sweater is light enough to wear belted, so I am! In two different styles altogether!

The ski sweater – Supposedly, these are in this fall and I'm happy about it! This is quite bulky and warm, but I was drawn to it because of the rich colors. I'll wear it for long walks, take with me on trips, and wear it and smile!

Gold crochet – The picture at the top is a gold crochet style sweater, great for this transition time, worn over a tee with a skirt, or jeans. I have a few crocheted cardigans that are really one of the best items to have. Super easy to pack, they can be dressed up or down, and they're not too hot.

What about you? Are you a fan of sweater weather?

Seven for You – The Great Gadgets

It's that season for all the aromas of pumpkin and spices in the kitchen, so we asked our panel to share with us any gadget that they really love using in the kitchen. After all, I want to know of anything I'm missing in my kitchen drawer, don't you? And since Christmas will be here before we know it, this list might be handy when thinking of gifts to give, or ones to put on our lists! Hope you enjoy our list, and find something you want. If you have your own, share in the comments at the end!

Lemon squeezer cup – I have a lemon squeezer, the kind where you place the lemon inside, and the juice falls into a separate bowl. However, I recently found this cute gadget that has the little measuring cup attached. So I can squeeze the lemon and save the unused juice, and measure it out as I need it!

I also love my food processor. I have been surprised at how many friends don't own one. I use it for making hummus, especially, which tastes so good made at home! It's great for making homemade pesto, as well.

I recently purchased a meat chopper after watching a chef on Instagram. What a game changer! It's great for breaking up ground meat/turkey while cooking. Works great!

https://www.amazon.com/OXO-Citrus-Juicer-Measuring-Strainer/dp/B01B7HSI76/ref=sr_1_16?dchild=1&keywords=lemon+squeezer&qid=1627930058&sr=8-16

https://www.amazon.com/ideas/amzn1.account.AFGMY23AF4JI2JNTTWLXIE3ZJVCQ/2UQOQY5CDAW0Q?type=explore&ref=idea_cp_vl_ov_d

My favorite kitchen gadgets are my cutting boards, salad servers, and hot plate trivets. These may seem like odd favorites, and they are. What I love about them is that I have made them my kitchen decor! Several years ago, I was redoing my kitchen and could not decide where to store my hot plate trivets. Then an idea hit me. What if I store them on the wall as decorations? I use them daily and they look modern enough to hang. Then I thought about cutting boards. So, I shopped for some that would work as decor and that I could hang. I found some that were perfect and in a great color. I also hung my salad servers that I got in Hawaii. Voila! My kitchen was redone and resourceful. - Carole

I don't bake a lot but I do have some favorite kitchen gadgets. My new one is my air fryer - I love it! It cooks things in half the time and I don't have to turn on my oven. I rarely fry in oil so this is yummy since the food tastes fried (at least to me it, does.) I also love my crook pot for the fall. It's so easy to put a whole chicken in or roast for when the cooler temps get here. – Melissa

https://www.amazon.com/COSORI-Electric-Reminder-Touchscreen-Certified/dp/B07GJBBGHG/ref=sr_1_3?dchild=1&keywords=cosori+air+fryer&qid=1627932959&sr=8-3

https://www.amazon.com/All-Clad-SD700450-Programmable-Oval-Shaped-6-5-Quart/dp/B0007SXBUQ/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=all+clad+crock+pot&qid=1627933005&sr=8-1

This little whisk is under \$10 on Amazon, but it's my fave! I make my own yogurt and I use this to blend all the ingredients, or to make sauces and gravies. It gets into the corners or rounded areas. Actually bought two! – Debbie Haynes

https://www.amazon.com/OXO-Grips-Gravy-Sauce-Whisk/dp/B0817KZWLX/ref=sr_1_14?dchild=1&keywords=whisk&qid=1627930017&sr=8-14

I only have one favorite gadget right now and it's our new Breville Smart Oven Air Fryer. It doesn't heat up my kitchen and because it's only my husband and I at the moment, it's all we use besides our cook top. It cooks and airfrys quickly and efficiently, taking up very little room in the kitchen. Really like it. – Tanya

https://www.williams-sonoma.com/search/results.html?words=breville%20smart%20oven%20air%20fryer&Kenshoo=k_CjwKCAjw9ailBhA1EiwAJ_GTSmbRayV9FyDD2xb1iXYJxvplktijcGiJ9aHJKujXhwxUzAUkP1RM5hoC-RoQAvD_BwE_k&cm_ven=NonBrandSearch&cm_cat=Google&cm_pla=NonBrand_Search_Breville_Exact&cm_ite=breville%20smart%20oven%20air%20fryer&gclid=CjwKCAjw9ailBhA1EiwAJ_GTSmbRayV9FyDD2xb1iXYJxvplktijcGiJ9aHJKujXhwxUzAUkP1RM5hoC-RoQAvD_BwE

I've had this cool gadget for years. It's used to butter corn cobs! You put butter in the square and press down on the lever to push the butter through the holes.

At this particular time my two favorite kitchen gadgets are the Pampered Chef Mix and Chop. It's the absolute best tool I've ever had to help break down my hamburger meat into bite size pieces. (I'm posting gadgets more than once if they were submitted – because they must be good!) My second favorite kitchen item is my Nostalgia My Mini Waffle maker. It's perfect when I crave a waffle, and only want a tiny one. I love that it stays on my kitchen counter and takes up very little space!

https://www.amazon.com/Chopper-Hamburger-Premium-Resistant-Smasher/dp/B08JKXDFQ9/ref=sr_1_1_sspa?dchild=1&keywords=pampered+chef+mix+and+chop&qid=1628593819&s=home-garden&sr=1-1-spons&psc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUFQN1NSMkZBNIRESFAMZW5jcnlwdGVkSWQ9QTAxMzI2ODQyNjVIM0JVNDMwM1RHJmVuY3J5cHRIZEFkSWQ9QTA2MDczMjhYT1hLSkk0VE05UjImd2lkZ2V0TmFtZT1zcF9hdGYmYWw0aW9uPWNsaWNrUmVkaXJlY3QmZG9Ob3Rmb2dDbGljaz10cnVl

https://www.amazon.com/Nostalgia-MWF5AQ-Personal-Electric-Quesadilla/dp/B07WNXSB3D/ref=sr_1_3?crd=3DIA33Z6OBVZN&dchild=1&keywords=nost

[algia+my+mini+waffle+maker&qid=1628593856&s=home-garden&prefix=nostalgia+my+mini%2Cgarden%2C386&sr=1-3](https://www.google.com/search?q=algia+my+mini+waffle+maker&qid=1628593856&s=home-garden&prefix=nostalgia+my+mini%2Cgarden%2C386&sr=1-3)

During my “minimalist phase” I purged my kitchen of many gadgets. However, this little measuring cup made the cut and has become a favorite tool. It is easy to see the markings from above and easy to store. Sometimes simple is better.

https://www.amazon.com/OXO-Grips-Angled-Measuring-Clear/dp/B00FYL4MPY/ref=asc_df_B00FYL4MPY/?tag=hyprod-20&linkCode=df0&hvadid=193129986239&hvpos=&hvnetw=g&hvrnd=138686333709233522&hvpone=&hvptwo=&hvqmt=&hvdev=c&hvdvcmld=&hvlocint=&hvlocphy=9028263&hvta rgid=pla-335441694444&psc=1

Three Moms – Struggles with Fear – by the Cousins

Mom of Three

This is a huge topic – mom fears! I honestly try not to entertain fear. However, one fear is that when I'm not with my kids they might be hurt or end up sick, or have to go the hospital, when I'm not around. I remember after having a miscarriage, the first few years of my son's life I was really nervous to leave him anywhere. We kept him with us a lot. That was definitely hard and that fear came up again when they started school, and any time they are out from under my "protective umbrella." I have to take those thoughts captive and pray before I drop them off, just a simple prayer that realigns my thoughts. This also allows me to enjoy what I'm doing without them.

A second fear I've had was in this past year with Covid. I wasn't so much afraid of us being sick, but the realization that we are not promised tomorrow, and to not be anxious, and yet we risk things every day by driving, swimming, etc. But the idea of being sick from a virus was so much "in our face" that I felt scared, because of the unknown. This fear even affected my sleep. When my daughter dreamed about what she wants to be, the what-ifs bothered me. But yet I want her to continue to dream! I even remember struggling with this fear as a teen, worrying that I might not get married before the end of the world. Teaching my children how to dream and also teaching them to not worry or live in the future, but to live in the present, is hard. I want them to be dream, I want us all to not be afraid to live. Reality is before us, but listening to the Lord is, as well. I've seen this fear in my kids a bit, in the past year, as well. I don't want my fears to be in my kids.

A third fear that isn't so much a problem now, but when my husband lost his job or money is stretched thin, I worry about not having funds for the bigger things my kids want to do – like trips and fun. And then I think about them being grown and having missed out on these fun things because of money. This goes along with the Covid experience, that we would be so afraid to not go out and do things. I've had to get out of the fear of not having enough. Sometimes, when I get money I want to spend it, out of fear of losing it again.

I deal with these fears by talking with my husband – he's so good at being calm. I have learned to ask for help with the budget, when I need help. I've had to give my fears to my husband and to the Lord, because they both carry well when I don't! With all of the changes in our live, this has been a big deal to allow someone else to lead and carry, so that I can rest in knowing the Lord has us and provides. Just like when he provided manna daily, he provides for us the same way. I also turn on worship music to reset my mind. And the Word, especially Philippians, is my favorite. I can do all things through Christ – if I have little or a lot – I'm good! And finally, I talk to my mom and dad, and I know they pray. A few close friends help me, as well, by setting me straight or praying for me!

Mom of Two

Fear. That's a big word. There are many moments where I have been fearful. But, in general, I'm not a very fearful person. I do have concerns that keep me up sometimes or might consume my thoughts on how to tackle. Those are real, for sure. I think my concerns for my kids will change in different seasons. For example, as newborns I worried about if I was feeding them enough, are they breathing, will I break this baby, etc. But as they've grown, there have been fears that have left and new ones have come in...

My daughters are almost 3 and 5, my biggest fear is that they might not know the Lord. If there might be a possibility I would not spend eternity with them is fearful for me. I combat that by knowing and reading scripture that He is the one that transforms, and He can use me as a vessel, but God has my daughters – they're his. I'm to do the best I can do as a mom, by showing them Christ's love, reading the Word, praying with them, surrounding them with other believers. But in the end, the most security comes when I know I serve an amazing God that can touch them, even at their young age.

The second fear comes from the news, hearing of kids with illnesses like cancer, or young lives taken too soon. Every so often, I fear I might lose my kids too early. God only knows the future. Again, I go to Him and know that the Lord has a perfect and good will for each of my girls. He allows me the opportunity to be with them, but he has a good plan and story for them.

A new fear that has started to creep up is how to prepare them for the school years, as my oldest starts kindergarten soon. Do we choose private, public, or Christian-based schools, or where should she go? Teachers and cultures and friends, and all the things. We want to guide her in the right direction. Again, all fears I take to Him.

Fear is a liar, it is not from God. We might feel like we're a failure or overwhelmed, but we can give our fears to Him. That is the biggest and best way I combat fear. Talking to my husband is also helpful, and expressing how I feel, helps as well! God always give me peace in every season, and I love Him for that!

Mom of Four

One subject of fear is in the area of our physical health, making sure we are taking care of bodies. A few years back our daughter had severe stomach pains, landing in the ER several times. We finally discovered it was a gut issue from antibiotics and what we ate, even though we had always tried to eat healthy. So we have tried to all make better decisions with food choices, regarding sugar intake, and having fruits and vegetables each day, as well as getting exercise. The kids also take probiotics daily.

The second is purity, having a healthy view of sex for my children. Our culture presents an unhealthy view of sex and marriage. I want them to not see it as something bad, but as something beautiful in God's design. We have started *God's Design for Sex* books with our kids, which are age appropriate as our kids grow. Things like sex and movies, etc. are addressed. My hope is that when they hit puberty and start to encounter the challenges of dating, we can talk through each thing then as well!

Finally, I want to have wisdom on handling technology. Parental controls are present, but sometimes things just pop up in commercials or ads. I want my kids to grow in discernment and guard their eyes, honoring God in what we watch. Our oldest has a Gabb phone for just texting and calling. There's a balance between guarding and shutting it all off and training and preparing them for exposure in the world. Trying to do both!

In the Kitchen – No-Bake Snacks – by Marcy Lytle

School is back in session, hopefully cool temps are coming and it might be a busy time of the year for many of us. We want snacks, but we don't want all the trouble it takes to mix and bake, and don't want the store-bought stuff with added ingredients. So...we want easy snacks to make at home!

I love taking snacks to the movies, packing them for picnics, and just having on hand when I'm hungry in between meals!

Here are seven of my faves:

Popcorn with mix-ins:

- Popcorn
- Caramels
- Burnt peanuts
- Dark chocolate covered almonds
- Peanut brittle

Just pop the corn, salt it with pink salt, then add in the chopped mix-ins. If you're packing it, you might want to keep the mix-ins separate until time to eat, so the chocolate won't melt.

Three-Nut Mix:

- 8 oz Marcona almonds, roasted
- 8 oz roasted and salted pistachios
- 4 oz pecan pieces
- $\frac{3}{4}$ c sugar
- 1 T vanilla
- $\frac{1}{4}$ c maple syrup
- $\frac{1}{4}$ c water
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp kosher salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp black pepper

Preheat oven to 350. Combine all the ingredients in a large bowl and stir til completely coated. Spread out evenly on a parchment lined baking sheet. Bake until sugar begins to melt, about 7 minutes. Remove from oven and stir, then bake another 7 minutes. Cool the nuts and place in sealed bags or container.

Olive Hummus & Pita Chips:

- Store-bought or homemade hummus
- Kalamata olives
- Pita chips (HEB brand are the best!)
- Carrot sticks

This sounds simple, but adding Kalamata olives into your plain hummus adds SO MUCH flavor. And with the right pita chip (you can even make your own – make sure they're crunchy not hard!) This is a dip to die for.

Ham Skewers w/Dip

- Thinly sliced ham
- Cubes of cheese (we used Brie)
- Large green olives
- French's Honey Mustard dipping sauce
- Homemade dill pickles (get a farmer's market!)
- Dark chocolate and those nuts!

Fold up some ham and thread on skewer with cheese and olives. Add the dipping sauce, and the other things alongside. So yummy.

Quinoa Salad with Crackers

This was a great no-bake snack/supper (except for the quinoa) we took to a recent concert in the park. It's so good, makes a lot, and tastes even better the next day! You could totally bake the quinoa ahead of time, so the salad then can be made in a snap!

- Cooked quinoa
- Chopped celery
- Chopped red onion
- Shredded carrots
- Can of black beans, rinsed and dried on paper towels
- Dried cranberries
- Olive oil, lemon juice, salt and pepper for the dressing

There are no measurements, because you can just add the ingredients – as much as you need – for this delicious combo. Combine the quinoa, celery, onion, carrots and black beans...then stir in some cranberries. Toss with the dressing. Keep in fridge until time to enjoy.

Ice Cream Sandwiches

These were a hit! And so easy to just have the ingredients on hand, take them out, and let each one make their own, or you can make a variety and set out!

- Lacey Cookies (we got these from World Market)
- Four small tubs of unique ice cream flavors

You'll want to set the ice cream out a few minutes before assembling, so that you can then spread the ice cream. Then if not eaten right away, you'll want to freeze (but not too long) and then eat.

Tried and True – Table Runners – by Marcy Lytle

I have a full drawer of table runners. I'm thinking our grandmothers had full drawers of tablecloths to cover the entire table. Maybe you have both, or neither. But I thought I'd share a way to change up the dinner table often, to make that place more inviting and cozy and cute. And it all starts with a table runner. You can find these at discount stores, on line, at Target, or most anywhere that sells linens...and if you buy them off season, you can get a bargain!

Why a table runner? A runner takes a plain table and elevates it to a piece of art with the runner as the backdrop. And the fun thing is that there are table runners for every season, and it's an inexpensive way to decorate when the seasons change.

How do I keep them clean? Many can be spot-cleaned, others can be washed, and still others can be removed if need be for the dinner. When we serve buffet-style, we push the runner to the back of the table and line candles on it, but keep the food off of it. Sometimes we place a mat under our plate so food doesn't fall on the runner.

What should I place on the runner? There are lots of ideas. Remember that three grouped items often are pleasing to the eye, as well as different heights, color and texture:

- A plant on a stand, with a candle or two
- Fresh cut flowers in a unique antique vase
- Lemons or oranges or apples in a pretty wooden bowl
- A wooden cutting board with a candle and a succulent on top
- A group of three lanterns of varying heights
- A circular or rectangle shallow basket with a candle, wooden beads, and a book on top
- A long skinny bread bowl with small gourds or greenery
- A large clear vase with tall branches cut from your yard
- Seasonal or holiday décor
- Several tapers in different holders of different heights

Where will I store my runners as I collect them? Have a designated drawer or large basket or shelf where you fold and stack them. This way it's easy to see which one you want to use for which month/season. You could even drape them over hangers in a closet.

How do I choose a color or style? Stand back and look at the room where the table is located, make a note of the colors in that room. Then when you shop, look for different styles of runners, depending on your taste. Some have texture like fringe or patterns like flowers, or artwork of the season like pumpkins. Choose one that goes with your color scheme, and even take a picture of the room before you shop, to take with you.

How often should I change out the runner? Once a month, if you wish! Or at least once a season. It's fun to have a runner for fall, Christmas, the winter season after Christmas, maybe one for Valentine's and one for Easter, a pretty spring runner, one for July 4...and then start all over again when fall begins again.



HOME

Practical Parenting – Three Family Games – by Marcy Lytle

We recently gathered with our kiddos and had a fun evening with food and games. Food is a given, and games are often played on the field or in a gym with friends, but then games at home get pushed aside because there's no time – once school is back in session. However, you can still have family game time often, for special occasions or for upcoming holiday gatherings, and I'm sharing three ideas for you, for the next time "game night" is on the calendar!

Saran Wrap Roll:

You'll need a big roll (or two) of Saran Wrap and several small dollar items, plus some cash, and one pair of big gloves.

The cash prize is the big one (it can be \$10-\$50!) and you start by wrapping it in the wrap, first. Then you take each subsequent item and wrap it in the Saran Wrap several times by wrapping, twisting, changing directions, etc. You continue to add all of the items until you have this HUGE ball full of hidden prizes inside. We had about 35 tiny gifts and a cash prize of \$20. So all in all, it was about \$60 for this game, but everyone went home with several things. Some were adult items (socks, shower cap, Chapstick, etc.) and some were kid items (tiny puzzle, candy, toy, etc.)

Here were the rules: We passed the ball and each one rolled a couple of dice before unwrapping. Doubles = you got to unroll two gifts; Lucky 7 = you can trade what you unwrap for anything anyone else has; and Snake Eyes = you have to unwrap while wearing a pair of ski gloves or mittens.

Oh my gosh, this was great fun! And at the end, after all the gifts were unwrapped and the last person got the cash, we then traded if adults had kid items and vice-versa.

Memory Tray:

You'll need a large tray with about 30 tiny things you gather from your junk drawers and around the house (tiny screwdriver, earring, ticket stub, a peanut, etc. – all small). Each person (or duo, if you play in pairs), needs a pen and paper. And you'll need a list of what all you placed on the tray!

Lay out the items on the tray in no organized fashion, but so that they are all separated and set out for viewing. Gather the family and have them sit in a circle. Give them about 1-2 minutes to view the items, and then take the tray away. Give them another 1-2 minutes to write down all the items they can remember.

Give a prize for the winner...or just bragging rights!

Identify the Scent:

You'll need 10 spices from your cabinet that have quite strong aromas (we also used cocoa, vanilla and other scented spices – fall is great for this.) You'll then need to "disguise" them. We

sprinkled each in tissue paper and placed into jars. Then we labeled each one with a piece of tape on the bottom.

Pass the jars (you do it, so they can't look inside) and let each one sniff and then come up with their guess. The one who guesses the most correctly, wins!

This is a great idea for the fall/holiday season as those spices smell the best. Be sure to throw in some obscure spices they might not recognize!

Enjoy each one, let the older kids put these games together, and then see what other creative family games these inspire for next time!

I Don't Do Teens – There Will Come a Time – by Marcy Lytle

There will come a time when you won't have a Bandaid for that cut.

You'll have to lean on Him to heal your daughter.

There will come a time when you won't have an answer for that question.

You'll have to take it to Him and let him lead your son to the Answer.

There will come a time when her heartache will be your sleepless night.

You'll have to crumble before Him at his feet, and learn to rest.

There will come a time when you're no longer the hand they hold, and you'll cry.

You'll have to hold His hand and let go of theirs, and trust in Joy in that journey.

There will come a time when their rudeness will cut you to the bone.

You'll have to forgive them, and still love them, because they aren't yet grown.

There will come a time when she will do the unthinkable and it will leave a scar.

You'll have to hold her, tell her the truth, then tell her again of His great love.

There will come a time when he may walk away from all that he's learned.

You'll have to pray harder, trust more, and remain ready to welcome him home.

There will come a time when your friend's child will succeed, and yours will fail.

You'll have a choice to rejoice or envy, and trust or flounder. Make the first two.

There will come a time when she'll drive away without you in the seat beside her.

You'll have to pray that He's with her, to protect and guide her.

There will come a time when he will meet a girl, and be alone and tempted.

You'll have to pray that he's reminded and restrained and then refrains.

There will come a time when all you've done will not seem like enough.

You'll have to stand tall, surrender them all, and sit down and watch...

The Goodness of Your God to You and Yours.

An Adage A Day - On the Ball – by Carole Gilbert

It's football season! It's time to "Get on the ball." I've said this idiom many times while raising my kids, mostly literally. We always had one, two, or all three playing some sport or another. And sometimes they were playing multiple sports at once if their grades were straight A's. That was our rule. If you had straight A's, you could play whatever sport you wanted, and as many as you wanted. I have also said it many times when I was not referring to sports but to their behavior. I have even said this to myself, trying to get motivated for something I needed to do.

So, what does this idiom, "Get on the ball," mean? It is thought to have originated from the early 20th century and was first used as a baseball phrase. It referred to the pitcher's technique of handling the ball as he pitched it to the batter. He would "put a spin on it" or "throw them a curveball." He was definitely "on the ball."

Over the years, this idiom evolved and now refers to being on the ball with other "tasks at hand" or with "the thing of importance." It literally means someone or something is good at getting things finished, and when used as a verb it is addressing someone's ability to do just that. In other words, it means to get going with a job that needs to be done. When I think of myself as *on the ball*, I know I've completed a task well or I'm telling myself to get moving on performing a task.

This idiom also brings a favorite thought to my mind of my kids playing soccer when they were little. I have lots of memories of them on the ball but there's something about several four- or five-year-olds all trying to get their foot on one ball at the same time that can be quite entertaining. I always loved to watch them huddle together and chase the ball as it bounces away. I have enjoyed watching them make goals even as they look confused as to why they're doing this. I have seen them jump with excitement over their victory as they kick the ball into the wrong goal. I have seen them walk off the field in the middle of the game because they did not want to play anymore, and I've seen them sit on the sideline refusing to go into the game when it was their turn. And I have also seen their growth and maturity as they learn to play on a team. There's something about being "on the ball" that seems to be good for everyone.

We read of wrestling and boxing in the Bible along with endurance running, but I can only find one verse that refers to playing ball and it's actually about playing in God's court.

It's Isaiah 22:17-18 and it says, "Beware, the Lord is about to take firm hold of you and hurl you away, you mighty man. He will roll you up tightly like a ball and throw you into a large country. There you will die and there the chariots you were so proud of will become a disgrace to your master's house."

This verse helps us know how important it is to be on God's team. Along with this, the bottom line of being on the ball for all of us can be found in 2 Timothy 2:5.

It simply says, "An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules."

We are all God's athletes, and we all know that without God's rules we are already defeated.
"We can't win for losing."

Tiny Living – What a Trip! – by Leyanne Enterline

Oh the adventures of camping!

Not glamping. I'm talking an actual tent in the wilderness for seven days, 45 minutes away from civilization. No clean, running water, no showers or sinks, no electricity, no cell service. Just you and the woods and whatever supplies you bring along.

We have taken a few camping trips within the past few years, but nothing quite like this one or for this long. We typically go for a few days with just our family. This time we brought one of the boys' friends along for an all week fishing trip. I was basically along for the ride as the chef, maid, designated driver for drop-offs and pick-ups, photographer, doctor, prayer warrior... Basically, that's what I do every day, but this time it was just in the woods!

This amount of time in the woods definitely brought on strong emotions. And since we had a friend along, I felt that we really couldn't (or shouldn't) express or let loose like we usually do! It probably ended up better that way! Instead of screaming, "Stop hitting your brother!" It went more like, "Please stop bothering each other. I don't think that's a very good idea. We'll have a much better time if we all stop touching each other and get along." Not how I would typically react, but maybe it was a good way for me to focus on nicer parenting!

Each day brought on new adventures. One wouldn't think much could happen in the woods, but every day something new and crazy did occur! Our first day, as we were setting up, a rainstorm blew through and soaked everything! Luckily, it was a quick shower and our bedding wasn't ruined to start off the trip. I did almost start crying as I thought, "Is this how it's already beginning?" Our next day, we drove into a town to a fly shop to get the boys set up with some local gear and ask for some advice. The local guide must have thought we needed an adventure because he sent us on a wild goose chase up a mountain, down a dirt road into the forest. We gave up looking for this amazing fishing spot and headed on to a much easier route.

Again the next day, we tried one of the guide's wild goose trips and came across the long, lost hippies that the cops were searching for! Not what we expected to see at all! Apparently, this group of about 8,000 meets every year in the woods and doesn't abide by the law, and they were being hunted out. And we found them! They were super nice people. However, it was a bit terrifying to come upon the outlaws! I can't even describe what we saw! This should truly be a book. We quickly turned around and of course passed the cops on our way down! We did not want to be guilty by association! We kindly smiled and waved to the cops as they sped after who they'd been searching for!

As soon as we got back to our camp, a thunderstorm blew in, one that we were not ready for at all! Later we found out that we came during monsoon season and that it would be raining every day from there on out! That crazy storm that blew through soaked our entire tent and everything in it. With the nights getting down in the low 50s we could not sleep on wet bedding. My husband Brian went for the long drive into town to buy a new tent, sleeping bags, and tarps.

Now that we were all nice and dried out, we were off for more fishing adventures the next day! This group of boys did not want to go to the nice lakes that provide everything for their visitors.

No, we had to go trampling through the woods, down mudslides, across beaver dams to get to “the best fishing spots.” Ugh!

This kind of adventure is not what I love, but to see how much fun these boys had and the stories they got to tell made it all worth it! I mean, how many people can say they fished on a beaver dam with the beaver chasing after them swatting his tail at them? Or how many can tell about falling in a hole to get a remote fishing spot, all for the catch of a beautiful speckled trout? There are so many stories to tell that I can’t even fit them all in!

This adventure makes our life in a trailer seem so much less eventful than tent camping. The adventures we had were fun and challenging, but I do appreciate my tiny trailer that comes with a restroom, shower, kitchen, and dry warmth...

A Night to Remember – Hide n Seek – by Marcy Lytle

Do your kiddos still play this game? I'm pretty sure it's a favorite family game in the house, from the time kids can walk and play "peek a boo," to the time kids are old enough to hide well and never make a peep! And since there are lots of verses about hidden and found things in the bible, how about incorporating this fun game into learning about the Good Shepherd?

Preparation: *Set aside time to play traditional Hide n Seek for a few minutes before settling onto the sofa to talk about the fun game. Provide a snack of Goldfish with "hidden" M&Ms or raisins among the fish.*

- What things do you like to keep hidden? (answers might be a diary, toys so little siblings can't break, special jewelry, a gift we're keeping hidden until Christmas, etc.)
- What other things do we sometimes keep from others' view? (now delve deeper...maybe a messy room, a physical injury or scar, when we've disobeyed and broken something, etc.)

Colossian 3:3 says our life is hidden with God – he protects us, covers us, keeps us close, and never leaves us!

- What are the best hiding places in our house?
- Who's the best at hiding? At seeking?
- What things should never be hidden? (any sin or disobedience, our faith in God, our love for others)

Luke 11:33 says the Light of the World (Jesus) should never be hidden away, but rather be very visible so that others can see the Light and come to him!

Hebrews 4:13 says nothing can be hidden from God. He's the best seeker ever!

- Do you like to be the one hiding or the one seeking?

Did you know that there's a verse in Deuteronomy 4:29 that says if we seek the Lord with all our heart and soul, he will be found? That's pretty cool. He never stays hidden away from us, because he's always near.

We are told over and over again in the Lord to seek Him, but it's not because he's hiding away in a corner! To seek means to search for and desire. As long as we continue to look for God and desire to know him more, he gladly appears and says "Here I am!"

- How do you feel when you're seeking for the one hiding and you spot that person?

Psalms 34:14 says to turn away from evil and do good, and to seek peace and pursue it. This means if we have an argument with one another, for example, instead of hiding away and ignoring each other – we should seek forgiveness and make peace.

The game of hide and seek is so fun, especially if we find a hidden spot no one can find, or if we're quiet enough to not be found. And it's SO FUN to find someone after seeking all through the house.

Hiding and seeking is something we all do. And we can always know that God hides us next to him to keep us from evil, and when we seek Him he will always be found. That truth will hold us safe our entire lives!

Let's pray (ask kids to repeat after you)

Dear God, thank you that my life is hidden in you and I'm covered by your love all the days of my life. Thank you that your Light lives in me and I don't have to hide that light under a basket – no! Help me to always let your light shine so that those who seek you may find you. And finally, thank you for your promise that when I seek you and desire you, you are always there to be found with welcome arms wide open!

Love is Not Love: Discerning Logical Fallacies - by Jennifer Lytle

This summer, we decided our son was ready for a Passport to Purity retreat—just Dad and him. Dad and I found Dennis Rainey's *Passport to Purity* in the early years of our marriage during *A Weekend to Remember* retreat. The talk goes through everything a growing boy or girl may want to avoid discussing with their parent. Our son enjoyed the time together but was horrified by some of the scientific information.

Experts encourage "the talk" to be an ongoing conversation from an early age. During one Weekend to Remember, I purchased a pack of books about the body and human sexuality designed to grow with your child. The text for 3-year-olds was easy enough for me to read through regularly. I used the proper terms for human anatomy openly with all of my children from birth, so nothing was out of the ordinary for me. However, when the books advanced and talked straightforwardly about husbands and wives, I found I almost could not read through some parts aloud.

How can I talk to my son about how the world views love when it can be uncomfortable and difficult for me to speak with him about sanctified eros? I don't know the answer yet, but what I do know is that I must. If I fail to talk openly about what is true, he will hear, learn, and believe what the world is willing to put in front of his eyes and ears. When we teach our children Truth, they can grow in their discernment and ability to shake out logical fallacies.

Maybe it was having one boy and one girl. Perhaps it was something else entirely. I do not recall. During the early years of being Mommy, I realized one of my most important messages to teach my children included; boys and girls are different, and it is good! While I feel confident in the seeds I have sown in that area, there are other areas I'm still figuring out how to approach.

One logical fallacy our family has rubbed up against recently is the slogan, *love is love*. The cultural phrase is kind of everywhere. The fact is, it's just not factual. Despite the super cute expression and catchy merchandise the phrase appears on, I feel it is wrong to allow my children to engage with the message if they are unaware that it is untrue, at the least, and in opposition to God's design at worst.

Love is love is in direct contrast to Biblical truth. God is love (see 1 John 4:8). Accepting sin (see 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and Romans 1:32) and coloring it beautiful is not love (see Proverbs 27:6).

A more logical response to the crowd is that all love is not equal. The English language proves inadequate in categorizing love with more precise terms. Regularly, what is infatuation is called love. Affection, too, is labeled love. Consider Greek for accurate distinctions of the English term. Agape includes universal acceptance and empathy for others. Eros underscores physical passion. Philia refers to a deep connection between people or intimacy within the soul.Pragma denotes longevity and commitment, while philautia relates to self-love.

If I go back to the moment of innate understanding of what my children needed to distinguish, accept, and respect their different biologies, perhaps I can find what now needs to be shared again.

One of the things I started doing many years ago was reclaiming the beauty and true symbolism of the rainbow, especially for my daughter. For now, that is what I know to do, but I am prayerful about the next steps.

Have you found a beautiful way to encourage and empower your sons or daughters in discussions that touch cultural trends? I would LOVE to hear about it!

Dear Jesus, please help me navigate this field. Give me discernment and wisdom and favor with my children as I talk with them. Thank you for being present in all of this so I never walk alone. Thank you for being the teacher my children need when my words fail them. Amen.



YOU

Strengthening Your Core - A Random Thought – by Marcy Lytle

What would we do and how would we look, and when would our houses be cleaned, if we never interacted with others? Have you ever thought about this? In other words, is it interaction that prompts us to action? If we had no places to go, people to see, or friends to invite over, would we really take care of things and does it matter, or should it?

Here are my thoughts on the subject:

Would we paint our toenails if when we visit friends, we weren't worried about our ugly feet? I've been about to leave the house before and looked down and gasped! I then grab the nail polish and paint my toenails in the car; much to my husband's dismay, as the smell is strong! But I don't want my half-painted toenails to be seen by anyone!

Would we dust our furniture, if no one ever came to visit? I dust weekly, but I don't look for the places I might have missed very carefully, unless we are having guests. And wow, I've been so surprised when I've seen the sunlight hit the front door just right to reveal a huge dust rectangle under the sofa that I've missed!

Would flowers be snipped and placed in vases, were we not setting a table for family? The answer to this question is yes for me, because I enjoy those flowers myself! But it's definitely something to think about.

Would we even comb our hair or wear makeup, or even brush our teeth (yikes) if we weren't going out among others where we need to be presentable and smell good? I'm thinking the past year of Covid answered that question for a lot of us.

I think the reason I thought on this subject lately is because in talking with friends, I've heard some say that they've become "comfortable" hiding away in their homes, not attending events, and making their new routines in the safety of their confined spaces. All of that can be a great thing!

However, we were made for interaction, fellowship, fun, and friends!

Whether or not we paint our toenails is of no importance, because that's just a personal preference. But it's worth thinking about other things that we do to make our homes and ourselves presentable and attractive to those around us. I personally like having times scheduled for our family to come visit, or for us to attend an event, so that I WILL take the time to see the places that need attention and care for them!

It's hard work to maintain a yard, keep a house tidy and clean, and even to add touches of pretty around so that our places and persons are ready for interaction. I get it. It's easy and even enticing to let things go, until...we have this huge pileup of junk, dust an inch thick, and smells emerging from unknown places...while we hibernate and hide.

Maybe this is a random article on a random subject, but I just wondered about it one day when I was feeling a little down about the surge again of the virus, the call to withdraw once again from public places, and to hunker down.

I'm thinking that it's worth the work and the pretty and the cleaning just to be ready for him, for them, or just for yourself, as you pull up a chair or recline in that space and smile. All because you took time to snip, paint, swipe and rearrange to keep all things you call yours in good order...

Here's to many good times with many good friends in many good places as we head into fall...

Under Pressure – Beautiful Bread – by Debbie Haynes

The bible has so much to say about bread. I remember reading that bread comprised a good 50% of the caloric intake of the Israeli people. That's a lot of bread, but it makes sense, because it was eaten with most every meal. And there are basically three main purposes of bread, as mentioned in scripture:

Bread was necessary for sustenance (Genesis 3:19). God told Adam that growing grain to make bread would be a requirement for life. And we have a built-in hunger mechanism that reminds us that we are dependent upon God, for our food.

Bread draws us together. Abraham shared bread with three visitors, and Jewish tradition calls for breaking of bread at the start of mealtime.

Bread is a covenant relationship with God. The Israelites were instructed to keep 12 loaves of bread on the altar at all times, for the 12 tribes. Jesus broke bread at the Last Supper and said "This is the new covenant..." (Luke 22:20).

Besides the above three purposes, *bread is also connected with hospitality.* When we share meals, it shows that we care about our guests. In restaurants, it's often bread that is shared first and it's a welcoming addition to the table. Sarah used the finest flour to make bread for strangers, David honored the memory of his friend by providing bread to that friend's son.

There is also the mention of bread being given daily to God's people, as he led them through the wilderness. God made sure they never missed a meal for 40 years! And bread/manna was so important that when the daily supply ended, as the people made it to the Promised Land, God told Aaron to measure out a portion of it and place it in a jar. This was to be preserved, so that all future generations could see! Those 12 loaves of bread mentioned before were to be kept in view and replaced each week with fresh ones. I even read that the loaves weighed five pounds each – a visual reminder of God's presence. Can you imagine the aroma of baking bread, to remind them that God was there with them?

There were even grain offerings set up by God in Leviticus, where oil and incense and grain were offered to honor God. Those things were placed on an altar, and again the aroma filled the room. So necessary, to cleans the air from the smell of animal sacrifices!

Moving on to the New Testament, Jesus' death replaced all of those sacrifices, and on the night before the crucifixion, Jesus offered bread to his followers. We still celebrate the bread and the new wine, when we take communion. In fact, in I Corinthians 11:25 it reads that every time we share communion, we proclaim the great sacrifice Jesus made!

What about the account of the loaves and fishes? What extravagant love was shown by Jesus as he made sure there was "more than enough" for all who were hungry. And after this miracle, Jesus told the people that he was available to them any time, because he was The Bread of Life. Just like that manna fell for the people back in the wilderness, now Jesus was sent from heaven to be the daily bread for all eternity.

There are only a few basic ingredients needed to make bread: grain of some sort like wheat or rye (that is ground into flour), water and salt. The grain is symbolic of Jesus' death and resurrection, because the grain dies and sprouts up a new crop. The water is again symbolic of Jesus' provision for all who are thirsty – because he offers rivers of living water. And the salt? Back in II Kings 2:21, bitter water was healed with salt. Jesus offers healing to a dying world, and calls us to do the same by reminding us that we are the “salt of the earth” in Matthew 5.

When we read about bread, eat bread, share bread, and take of the bread in communion, we are reminded that He is here with us. When Jesus walked with two men on the road to Emmaus, it says he broke bread with them and their “eyes were opened.” They then knew him and their hearts burned within them.

Beautiful bread, available for all, filling up the room with the scent of something baking that is good and ready to be enjoyed for all who come...

Life in a Nutshell – That Third Option – by Jill Montz

My daughter, Dotty, is quick to tell people being the child of divorced parents has its perks. Not the least of them being every year she gets to take two vacations. One with me and one with her dad and his family.

Dotty's dad and I don't have a typical divorce agreement when it comes to Dotty. We have never had a set visitation schedule or even set rules around the holidays. We just split our time with her fairly equal throughout the year. Most weeks she spends two or three nights with one parent and then switches over to the other parent's house for the next two or three nights, then back again and so forth. This all works great since we live in the same town. Neither household goes more than a few nights away from Dotty. That is until she goes on vacation with the other parent.

While this may seem like an uncommon arrangement it is the only arrangement we all know...including Dotty. And it works for us and for her, which is the most important thing we can do as co-parents.

The week she spends with me on vacation is my favorite week of the year. We have made some of the best memories during our vacations. However, the week she spends away from me is my least favorite all year. And I know her dad, bonus mom, and siblings feel the same. I am not sure how the other side of Dotty's family copes, but as for me I fill my week with all kinds of activities to make the time go by faster.

I prepare months in advance for Dotty's vacation with her dad. I save the really big, time consuming, and often dreaded work projects for that week. If they require me to move heavy objects, sweat, and get dirty...even better. I hold off tedious paperwork that requires my full attention until then. And my staff is great. They know the drill when it comes to this week and they give me lots of grace and space and understanding as I work like a mad woman. They don't even grumble when I include them in my often less than fun ideas for work that week. They know my momma heart is hurting and they let me soothe it the way I prefer.

I even schedule as many doctor's appointments, teeth cleanings, and haircuts as possible that week. I go for early morning walks with friends and have lunch and dinner with others. I catch up on calls to friends and family I haven't heard from in a while. I catch up on Bible studies, books I wanted to read, yardwork I have been putting off, and even tend to cleaning out my garage, spare room, or storage shed that week.

I get up early and I stay out late. I want to be busy. I want to be exhausted. I pack my schedule as full as possible so my brain barely has time to think about missing my girl. I usually do pretty well for the first three days. By day four and five I am a bit antsy, and then by day six and seven I am almost unbearable to be around.

Perhaps I should also schedule an appointment with my therapist this week but I usually save it for the week after Dotty returns. My therapist knows I am not good with expressing negative emotions. She probably has at least five folders on my need to avoid feeling sad or mad. It's a battle I just don't fight well, yet.

Many people ask me what I will do when Dotty goes off to college and my response is always two options...

Option 1: I will buy a tiny home and move to whatever town she goes to college in. I can open up another one of our family stores there. I feel like every town would love to have a Pecan Shed in it.

Option 2: I will stay very busy that first year. Possibly open up another Pecan Shed store or two. Maybe even train for a half marathon or a tough mudder. By the time she graduates I might be giving Buc-ees a run for their money and training for the Boston Marathon or an Iron Man competition.

Dotty is not a fan of option number one. But I am a little concerned about my health and sanity with option number two.

Perhaps there is a third option. (I think my counselor would say there most definitely is.)

Perhaps I will learn to sit in my sadness. Perhaps I will learn to lean in to the loneliness. Perhaps I will find joy in celebrating her independence and this new phase of life for both of us. Perhaps I will find peace in stillness and rest in God's assurance that all will be well.

This year I did none of option three. But, perhaps, maybe next year I will.

At least that is my prayer.

Healthy Habits – Choose Wisely – by Marcy Lytle

I recently rolled my foot off the sidewalk and it hurt badly! I limped for a few weeks before the pain finally began to subside and I could walk normally again. I also did another crazy thing. I leaned over the console in our car to reach for something in the pocket of the other door and rolled my rib and bruised it – it was even more painful than the foot! Such silly things that happened, and they happen to all of us. But, I've found that some things can be avoided, or at least be thought out, before attempting. And doing so might keep us a bit more healthy and in less pain:

Wear shoes that fit – My shoes I had on were loose. I've also noticed that loose fitting shoes do not bode well in rain – my feet slip right out of them! If shoes are too tight, they cause problem, we know. But so do shoes that are too loose!

Think before reaching – I should have gotten out of the car and walked around instead of reaching so far. Even reaching under a cabinet and straining our backs often ends up in injuries. I've done that, too. If something is too far to reach, we can think and get up and walk to it, instead of trying to be like Gumby and stretch our limbs!

Don't walk and text – We've been told this so many times, but lately I've seen many folks text while crossing a parking lot with cars driving by! Yikes. Not only could a car hit us, but we could step in a hole or on a crack and break a bone. Not a wise decision.

Sleep comfortably – If our pillows are too lumpy or flat, why do we keep them for years and complain about our backs? If our sheets feel scratchy and annoying, we can ask others for good brand suggestions. And if we're constantly hot (or cold) at night, we can adjust the AC or the covers on our beds. I have been guilty of sleeping uncomfortably way too long before finding a remedy.

Use that lotion consistently – I have some heel cream that works wonders. But only if I use it daily. I've told others about it. But if it's not used daily, there won't be results. Same with other potions and lotions. The directions say "use daily" so it's no wonder we're not getting smoother skin, if we only remember to use it once a week!

Stop listening – If he/she talks constantly about others, criticizes you in person, or makes you feel uncomfortable when you're near them, then either tell them or stop the connection. We don't have to sit with people, head home and feel as though we've been dumped on, sat upon, or used. Life's too short to be abused.

Hit the pause button – I'm guilty of going and going all day without stopping and then being a bear (that growls) by evening. Pausing the busy button is never a bad idea, but it's one many of us forget to do, and it shows. If we can't do it on our own, we can phone a friend and ask her to remind us to pause, cry when we're sad, rest and take a nap, walk outside in the sunshine, or any number of things that refresh!

There are many things that cause us ill health, bad moods, or even just cracked skin because we don't choose wisely. I'm watching more carefully where I step and making sure I don't head

out in the rain in shoes that are too big for my feet. And next time something's in that pocket on the other side of the car, I will open my door and walk around. Sounds like a no-brainer...and it is.

Life Right Now – Worth Reading – by Hanna Bouck

Each person leads their own extraordinary life.

I used to think that to be considered one of the lucky living ‘in the extravagant’ I had to have a title. (I blame it on my teeny-bopper love of rom-coms.) Some examples would be “Hannah Bouck: singer,” “Hannah Bouck: actress,” but alas! It would never be, because...I CANNOT sing! And getting up and performing is quite frankly the thing nightmares are made of in my mind.

But, who am I to say that the life I live is mundane? Or the life of the person I walk by in the grocery is dull?

A couple of summers ago, I had taken up a job as an in-home caretaker. My position was simple. It entailed sitting with the client, sometimes staying overnight, but mostly offering companionship. My first client was an 85-year-old lady from England who was in her final battle with cancer. During one shift, when the bulk of my job was over, I enjoyed looking at her walls observing the mosaic of photos and memories of a life that was worth living. Beautiful pictures of a bright-eyed beauty queen, Bible verses coated the walls, and scrapbooks were filled with photos of her church family and love notes they’d written to their dear friend.

On my last night working in her home, she called me into her room before bed and told me, “Holler if you need anything.” (*Ironic, right?* I was there to help her in her moments of need but she still desired to be needed.) She was sitting up with a book in hand and we started discussing what she was reading. She suggested that she didn’t really like it, and that the author had “no depth in the writing.” I chimed in about a book I was reading. She smiled and said, “Now that’s the kind of book I like! A story worth reading.”

But back to people and their lives...

Plainly stated, I think we all have a story worth reading. Words that captivate and a history of WHY we have become. Of course, not all titles of books are initially captivating, so we might glance and then pass them by. Just as we may overlook beyond the covers of who we are, because the title we hold may not be what we thought it should be.

Right now, I find myself in a position of wondering what my book will be about; and to my dismay, more frequently what it is not. Reality is: I probably won’t ever have “Grammy Winning Artist” following behind my name. But you know what?

Hannah Bouck, “living a life of loving people,” *oftentimes baker of bomb brownies*, is a title worth reading in my library.



MARRIAGE

In This Together – In the End – by Bekah Holland

Sometimes, it's nice to be wrong.

No, I haven't been abducted and I'm not signaling for help with this statement. I like being right as much as the next person (unless you ask my teenage daughter...she says I have to be right all of the time). There are some things that I'll dig my feet in and scream loudly into the night until the day I die (like decaf coffee is straight from the devil, nuts do not belong in brownies or ice cream, and tacos are a whole love language, just to name a few). But there are some things in life that I get completely wrong.

For example, I pictured my husband and I being partners in the kitchen. We'd go shopping together or take turns going and we'd serve beautiful meals that the whole family would all eat at the same time, at the same table. This delusion lasted until the first time I sent my husband to the grocery store by himself and he spent the entire week's grocery budget on one meal. It was a well-played move that earned him a "not allowed to shop for groceries without more adult supervision" status. So, obviously, now I do the shopping and cooking, unless it's on his new favorite toy (grill). Sometimes, I produce a great meal that 3 out of 4 people like and the leftovers don't die slowly in the fridge. Other times I manage to cook something so terrible, the dogs won't even go near it, and we order take out....again.

I also swore we'd never be those older couples that we'd see at dinner, and look at with pity. You know, the ones where they seem to be silent, just eating, looking around. I always looked at them and wondered how they got to that place, why were they even married, and obviously, we would never be "those people." Now I look at those couples and realize, they are probably just tired, and they don't want to talk because their extroverted child never, ever, ever stops talking, even while they're sleeping (what, just us?) but they're still trying to make time for each other, even if no one is talking. Funny enough, as it turns out, our favorite date night consists of queso, cupcakes, sweatpants, our comfy couch, and a funny movie we can't watch while the kids are awake. We don't have to fill the silence. We can just be.

I also used to think that marriage, and romantic love was just so different from anything else. It should be butterflies and flowers and staring into your lover's eyes. Quality time and secrets and long, luxurious walks, hand in hand, with the future in front of you. This one, this is my favorite. I thought I knew what this kind of love was "supposed" to look like. But I love how wrong I was! Because our reality is so much better. We laugh our way through most of what life throws at us. We tease each other over silly things, we crack up over stupid movies we've seen 47 times, and giggle through flirty, fun moments that make our kids cringe, which is obviously a bonus. I love the chance to laugh through our days and nights with this person I've chosen to do life with.

Don't get me wrong, there are really bad dumpster fire days too. Days that are painful and filled with the unknown and we can't remember when we were happy. But as we fight our way through those, it makes us so much more aware of the light because we've crawled through the darkness to get there. The more time that passes, the more that I notice and appreciate the friendship part of our marriage. This isn't to say that I'm not still hot for my husband, because I totally am! And judging from the regular slaps on the rear I get from him, he thinks I'm pretty okay, too.

Now don't go clutching your pearls, ladies, because we all want to be wanted and God created this part of us, too. We can laugh together in the bedroom just like in every other part of our marriage. We can laugh when we're too tired to do the dishes or even too tired to make the kids do them. We can laugh when we've had a "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day" and decide that ice cream for dinner is, without a doubt, the answer to our woes. Sometimes, when the *joy* of raising kids and teenagers is just so ridiculous we laugh just to keep from crying... we do both. But this is the part that makes the dark days worth getting through. This is the part of our relationship that will hold us together long after our hair greys, our bodies wrinkle and the sex is less frequent. Long after our kids have left home and it's just us and the dogs in this little world we've created, we'll always find our fun, adventure and many more moments to laugh through, because in the end, we still have each other.

"I love being married. It's so great to find that one special person you want to annoy for the rest of your life." - Rita Runder

Date Night Fun – Seize September – by Marcy Lytle

I keep hearing from everyone how 2020 was a blur because of Covid, and now 2021 is flying by because of more Covid, and here it is now the month of September! I thought of the saying “seize the day” and figured we may as well seize this month, before it disappears and the holiday season begins. Sometimes, date night on our calendar is non-existent as well, because time has gotten away from us. However, this month let’s seize the opportunity to take notice of what makes this month special, and enjoy!

September 2 is World Coconut Day! Look up a granola recipe that includes coconut and make it together. One of you chops, while the other prepares the mix. While it’s baking, do a crossword puzzle together. Then enjoy the granola atop your favorite yogurt or ice cream!

September 8 is International Literacy Day. Scout out the little neighborhood libraries in your area, and gather up at least three books each (from home) to donate. Then take a book out of the little library, and head to a park to read and enjoy an early fall picnic together. Purchase red/white checked plates and napkins and make this date so fun.

September 10 is World Suicide Prevention Day. Depression leads to suicide in so many. Think of any of your friends that might be feeling a bit down, and decide to invite them on your date night. Pick up the bill, and take them to your favorite fast food place and eat on the patio. Then play a game of mini golf, and laugh out loud when you miss a sure shot!

September 18 is World Bamboo Day! Google bamboo products and then go shopping to see if you can find something to buy made out of bamboo, for your house. Then visit a local gardening center and wander around to find a new plant or two for your yard, or porch, or inside. Finally, look up the definition of bamboozled and share stories about when that experienced happened to you!

September 27 is World Tourism Day. So take a “world” tour by choosing three destinations. Read about one at a book store. Eat or make food from the second destination. And see if you can find a movie made about the third. It could be one destination if you’d rather. For example, read about Mexico, eat queso and chips, then watch a film made in Mexico or about Mexico. How fun!

Seize the day this month and make it a celebration for two (or more) as you plan your nights out together for a good time!

After 40 Years – Grab the Moment – by Marcy Lytle

This morning, I had three errands to run and he decided to take 30 minutes and go with me. I loved it! We stopped at the P.O. to mail a few things for my daughter, then on to pick up my work, and lastly to drop off something at a friend's front porch. It was just a quick little trip that I would normally have gone on by myself, but he said, "I'll go with you," and we grabbed those moments and smiled. Grabbing little moments to be together instead of being alone adds interest to our days, and actually lifts our moods!

So here are a few ideas for grabbing the moment with him:

- Make dessert together, like strawberry shortcake. Just bake some canned biscuits (sprinkle with sugar), cut up strawberries (sprinkle with sugar), pile high and top with Cool Whip!
- Grab fast food and eat it, and people watch. Go through the Chick Fil A line and order Ice Dream (have you tried it?) with chocolate syrup, and an order of fries. Pull up where people are in full view and eat and wonder...what job each person has...by the way they look.
- Water the plants and pull weeds together. Take 30 minutes and go outside together to tend just a portion of your yard. Hug each other, pick a flower or two, smell it, and go back inside to resume your normal day.
- Sit beside him during a show (instead of in separate chairs!) and hold his hand. It's amazing how this little gesture can disappear if we let it!
- Sip an evening coffee/tea on the front porch. Make each other's drink and head out on the porch just before sunset. Feel the breezes, breathe, and don't say a word.
- Get dressed together. Actually get ready at the same time and converse, while you brush your teeth, get on your clothes, and head out. Give each other a compliment!
- Fold the laundry while listening to a song on YouTube. Sit on the sofa and get this chore done, together, while you are encouraged with a tune!
- Do you get a *Community Impact* or other newspaper/journal delivered? Sit down, let the other read and share the news and the new restaurants to try and coupons inside!
- Kids in the house? Grab a moment to catch his eye across the room while chaos is happening, then gather the whole family for a group hug and affirmation.
- Grab him by the hand whisper, "How can I pray for you today?" and listen to his heart. I bet he'll do the same for you.

If we aren't careful, weeks can go by and we're so busy going and coming, and working and sleeping, and eating and cleaning, all in our own corners and at our own pace, that we miss these small connections. It really made my day that he went with me this morning on those errands. In fact, I'm going to tell him right now!

For Better or Worse - What Do You Love? – by Kaelin Scott

One of the coolest things about being married is knowing another person inside and out, and being known in return. Sometimes they even know you better than you know yourself. And it's so wonderful having someone by your side through all your trials and triumphs and growth. Someone to help you reach your goals and follow your dreams. A life partner through thick and thin, who sticks by you despite your mistakes and failures. They know everything about you, and still they choose to love you. That really is something special.

I thought it might be fun this month to share a few things about my husband that I love, and then in the comments you can do the same. I'd love to hear what you love about your husbands, too! It's a chance to build up our spouses and spread positivity. Couldn't we all use a little bit more of that these days?

Something I really love about Britton is that he exudes confidence. He truly doesn't care what people think about him, and he never second guesses himself. And he doesn't change himself to please others. If someone doesn't like him, he moves on with his head held high. I tend to be a people pleaser to the highest degree, so I've always admired his self-confidence.

Along with that, he also has a strong moral compass. Where others waver, he never does. Britton knows what he believes and sticks to his convictions. He knows the right thing to do and does it without hesitation. God's voice is loudest in his life, and he makes sure to obey it. I love that.

My absolute favorite thing about Britton is that he can always make me laugh. That's actually what initially attracted me to him. He's the funniest person I know. Even when I want to be mad at him, he does something silly and I can't help but crack a smile. No matter where we go or what we do, we can always find something to laugh at. We make things fun together, and that makes life so much better.

Another thing I love about Britton is that he teaches our kids valuable lessons. Sometimes it's hard to discipline your children or help them learn from their mistakes, but Britton doesn't back down from that challenge. He loves them enough to teach them those hard lessons, knowing that it will mean so much to their futures. He really is a wonderful dad and leader for our family.

One of the things he teaches our kids is the value of hard work, because he has a strong work ethic. He always does his best at everything. No shortcuts, no doing things halfway. Britton always gives 110%, and the fruit of his labor speaks for itself. He is proof that hard work pays off. With God's guidance of course!

There are so many more things I love about my hubby, but now it's your turn. Leave a comment below with something you love about your man. Marriage truly is a wonderful blessing, especially when we speak life into our spouses.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Rooted in Love - Fear Not – by Kaelin Scott

Did you know the Bible tells us not to be afraid 365 times? One for each day of the year. I don't know about you, but that's definitely a reminder I could use every day.

While I'd like to tell you that simply having those words from God is enough to silence fear, it isn't quite that simple. In all honesty, it's one of those things that's easier said than done. But if it's in the Bible that many times, I know it must be important. Even if it's hard to do, it's something we must strive toward. And you know what else solidifies our need to abolish fear? It's not just a suggestion – it's actually a command. God *commands* us not to be afraid.

So how do we do that? How do we choose not to be afraid?

I wish I had a concrete answer, but I don't. In fact, the reason I decided to write about this is because I'm struggling with this right now. In a major way. But in the midst of my struggle, I have to remember that God is bigger than what I am afraid of. Fear is a lie the enemy uses to distance me from my Savior. Satan doesn't want me to be confident in God, so he whispers doubts and fears into my ears all day long. And because my flesh is weak, I believe them all too often. I allow them to consume me and rob an entire day of joy.

But the good news is this: We don't have to operate out of our flesh. We don't have to rely on our own ability to overcome fear. We can trust Jesus to be our strength. We can surrender the fight and leave it in His hands.

Holding onto fear doesn't really get us anywhere. Trust me, I would be the first to know. I'm scared to death of so many things, and I'm not very good at letting go of it. But little by little, I'm learning that surrender leads to freedom.

Yet it's not a one and done type of thing. It's a choice we have to make over and over again until it becomes our natural response, even if it's a thousand times a day. We have to shut down fear as soon as it starts, before it spirals out of control. We can't run through endless what-ifs or scary scenarios, because soon our brains won't be able to separate them from reality. We have to focus on what we know here and now, and let God worry about the rest.

I know this can be hard. For me personally, it's one of the toughest battles. But we're never alone in our struggles. Jesus faced everything we face. He knows exactly how we feel. All He wants is for us to lay it in His hands. After all, He came to give us life to the fullest. And fear isn't part of that plan.

Don't try to get on a train you don't have a ticket for. Trust God to take care of you today, and take on tomorrow when it comes.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” Joshua 1:9

Firmly Planted - Imagine—by Dina Cavazos

I read somewhere that imagination “is quite possibly a uniquely human ability.” It allows us to explore beyond our present environment, including things that aren’t even real. Imagination has birthed ideas that have changed our world for the better; it has given us beautiful poetry, entertaining movies, inspiring books, medical advances, and much more. But everything has a flip side—what about when the imagination spews ideas that are destructive or untrue? Can an idea seem good but really be off? It can all be so confusing, and dark, and tangled up.

Our uncertain world can feel like a jungle, but this jungle was once a garden of order and peace. In this metaphorical jungle we live in there are complex, devastating, catastrophic problems we, the human race, have created and must deal with sooner or later. Questions and concerns abound; answers and solutions are few, but one thing has made a real difference for me: my understanding of truth. I used to think truth was a *thing*. That got my mind spinning because there were so many truths to know. How could I know so many *things*, and how could I determine which were true? Now, obviously, some things are “true,” like there’s ink on this paper, but I’m talking about deeper truths—you know exactly what I mean.

One day Truth shined in my soul like a sunrise and I realized that *Truth isn’t a thing, but a Person*. It’s a mystery our finite minds can’t completely comprehend. How can Truth, Life, and the Way to them be a Person? Only if that Person is God; only if Jesus is really who he said he is. It’s another mystery that he can actually reside in us and is working out his will on earth, despite our many failures. In these extraordinary times that often feel hopeless, dark, and overwhelming, I take comfort and hope because I believe there is One who holds all things together, One through whom all things were made, One who was, who is, and is to come, who will make things right in his time.

The singer/songwriter John Lennon imagined an idyllic world where all was right and appropriately called it *Imagine*. He thought that if we just tried hard enough to get along...if we could just put away our differences, we/the human race could make it happen. You can find the original lyrics online, but I’m offering another version of Imagine—one rooted in reality, in Truth. I hope it gives you comfort and hope.

IMAGINE

Imagine life everlasting
Where light and love abound
Where evil cannot enter
Where Jesus wears the crown

Imagine there's no darkness
It's easy if you try
No fear or pain or trouble
And everything is right

Imagine all the people
Living life in love
Ahh,,,

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
In the Kingdom of the Son

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
Because Christ died for you

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people
Living life in peace
Ahh...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
In the Kingdom of the Son

Simple Truths – We Rise – by Marcy Lytle

I recently ordered a tapestry blanket for my granddaughter for Christmas that is pictured here on this page, and you can read the saying “We rise by lifting others.” I love the image and she loves elephants, so I figure it’s a gift she will use and enjoy! I’ve been thinking about the phrase on it, and what it means, and how it can encourage us all.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve grown tired from lifting others. I’ve sat and listened to others and their woes and ended up exhausted after the visit. When I’ve offered a hand up, there have been times when my hand was bitten and I was sorry I extended it. And there have been other times when I felt like all I did was lift up others, but I felt unappreciated or not lifted up myself, so I burned out. Can you relate?

So although the phrase on this blanket is true, it needs to have a bit more text and explanation with it, don’t you think? Or maybe we just need to analyze a few things.

First of all, look at the picture. The elephant is huge, strong, and the biggest of all of the creatures atop him! I’m thinking he may not even feel the weight of those animals standing on top of his back. If we are the weak one, the tired one, the weary one, and we invite others to climb atop our backs, we’re going to end up with a backache. And besides that, we weren’t ever meant to carry others on our backs, but rather transfer their weight to the Strong One.

Secondly, the elephant is standing among green grass and beautiful flowers, and is even smelling one of them. In other words, he himself is being refreshed while he’s giving others a lift. That’s so important. We can’t constantly give out if we are constantly thirsty ourselves. Those we’re trying to lift, as well as ourselves, will tumble down in a heap!

Thirdly, that first animal on top is then carrying another on top of him... Because he was lifted up, he invited another to join him. And all three of those pictured seem happy. Birds are chirping nearby, the sky is blue, and smiles are evident. Any time we’re carrying the load or woes of another and everyone is frowning, it feels like the sky is falling and there’s no sound of music in the air, we need to reconsider the lift.

We are not elephants. And sometimes those that need a lift are carrying burdens way heavier than any weight we can carry.

But here’s what IS true: We do rise by lifting others, but not by lifting them in our own strength.

Lifting others sometimes means just cheering them on, instead of being jealous. That makes us rise.

Being quick to forgive elevates others in our eyes, and relieves us of heaviness. That makes us rise.

Listening with understanding and then releasing what we’ve heard to Him is good. We all rise.

There are so many ways to life up others without lugging their cares around for them. We do rise by lifting others, but only as we love them and trust in the One that loves them even more, to take care of their needs and ours.

Don't you love this picture? I sure do...

May 2, 2021

Good morning everyone! Last week we talked about bread. Well, we're going to do that again today, but in a different light. This is more of a probably more of a Bible Study than a sermon message, but I will try not to be too long.

The Bible has a lot to say about BREAD. In a message some months ago I remember saying that bread comprised a good 50% of the caloric intake of the Israeli people. People shared bread at meals.

There are three main purposes of bread mentioned in the Bible.

1. **Bread was necessary for sustenance.** Genesis 3:19
 - a. God told Adam that because of his sin, he would have to labor with sweat for bread. That meant that growing the grain to make bread would be a requirement for life.
 - i. **By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."**
 - b. And God created our built-in hunger mechanism that reminds us that we are dependent upon God, who created food.
2. **Bread draws us together in fellowship**
 - a. Abraham shared fresh bread with the three Angel visitors that came to his farm.
 - b. Abraham, himself was also served bread and then blessed by Melchizedek.
 - c. The Jewish tradition includes breaking bread at the beginning of a meal and praying "**Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth."**
3. **The third significance of bread in the Bible is covenant relationship with God.**
 - a. The grain offerings and the bread on the altar in the Old Testament. This was part of the covenant symbols between God and the Israelites. The Israelites were instructed to keep 12 loaves of bread on the altar at all times, for the 12 tribes.

- b. Jesus, when he broke bread and shared wine at the Last Supper, said, This is the new covenant in my blood which was shed for you Luke 22:20.

So in the Bible, faith, bread and relationships are all connected.

Bread and Hospitality

The Bible teaches that relationships develop when we care one for another. One way of doing that is sharing meals, since it shows we care for those we are feeding.

In nicer restaurants we are served bread first, as a way that the restaurant welcomes their guests and shows their appreciation for the patronage. Abraham told his wife Sarah to use their finest flour to make the bread for his guests, who were strangers and angels.

David honored the memory of his dearest friend, Jonathan, by providing hospitality to Jonathan's disabled son, Mephibosheth in **I Samuel 9:7, where he said that the boy would eat bread at his table continually.**

Manna and the Bread of the Presence

When God guided the Israelites through the wilderness, he gave them their daily bread in the form of manna. God was ever faithful and they never missed a meal for 40 years!

God thought the bread / manna was so important that when he ended it after they came into the Promised Land, he told Aaron to place a measure of the manna into a jar and preserve it before the Testimony, which was the tablets of stone in the Ark of the Covenant, for all future generations to see.

God even commanded that 12 loaves of bread, symbolizing the 12 tribes, be kept on the altar of Shew Bread, or the altar of Presence at all times, and be replaced each week with fresh loaves. I read that the unleavened bread loaves weighed 5 pounds each and it was a visual reminder of God's eternal presence. Just Imagine the aroma of the baking bread to remind them of God's nearness.

Grain Offerings and Sacrifices

God commanded that the priests make sacrifices and offerings for the people. These included grain offerings we read about in Leviticus, chapters 2 and 6. Oil and incense and grain were lifted up by the priests in honor to God. They prepared cakes of grain and oil and put them on the altar of sacrifice and the aroma filled the area; this was to be done specifically AFTER the animal sacrifices, to purify and cleanse the animal smells from the air!

In the New Testament

And in the New Testament, God gave his only son Jesus, and he became the sacrificial lamb. His death, the perfect sacrifice, replaced all previous sacrifices. And the night before his death, Jesus provided the bread offering for his disciples and so set the example for us to follow. We celebrate the bread and the new wine of his shed blood.

In I Corinthians 11:26 the Apostle Paul stated that every time we share communion, we proclaim the death of Jesus.

Loaves and fishes

The account of Jesus feeding thousands of people with bread and fish shows us the extravagance of his love for people, which went beyond just mere physical food. He made sure there were plenty of leftovers, to show us that He's more, much more, than enough for our needs!

After this miracle, Jesus spoke to the congregation and told them that they could eat of his body anytime, **because he is the bread of life**. Just like God sent down manna down from heaven to be bread for eating, God sent down his Son, Jesus, to be the bread of life—eternal life.

Matthew 4 tells the story of Jesus being led into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted of the devil. And when Jesus had fasted, he had no bread for forty days, he was hungry. And Satan said, if you are the Son of God, then turn these stones into bread.

Imagine, Satan tempting Jesus, the bread of life, with bread. But Jesus said, man shall not live by bread alone, but every word that proceeds from the mouth of

God. Later, in John, Jesus said, I am The Bread of Life and he who comes to me shall never hunger. Jesus, Our Daily Bread.

Bread in Communion

At the Last Supper, that commemorated the Passover, Jesus gave thanks and broke the bread, and shared it and said, This is my body. The bread represented Christ's body that was nailed to the cross and broken the very next day.

And of course, the wine represented his blood, which was shed as soldiers pierced his side. And Paul felt this was so important that he admonished the Corinthians to observe the eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup, or the communion as we call it today, in a worthy manner, to avoid being judged. To examine ourselves and be certain we are fully in the faith of Christ.

Taking the Communion cup and bread unites us with Christ and it signifies our belief in the work of the cross; death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and the soon return of Christ; But, likewise, sharing in the cup of blessing and the eating of the bread also unites us as one in the body of Christ, the church. Jesus told us many, many times throughout the Word to be in unity with the believers in fellowship and in sharing.

Some churches call communion by the Greek word "Eucharist" which simply means "thanksgiving." Of course, we should be, and are, so very thankful as we receive the bread and fruit of the vine.

IN Luke 6:38 Jesus said these words:

Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that you mete it shall be measured to you again.

The terms Jesus used in this verse related to grain. How the buyer in the market place would watch the seller of the grain pour the measure of the grain into the bag, and shake it down so he could add more, then fill it to overflowing so that the buyer was assured that he got the full, good measure of the grain.

Jesus said this is how we should give, and we will receive the same way.

Bread Symbolizes Jesus

There are only a few basic ingredients required to make bread. You can add other things, but the basic requirements are: **Grains of some sort, such as wheat or rye, ground into fine flour, water, and salt.** It's amazing that these three elements, grain, water and salt, are all used by Jesus as examples of himself, the bread of life.

The GRAIN

Jesus said a golden kernel of wheat must be buried in the ground to grow up and produce a great crop, signifying how he must die and be buried and rise again to the glory of the Father.

THE WATER

Jesus said that, all who are thirsty can come to him and drink, and they will never thirst again. And that those who come will receive rivers of living water springing up within their souls.

The SALT

In II Kings 2:21, Elisha healed the bitter water with salt. Then he went out to the spring that supplied the town with water and threw the salt into it. And he said, "This is what the LORD says: I have purified this water. It will no longer cause death or infertility." This is called the Covenant of Salt.

And likewise, Christ was poured into a putrid dying world and brought life.

Matthew 5 Jesus said that we are to be the salt of the earth. We can be poured into putridness, and men will see HIM.

Grain, water and salt makes bread. Today we are going to partake of The bread of life in communion.

Don, will you come.

That spiritual bread is still fresh and nourishing those who partake of it daily! When we take communion, we should ask the Lord to open our eyes of understanding, just like the two who walked with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, and when Jesus broke bread with them afterwards, the Bible says that their eyes were opened and they knew him and their hearts burned within them.

Unearthly Thing - The Catastrophe of Quitting Coffee for 30 Days – by Angela Dolbear

I love coffee. Every day starts with a 3-cup minimum. So it has been, since I was in college a couple of decades ago.

I serve myself my favorite morning beverage in any one of my favorite mugs, since it brings me a little bit of joy. Mugs that I purchased at favorite places I have visited, such as Graceland, New York City, and of course, Disneyland. Then I carry my mug full of delicious warm caffeinated goodness down the hall to my home office. I am careful not to spill a drop on my hardwood floors (usually requires dodging 2 dogs, and sometimes a black cat), and then set my mug down on my desk in front of my computer, and begin my day.

That is until recently.

After taking a food sensitivities test for better health and other unmentionable reasons, I decided to eliminate coffee and the milk that goes in it for 30 days.

I can do this, right?

Day 1: I drink water instead of coffee. Cool, clear, pure water. I feel healthy, and refreshed.

Day 2: The “sleepies” hang around for a little longer than they usually do. I drink 2 glasses of water. Which does not give me the alertness I crave, and need. Pray for divine intervention.

Day 3: So tired, so I make myself a mug of organic chai tea. While it is delicious, tea is not coffee. I want coffee. I want it bad.

Am I addicted? Is coffee a drug? Hmmm. Maybe it’s a good thing I have decided to purge this steaming aromatic elixir from Heaven from my flesh.

I have this heavy-headed headache. It’s 3:30 PM and I am still sleepy.

Day 4: Sunday morning. Coffee goes with church. Sometimes, coffee goes to church. Not today. I tell myself that coffee is a heathen idol to be cast-off for its sumptuousness. But I am not convinced.

Day 5: Coffee, oh, coffee, where for art thou, coffee?? Denied thy rich flavor, refused thy awakening properties...be but swarn my morning beverage, and I shall no longer be a...um...uh...what is a good replacement word for “Capulet?”(Proof that my brain needs coffee.) Would William Shakespeare frowneth upon my play on lines from *Romeo and Juliet*?

Day 6: Coffee is my boyfriend who left me. Probably went overseas somewhere. Maybe to serve a tour of duty, or became a freedom fighter and join La Resistance, or something else noble and worthwhile.

Day 7: I can’t go on....I just cannot...without coffee.

Why am I doing this to myself?

Because it’s good to say “no” to my flesh sometimes.

Really?

Yes, really. We’ve been over this.

I think it's different this time.

Be strong.

I can't, and I don't wanna, so there. (I'm grateful that this on-going debate with myself is taking place in the privacy of my own skull.)

Day 8: Adopt a new puppy from the animal shelter. Yay! She is so sweet and the perfect companion for my adult Lab, Abby.

Have to get up numerous times during the night to take Sally the pup out as we work on housetraining her. Lack of sleep has me seriously eyeballing my coffeemaker.

Day I'm-not-sure-of-the-number: It's beyond temptation now. We are in survival mode. Sally is doing well, but we are still making trips outside at around 12 AM, 3 AM, and then rising at 7:45 AM. My head has that floating feeling from days of interrupted sleep.

Day 108 (feels like it, anyway): I'm starting to drop things, forget things, and even spill things. I have to stop myself from instinctually lapping up the precious caffeine-filled can of Diet Coke I knock over on my desk.

Ok, enough. "*Uncle!*" I cry out to myself.

Since my digestive health has not improved, I reason that a reasonable person such as myself has good reason to make and consume a cup of coffee...because, so very tired.

I shuffle to the kitchen, feeling a little ill-disciplined at the task I am about to perform. But I press on, because I need to jumpstart my brain, so I can get some work done.

I lift the glass carafe from the coffeemaker, as if I were grasping the Holy Grail, and prep my trusty Oster 12-cup Programmable Coffeemaker to brew some coffee (for only 2 cups...I'm not a monster). I press the red start button with an elevated sense of expectancy.

It's not long before I hear the familiar bubbling and gurgling sounds of boiling water pumping through the coffee grounds, releasing the delicious scent of fresh brewed coffee. I turn away, and go see what the dogs are up to, so I don't feel like a freak, staring at the small appliance as if it is related to a defibrillator and would give me life. Even though, I feel like it might.

Ahhhh...it warms my soul as well as my body as I sip from my mug adorned on the side with Elvis, striking a pose as he croons into a tall microphone stand. I believe he is celebrating with me. Okay, maybe not.

Have I failed in my goal to go 30 days without coffee? Yes, from an earthly stand point. But it the Big Heavenly picture of things, no.

After reflecting (and sipping...mmm), I learned some things. I listed them in bullet points here, for quick future reference, since these are areas I frequently struggle in:

- I was not trusting God to bring the healing I needed;
- I did not ask Him for the healing I needed;
- I tried to fix my problem myself (bad self-reliance, bad); and
- God is not going to help me achieve a goal that is based on not trusting Him and relying on myself.

The same Spirit Who raised Jesus from death gives life to my mortal body (please see [Romans 8, particularly verse 11](#)).

That is some great power! He is able, and has healed me physically, mentally, and physically. I need to ask, and believe Him.

God is good. I am grateful for the coffee I sip in my beautiful home office, with beautiful sweet dogs at my side (and a cat), in a beautiful home in a beautiful tree-filled Nashville neighborhood.

I am grateful for God's forgiveness, mercy and patience, and the ability to laugh at my mistakes.

And I am grateful and mindful to ask for His help in my time of need, expecting to receive His help. *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 - How I Need You – by Pam Charro

*My one defense
My righteousness
Oh God, how I need you*

-- Matt Maher

I really love the above song lyrics, but I think when I posted it on my Facebook page the other day, some of my friends mistook it for a cry for help. While I can understand why they thought that, it was a simple statement of faith. I feel completely unable to conquer in any area of my life on my own strength. But that puts me in a perfect place for him to show up.

Remember in the Bible, when Hannah cried out to God in her desperation for a baby? She said, "Give me children or I'll die!" She felt such a strong need, and there was nothing she could do to bring about the outcome she felt she could not live without, except to address it with the Almighty. But when he came through for her, he really came through! Not only did she give birth to an amazing, godly person, but God also blessed her with three more sons and two daughters.

He took her big minus and turned it into an even bigger plus
because this woman *recognized her need* for him to do something.

And remember when the disciples asked Jesus why the man was born blind? Was it punishment for someone's sin? Jesus replied, "This happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him." And when that man received his sight, glory for God is exactly what happened!

If I could fix my own life right now, I'm sure I would, but it's so much better that I need God to do it. I know he is up to something so much more grand than anything I could ever come up with. I can't wait to see what he is going to make out of my life, and I am honored to be a part of his glory story.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – In Season – by Marcy Lytle

It's September already, and I'm pretty sure it will be like most other Septembers here in Central Texas, where I live. The stores will have fall décor and pumpkin scented candles ready for purchasing, but the temperature will still scream summer. I've said it so many times. I wish each season would be what it's supposed to be! And when I wish for that too much, I become so dissatisfied that I miss days and even weeks of contentment, because I'm constantly wishing for the next season!

In the fall, I long for cooler temps so that sweaters can be pulled out and worn over my cute outfits. More often than not, that said sweater might be pulled on in the morning, but it will come off by 3pm when sweat is pouring. I see the colors changing in the northeast and look out my own window and see nothing but brown, sun-stricken leaves on our trees. And while others are preparing for hay rides with hot apple cider in hand, we're still running our AC on full blast until sometimes well into late October!

In the winter, it's finally starting to cool down here to cooler temps, and it's the time of year to prepare for the Christmas holiday. Sleigh bells are not ringing and there is no winter wonderland prior to December 25, and actually never (except the weird freak storm of 2020.) Oh, we sing the carols and wear the scarves and hats, because we want to feel the *feels* of the season, but mostly we listen to the Christmas carols and just "dream" of that white Christmas. I can't tell you how many December 25 calendar days I've sighed at the forecast of a high of 70 degrees.

In the spring, it starts warming up nicely here and things begin to bloom. However, all of the dead bugs from winter start emerging as well. Ant hills show up in the front lawn, which have to be treated constantly. The flowers show up profusely along the highways, and I'd say spring is pretty nice in Central Texas! Until...

In the summer, everything changes. Heat arrives and flower petals wilt, and color disappears. Grass becomes crunchy underneath our feet, and our electric bills soar. While summer concerts in the park and picnics are inviting, and we attend and enjoy many, we're swatting mosquitos and grabbing those cardboard fans to swipe back and forth in front of our faces after dousing our bodies with insect repellent.

Have I whined, enough? It's really not a good attitude to have, and what finally changes me (at least for a while) is hearing someone else respond to the seasons in a whole different way. We have friends that moved here from Wisconsin and they LOVE the heat. *What?* Other people we know get excited when Christmas Day is warm, so they can gather with their family in a park while others up north are scraping their windshields. And while we are swatting mosquitoes in summer, the kiddos are out catching fireflies!

It's all about perspective, isn't it? I don't know what the weather will be when this article finds its way to your eyes. I'm pretty sure it will be too hot for my liking, but I'm trying to embrace each new season as it comes with all its woes, as well as its wonders. I was happily surprised this past year with the snow that fell, and the rain that lingered, which were both so unusual for the

time of year they came. And there's this promise that there is always another season around the corner, should we not like the one we're in.

Which season is your favorite? Do you have one? I bet you're a pretty contented person if you enjoy each season, whatever it brings. But if you're like me, you have to work on your attitude to accept and embrace the heat, the cold, the wind, and the rain – possibly all in one day.

In season. That's what I want to be. I want to be found opening my blinds in the early morning light, with a huge smile at another day...whether I get to wear a sweater or not.

FRESH THYME – Most Unfortunate – by Marcy Lytle

My husband and I, my daughter and her husband and three kids, all showed up to watch our son and his wife play volleyball on a sand court. We were all prepared to watch them, while sitting on a picnic bench, when the other team they were supposed to play didn't show up. The little kids were delighted, because it meant they got to take off their shoes, step into the sand, and play with their aunt and uncle, and even their mom! I loved watching all of my kids play and have fun.

There's a time when the littles need to be invited to play with the bigs, because they need to interact, observe, learn, mimic, and be included. My goodness, those are important things for all of us to remember when we're playing this game of life. And sometimes, the only way those that aren't usually on the court get invited to step into the sand is if some unfortunate event takes place. Had the other team not showed, the kids would not have gotten the chance to play with their uncle.

There are times when we're playing in the game of going to church, for example, and it becomes so comfortable to see our same "team members" week after week, make plans for a visit, and leave the service feeling good. But when visitors, or those with needs different than ours show up, this interrupts our game plan and we're called upon to move over, make a seat available, and give of our resources.

I've been a part of the game of life where I've encountered those of the next generation and found myself aggravated at their lack of respect, or their arrogance, or others things that I think I've worked out over the years. However, until we all play on the same field, beside each other, we don't really appreciate their generation and how they work together with ours. And vice-versa.

Neighbors sit next door to us for years and we never know their names, but then maybe a crisis happens. Their house catches on fire. And suddenly, our living room becomes their haven for a few hours while they gather their wits, we offer our condolences, and we realize the beauty of who these people are...that we never got to know before. (This happened to us.)

Another team finally did show up that night, and the kids were removed from the sand, and the game for the adults began. However, those kids had a great time that night as they watched and learned how to bump and hit the ball. They were affirmed and applauded when they made a hit, and they felt so special to be included on the "big guys" playing court before the real game began.

All because the other team never showed...

Sometimes, the most unfortunate events, or even small disturbances, are just part of the grand scheme of life that calls us to note those on the sidelines that are just itching to play by us, be with us, learn from us and enjoy our company. We could have all gone home and just called it a night. But instead, the littles got to play with the bigs, mosquito bites and all, and good time and great memories were made.

FRESH THYME – The Bird Bath – by Marcy Lytle

We have bird bath that's been in our garden for years. We purchased it to add color and height and texture to our garden, and I love the way it looks nestled among the rocks we've collected beneath it, and in the little box we created for it, between the blooms. But it's pain, in my opinion. And my husband and I have this ongoing struggle with this garden addition.

He likes to keep it full of fresh water for the birds. He enjoys looking out the bedroom window to see them splashing and bathing themselves in the water. After all, it is a bird bath. But it takes time to clean that bowl (it gets so dirty from those nasty birds!) and it has to be refilled often (due to our Texas heat!). When he cleans the bowl, he does a thoroughly good job, and the tall red ceramic statue with a bowl on top looks amazing.

I, on the other hand, never have time to be "bothered" with that bowl. I'm usually watering the plants in a hurry and when I walk past the bird bath I sigh when I realize it needs to be cleaned and filled, once again. I don't like the time required to actually clean it, so I often just spray out the filthy water and add a bit more, not even to the brim, sometimes. And I don't even care if the birds get a drink, I just want to be done and go back inside.

I was looking at this photo of the bird bath and if you look closely, after reading what I wrote above, you can tell that I was the one that last tended the bird bath. It's not clean, and it's not full. I was in a hurry.

So I started thinking (as I do, when I'm out tending my garden), about how that bird bath relates to other things as well. It takes effort and time to keep other things nice and presentable and "full" as well, so that friends and neighbors feel welcome in our yard and home – and feel refreshed when they leave. We have barely even had guests over...because of the pandemic!

However, I know and appreciate the love my husband gives that bird bath. He never does a job halfway. If a job is worth doing, he will do it well. (I love it when he cleans my kitchen stove!) And I have to admit that it's fun to see birds of all kinds splash and play in the water once we go back inside the house and are no longer a threat to them.

This fall, I'm hoping that I can tend to my own bowls of water, so to speak, to keep them clean and full for those that need a drink. I have no idea if we will be able to have people over yet, but I know we will meet up with friends. And instead of offering them a dirty drink of nasty water I haven't cared to empty and refill, I hope I have clean pure living water to offer so that we are both satisfied after the visit.

Instead of complaining about the world and the virus, discussing other controversial issues or frustrations, it might be so possible and good and necessary for my visitors/friends and I to just splash and play for a while. Maybe that's what we all need at the moment. A good time to be had by all, just because we all took time to wipe out the nasty and fill it with the fresh.

What do you think?

FRESH THYME – Unfinished Stories – by Marcy Lytle

I love to read, I really do. However, there are seasons where I read a lot and then seasons when I don't. Even when I have the time to sit down and read, I often choose to do something else. Why? I don't know. But it happens.

The things I love to read are basically five. I love to read the Word, but only if I'm actually studying it for a devo or a lesson. I only find purpose in reading it if I can apply what I read. Books are a fun read for me, as a way of escape into another story way different from my own. I also adore magazines; and I subscribe to many, because magazines are my job! I especially love finding new recipes, fashion ideas or home décor inspiration. Those are my faves. I enjoy reading *The Community Impact* or the *Austin 360*, because both have coupons for restaurants, new ideas of places and things to do, which I love! And finally, I enjoy reading the articles that the women submit each month for *A Bundle of THYME*. I absolutely love the variety of voices we share.

One thing that keeps me from reading is the fact that somehow I feel like I'm "wasting my time," not being productive, while I read. I even have the same struggle when sitting still to watch a movie at home. I'd much rather go to the theater, where there are no chores around me to do. I don't know if this constant need to have "purpose" in what I'm doing stems from my childhood, or where. But I've always seen reading as a pastime, a waste of time, and something to be done only if one needs information.

However, in the past couple of years, I've come to struggle my way out of that kind of thinking. I realize now that reading doesn't have to be reading for information, reading to learn, or reading in order to "do" anything at all. It can be for pure pleasure alone.

You that are avid readers and read for hours are probably scratching your heads right now, thinking – she's crazy. I have friends that carve out time to read, and read book after book, never thinking it's a waste of time at all. And I now get it!

Here are a few things some of us may struggle with, if we're the work/work/work type of folks:

- Taking a long, hot bath to soak, not to clean
- Sipping tea and lingering by the window, without a list in hand
- Walking for pure pleasure to observe nature, not to measure steps
- Facetiming a friend, just because
- Reading a book for pure pleasure, not to take note

I'm learning, slowly but surely, that life doesn't have to be 24/7 purpose driven and list making and chore doing, but it can include lots of down time of just being and smiling at what's fun and senseless. I've sat down to read the book in the photo above about five times now and still not started it. One time I knew I only had 15 minutes to read, so I didn't want to begin. Another time, my mind was too full to be still and enter the story. And last night, it was just too noisy around me while in the car.

I've made real progress, but I've got a long ways to go, to learn and enjoy the beauty of just reading and turning page by page, unaware of the world around be, because I'm so engrossed in the world before me on the pages of the unfinished story I need to enjoy in the moment...



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

October 2021



TIPS

In the Kitchen - Gift Ideas – by Marcy Lytle

Just in case you're thinking about Christmas and wondering what to get your friends and family, I thought of all the things I use in the kitchen that I have loved using, loved receiving, and would make lovely gifts for others. I love reading lists that others put together of their favorites. So since we shared apple recipes over in the Seven for You column, I thought on this page for this month, I'd share some kitchen items that would make GREAT gifts, should you need to be inspired with ideas!

Fresh pasta and sauce – I love Texas Gourmet Pasta and any other freshly made pasta I find at Farmers Markets. These make great gifts, wrapped together with a jar of fresh pasta. Wrap both in a pretty dish towel, and you're done. Some of the cutest dish towels are hand stamped ones by a lady I met at a festival.

A new cookbook – I have been buying new cookbooks for the last few years whenever we go on vacation. I often choose recipes from the internet, but it's SO FUN to look through an actual hands-on cookbook. There's a favorite I have for baking, written by a woman that is still winning blue ribbons at state fairs at age 102! Pick a recipe inside and include the ingredients – like maybe a bag of pecans – and wrap it up for a gift!

Rope baskets – These are everywhere and are not too expensive. They're great for placing on a shelf to hold the above cookbooks, or mail until it can be sorted. They can just be decorative or placed in the pantry to corral paper napkins and plates. I love the variety, and I bet your friend would love them, as well! Include a monthly subscription to your favorite magazine – maybe Magnolia Journal – and place a copy inside before you wrap!

Spices and oils – Again at the Farmers Market they often have fresh spices without any preservatives or ingredients we can't pronounce. They also have flavor infused oils for cooking. A nice big bottle of cooking oil and a couple of spices would make a great gift for any person that loves to add flavor to their dishes. Have you tried avocado oil?

Paper Goods and a Tray – I like to stock up on paper plates and napkins for easy dining, impromptu picnics, for snacks while watching TV in the cooler months, etc. I keep a stash in a drawer, along with a few cute trays for setting and serving. Big Lots or even the dollar stores are great places to purchase these. Buy a bundle and give. What a fun surprise!

Charcuterie Board and Spreaders – Marshalls often has a few shelves full of really pretty wooden boards in rectangular or circular shapes, and these would make a great gift. It's so fun to set out cheeses and olives and nuts, for a casual affair for the family or friends. Include a set of spreaders for the dips, and you've got a great gift for a family!

Coffees of the World – Last year I gave a subscription to Atlas Coffee to my husband and he has loved it. Each month he gets to pick a different coffee that is then shipped to him from all different destinations, with a card of info about that place and the coffee. He has really loved it! It's the gift that keeps on giving all year long.

Just a Fun Dish – If you visit small towns or enjoy stopping in vintage or antique stores, look for a pretty serving dish that someone might love. I have a whole cabinet of ones for different seasons, and they're so fun to pull out when the season changes. Just look at the shelves and pick one that's a little different in shape, or one that's super interesting, or just so fun. Maybe a snow-themed platter for the winter months would be a fun idea, or even a cute pitcher for serving juice. Anyone would love this idea!

Notepads and pens – My sister gave me a set of monthly notepads that are magnetic, for sticking on the fridge, and I've loved them. There's this magnetic pen that also hangs on the fridge, great to place beside the notepads. You're done – a great gift idea for the one who likes to make lists and stay organized.

Local Honey and a Stick – Local honey is my husband's favorite thing to pick up when we visit markets. He keeps it and his coffee mug, along with a canister of coffee, right beside his coffee brewer. If you add a wooden honey stick with the honey, and maybe a book of recipes using honey, this is a gift worth giving as well.

Just look around your own kitchen at what you love and use the most, and consider how you might bundle and give this upcoming holiday season. Everyone loves food gifts or ideas, or at least they should!

Seven for You – All Things Apples

Just a Snack:

My favorite way to fix apples is very simple. I like to cut one up into bites, place it in a bowl and sprinkle cinnamon and curry powder on it. Curry powder has a mixture of spices that are really healthy and gives the apple a unique taste. I squeeze a little lemon juice on top and then microwave it for one minute and thirty seconds. It's soft and tasty and oh so good for me. – Carole

I LOVE apple nachos. Just slice apples and lay them out like you would chips on a plate. Drizzle with caramel sauce and sprinkle with mini chocolate chips and nuts, if you want. Enjoy every bite. – Marcy

I'm not much of an apple eater, so the only way I eat them is with peanut or almond butter, a good strong cheddar cheese, or disguised in a smoothie. – Tanya

I love apples with cheddar cheese as well, with ham, on a sandwich – Marcy

I don't have a pic - but I really like cooked apple slices. I think some people call them scalloped apples. I peel and slice an apple, and then cook in a pan with butter. I add cinnamon and sugar to taste when the apples are starting to soften. Yummy! – Beth

My favorite way to eat apples, especially Macintosh or Golden Delicious apples, is freshly sliced, and dipped in a caramel dip, which can usually be found in the produce section of the market, near the apples! If you can heat up the caramel dip a little in the microwave, mmm...even better. Enjoy! – Angela

Ahhhh apples!!! There's nothing like a cold, crisp, juicy apple. My favorite is Honey Crisp or Golden Delicious. I love to slice them and dip them in peanut butter or caramel sauce. And, who doesn't like a warm piece of a classic apple pie or a dish of applesauce infused with butter and cinnamon? That being said, apple sauce can be used as a healthier alternative to oil in your favorite boxed cake mix. It makes a very moist, light cake. And, no one is the wiser. - Gina

I love apple strudel – and I do not make it – but I sure enjoy it from a local bakery! - Sheril

In a recipe:

A tasty warm apple beverage that fills your home with a delicious Autumn aroma: Pour apple cider into a slow cooker, put in a couple cinnamon sticks, and 4-5 whole cloves. Cook on low. Ladle into a mug when hot, and enjoy! – Angela

One way to use apples is by adding applesauce to meatloaf. It keeps it moist and mellows out this savory dish. For years I have used the following recipe.

1 lbs low fat ground beef
1/2 cup bread crumbs
1/2 cup apple sauce

1/2 cup ketchup
1 egg
2 tablespoons dried onion flakes
Season salt to taste
Bell pepper slices

Mix all together and top with a little more ketchup. Bake at 350 degrees for 45 minutes to an hour. I like to cook it until the edges start to brown.

Apples are a very versatile food. And, they are good for you. So, be sure to always have some on hand. – Gina

I like to make Apple Stuffed Pull-Apart Bread or some call it Apple Monkey Bread. It's easy and can be eaten for breakfast, dessert, or as a snack.

Ingredients

- 4 granny smith apples, diced (or your favorite apple)
- 1 cup dark brown sugar
- ¾ cup unsalted butter, melted and cooled
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 ½ teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1 ½ teaspoons cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon ground cloves
- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- 3 cans biscuit dough
- 1 ½ cups powdered sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 3 tablespoons milk, or milk alternative

Preparation

1. Preheat oven to 350°F (180°C).
2. Grease a bundt pan.
3. Combine apples, butter, brown sugar, lemon juice, vanilla extract, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and cornstarch in a large saucepan.
4. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until apples have browned and softened and sauce has thickened - about 10 minutes. Drain excess sauce into a separate bowl. Set aside.
5. Cut each biscuit in half and flatten into rounds.
6. Stuff each round with a tablespoon of apples.
7. Close the round together by pinching at the seam and roll into ball.
8. Layer half of the balls in the pan and spoon half of the reserved sauce on top. Repeat with remaining balls and sauce.
9. Bake for 30 minutes. Cover with foil and bake for additional 10-15 minutes.
10. Cool for 15 minutes.
11. Whisk together the powdered sugar, vanilla, and milk, until you reach a smooth consistency. Drizzle over bread.
12. Remove bread from the pan and drizzle with icing.
13. Enjoy!

Edith

APPLE CRANBERRY CRUMBLE (wildflower bed n breakfast)

This is one of the best crumbles (and easiest) I've ever made. It's great for breakfast over yogurt, or as dessert with ice cream. I prefer the second choice!

- 4 cups chopped apples (unpeeled)
- 2 cups cranberries (frozen or fresh)
- ½ c sugar
- ½ c oats
- ½ c brown sugar
- 1/3 c flour
- ½ c chopped pecans
- 1 stick softened butter

Preheat oven to 350 and spray dish with cooking spray. Place apples and cranberries in the dish. Sprinkle with the sugar. In a bowl, combine oats, brown sugar, flour and nuts. Use a fork or your fingers to mix in softened butter until incorporated. Crumble topping over fruit. Bake for 45 minutes.

Apple Pasta Salad

Cook pasta as stated in the directions on the package, and rinse til drained and cool.

Add in a large bowl:

The cooled, cooked pasta

1 apple, chopped

2 cups seedless grapes, halved

½ c celery, chopped

1 c grated sharp cheddar cheese

Stir in your favorite vinaigrette dressing and enjoy!

The Dressings – Stepping into Fall – by Marcy Lytle

I love the hues that this new season brings – the dark rust, the caramel, the greens and golds and even all of the combos for fall that we see in scarves and sweaters and more! So if you're staring at your closet wishing for new, or just an idea of how to wear what you have, or it's still warm and you want fall but it's not fall – I have ideas for you! No need to feel stuck, when getting dressed for the day!

Still Warm Outside?

Consider just wearing the colors of fall. You can take one of your dresses from the summer and just add a tee or sweater over the top for a fall look, slip on some sneakers, and you're done. Old Navy has a great selection of tees. Wrap a sweater or a sweatshirt around your waist, and you've completed your look!

Jacket Weather?

I found this jacket and it appealed to me because of the neckline/collar – so different. Look for that when shopping. Just a little something different in the collar or sleeve or pocket, and pick it up and wear it!

Summer Skirt Still Works

Maybe you have a summer skirt and you're about to put it away until next year. Don't! Wear it with your sweaters or flannel or jackets, add booties and/or tights (if it's cold) and continue to enjoy it!

Belts and Scarves

If you prefer more solid colors in your sweaters and tops, wear them. But add a little something with a scarf or a belt. Summer belts can totally be worn in the fall – so don't just discard them all.

A Good Cardigan

A staple in your fall closet should be a few good cardigans. I recently was gifted this beautiful black one that's cozy, has great texture, and it's in black. I can never have enough black cardigans. They go with everything!

Fall Orange

I'm not a loungewear person but recently was gifted this set from Third Love and I love the color and the coziness. It can be worn so many ways, with just the top with jeans, or just the bottoms with a sweatshirt, or with tees underneath – or however I choose!

Leather Bag

I don't know what style you love, but the crossbody bag that looks sort of like a fanny pack, has been my recent fave. I found a pretty leather one by Spikes and Sparrow at Marshalls. It's casual but also dressy, and is great for holiday shopping or traveling.

Fun Shoes

I found these recently at Nordstrom Rack and decided that they will go with so much! And...they're comfortable! That duo is a win/win for me.

Three Moms – Being Good Stewards – by the Cousins

Mom of Three

We do talk to our kids about taking care of rooms, valuables, toys, time, and why we need to get things done. A few ways we've work on it this year in particular is through the redoing of our chore chart, and also homework – those two areas. Friends want to play after school, but then if homework isn't done the kids are whiny later. So first is stewardship is with homework and friends. 30 minutes to eat a snack, and then homework before play. The great part is after a few days, they adjusted to eating while doing homework so they can have more time to play.

We redid our chore chart and instead of having everyday chores, we came up with nine things – three daily they all do – three weekly to do by Friday – and the other three they rotate. Daily picking up island, picking up living room, and taking care of pets. Our family space needs to be clean! I've been really bad at picking up daily, so now we do it as a family – everyone picks up their stuff – we do this together – and we set a timer (timers are great!) We are leading by example and it's working well! The weekly chores are laundry, vacuuming and clean rooms. I hang up the kids' clothes, but they do drawers and bins. The other three items they rotate are between dishes, bathroom and trash recycle. They check it off, and by Friday they get an allowance. They want the money and that motivates them. Then they have to be stewards of their money – requirement is to give to our giving jar and a savings jar – then doing a family giving jar (we again are leading by example) and will pray about where to give and how to save.

Our youngest can participate and this new system has worked great. The kids feed off each other and encourage each other to work and get their money. Competiveness works! They are learning about money and chores, and hopefully these values will stick with them. It also helps us be accountable as a family and as the parents.

Finally, we are praying as a family each night (we take requests and a person to pray for) – it's cool to hear them pray. They are becoming aware of needs around them. We are then adding in monthly scriptures and things like that!

It's hard to teach stewardship because I just want to do it and get it done, but that did not work. It's been a resetting of habits for us and teaching the kids why. We also let them make such a mess and they didn't like their mess. They have lost and broken things. In the summer, I threw away whatever they left on the floor – and that worked because they didn't want to lose things they valued. We use the word "value" more than stewardship.

Mom of Two

My girls are ages 3 and 5 so they really don't have homework yet, and we don't have a time management schedule yet. But teaching them stewardship at this age is mainly with their toys, clothes and their rooms.

Their possessions can become obsessive, which means they get so attached to one thing and if it's taken away – it's the end of the world! We try to teach them to be grateful for things they

have. Maybe someone else has one pair of shoes, and that's it! And when they grow out of toys or clothes, we talk about the process of putting those things aside to share with other kids.

Taking care of what they do have, for example, is in the case of markers. The girls leave off the caps and the markers dry out, and this upsets them both. So when the girls leave off the caps, the markers are then tossed. This shows them the importance of taking care of what they have. We have conversations often of how we must take care of things.

Sometimes we might be cleaning and I will ask one to help clean up, and they ask "Why do we have to, Mommy?" We then remind them that the home belongs to all of us, and we must take good care of all of our stuff. Just having conversations and showing by example...all of this helps.

Both girls have banks, but taking care of moneys and costs, etc. but we aren't there yet with stewardship! Maybe soon. But I do enjoy hearing how other moms deal with these things as their kids grow up!

Mainly, we have conversations, show them, and work with our kids at the appropriate age as we see the need.

Mom of Four

This is a tough question and so different with each kid. It's sometimes one step forward and five steps back! This is a daily thing we work on, and it's constant and ongoing! We have to remind and remind and remind.

Specifically, spending time with God and creating that habit, we do that more as a family rather than individually. But my prayer is that our family time grows their hunger for God's word. They do read on their own some, but our goal is to continue our family habit and hope that translates into their own.

Our kids are very motivated in school and church and their activities, so they work very hard. But at the same time, it's easy to get distracted with playing and TV, etc. We mostly manage their time for them at the end of the day. Our oldest gets a bit more freedom. None of our kids has a TV in their room or technology, except music. As family, we watch TV as a reward after chores and responsibilities are done.

Being a good steward of our stuff – well at the end of the day – we have too much! We have so many toys and things, it can be overwhelming. This is probably our biggest challenge. On a weekly basis, our kids have to clean their rooms, and this is required before friends can come over. This is a motivator instead of being a good steward, at this point in our family's experience.

Tried and True – Prepared! – by Marcy Lytle

If you're like me, you love the holiday season so much, but the cost of everything can be overwhelming by the time the stockings are stuffed, the meals are prepared, the gifts are wrapped, and the end of the year is near. I've found that it helps to start early for lots of reasons, so that the last couple of weeks before Christmas are not so hectic. You might actually be able to enjoy and savor the moments, instead of rushing here and there. I've put together a calendar/schedule to help with your budget and your time. You're welcome to print it out and keep it near to help you feel some cheer!

October:

Gather lists from family members, make your own of all your to-dos – After you've made your lists, ask for help and give part of that list to someone else. Make a folder or buy a spiral and list each person's name, your budget, and gift ideas for purchase and cost. Stick with your budget. If you can spend \$100 per person, or \$300, or \$50, write it down so that it's there before you. List out each thing and its price as you buy...

Purchase paper goods – plates, napkins and cups as well as wrapping paper and ribbons for now through the end of the year. (Big Lots and Target or even online are great resources.) If you take the newspaper, use it for wrap – works great! Tissue paper is great for stockings, if you wrap those gifts. You'll need: paper, tape, ribbons and markers (skip tags, just write their name on the package – so quick and easy!) - Place all of this in a big bin in a closet or the garage for easy access and keeping things neat.

Purchase all stocking gifts – These add up, so spend a week or so visiting stores or looking on line for those stocking gifts for your family. Consider: warm socks, retro candy or gum, small candle, tiny flashlight, coffee, soap, lotion, nail polish, magazine subscription, a movie ticket, fridge to-do list, earrings, bookmark, etc.) Place these all in a bag (those dollar bags found at checkout) and hang on a hanger in the closet for stuffing later.

Order online – Now is the time to order online, so that your packages are sure to arrive on time, you have time to check them out and wrap them, etc. Especially if someone wants a specific item that might be a hot item to go fast, or from a website that's not Amazon.

Make any homemade items – If you're industrious and want to make homemade seasonings or other kitchen gifts, or frame pictures you've printed out, or create something for a few folks, set aside an entire day or two to get this done. If it's a kitchen gift, you could even wrap in a dish towel!

November:

Delegate Thanksgiving meal items and kids' activities and décor – Make your Thanksgiving meal list and decide where it will be held, and who will be coming. Communicate the who, the what and the where to all members. Consider inviting a family without a family.

Decide on your holiday décor – Get down all of your decorations and see if you need to purchase any lights, pillows, candles, etc. and make a list of what you can afford and what you want to buy. Get what you need. You can always snip branches from your yard and slip into a clear vase, and you'll have beautiful greenery that makes you smile!

Organize your gifts – Your orders are arriving and you're starting to feel the pressure. Consider a tub for each family where you store the gifts as they arrive, or a bag for each person. If you have a free closet rod, these can hang in bags on hangers. If not, clear a path in the garage for these bins or bags. Wait until all gifts are in before you wrap – so that you can see what you have and what you still need.

Enjoy the meal on Thanksgiving Day – Use those paper goods you bought instead of your fine china – seriously a time saver and there are SO MANY pretty options. If you've delegated well, you'll have someone else with the kids' activities, someone delegated to clean up, and others delegated to bringing dessert, etc. GIVE THANKS. This is an amazing activity that will lower your blood pressure and make you breathe.

Finish shopping for Christmas gifts – If you finish by December 1 you can then wrap with ease and fun, while you watch Hallmark movies and listen to Christmas music all of the month of December up until Christmas Day.

Send your Christmas cards – email or snail mail – your choice. It's easy to send it via email, attaching pictures, and you're done. If you must send by mail, make a night of it, with snacks and music, and someone to help you make it enjoyable.

Prepare guest rooms – If you're having guests this holiday season, check your room and bath that they will be using, and make sure sheets and linens are clean and perhaps a personal touch is present. Maybe a magazine, some lotion and a few snacks in a basket might work!

Finish shopping – Finalize all purchases before the end of the month, so that next month is actually fun. Look over your lists, check off what's arrived, and tally up your totals.

Put out your decorations – Make an afternoon of it – trim the tree – hang the lights – and watch a movie. You've gotten so much done already! Don't overdo it to make yourself tired. If you have lights and color and fragrance, you're all set for the season!

December:

Make a reservation for a Christmas outing for fun – to look forward to. It can be a dinner out, a concert, a stroll, a Christmas movie – something on the calendar for your enjoyment.

Spend nights by the fire wrapping gifts – If there's no fire, then light candles. Watch a movie, listen to music, and wrap and label, then place under the tree or back in the bins til Christmas morning.

Plan your Christmas menu – Again, delegate to others so that you're not doing it all. If a huge meal is stressful, lay out a spread of charcuterie items that require no baking or cooking at all!

Add in sprigs of rosemary and light candles on the table, and everyone can choose and make their own plates! Easy and so pretty and tasty!

The week before Christmas *breathe and enjoy the view* – Presents are wrapped, meal is planned, rooms are ready, décor is out, and now you can just clean and breathe and actually see the sights and sounds of the season.

Sit and watch your family and give thanks. Attend that event you reserved.

After Christmas, rest and take one day at a time as you clean, put away, and give thanks some more.

Celebrate the New Year by putting up your feet or dancing in the street! You made it, you enjoyed it, and you even smiled.

*** Charcuterie spread: olives, nuts, cheeses, crackers, bread, jams, dips, fruit (grapes, strawberries, etc.), deli meats or hard salami slices – all just lined up on a tray or huge board. And for dessert – cookies and candies all spread out, as well.



HOME

A Night to Remember – Eight Legged Creatures – by Marcy Lytle

It's the month of Halloween, and I bet lots of us will have spider webs strung across our homes or fences with plastic spiders stuck inside. Last year, we ordered a huge spider to hang outside, as we decorated for our pumpkin carving party. Spiders are fascinating and scary, at the same time. I know grown men that will run at the sight of one. And I know a little girl that will pick up a daddy long-leg for fun. But what if eight legged creatures were part of our time alone with God, as we learn about the wonder of these scary little things...

I read that spiders are associated with Halloween because they dwell in deep dark places, and they're spooky, so we use them for this holiday fun. Let's read about their properties and how they might not be as scary as we think. Other things we fear might not be, either!

Preparation: Find a spider web in the yard or even in the house for viewing...and/or give each person a plastic spider or a stuffed one, for the object of interest. And if you can, make these cool oreo spider snacks for all to enjoy! <https://www.blessthismessplease.com/easy-oreo-spider-halloween-snacks/>

Did you know that spiders are responsible for eating hundreds of insects from our yards? That's a good thing.

- Spiders jump and that's part of why they're so scary! Do you jump when you see a spider? Why, or why not? What other things make you jump in fear?
- Did you know that most spiders have eight eyes? Aren't bugs fascinating? What other body part on a spider has eight?
- Some spiders are poisonous so it's best not to touch them. It's best to never pick up bugs or pests in the yard, without asking. Some are okay for holding, like pillbugs, and others should only be seen and not touched.
- The silk that spiders use to form their webs is very strong. Some say it's stronger than steel!
- They tune the strands of their webs like the strings on a guitar, to detect certain vibrations. Did you know this fact? Every creature in the earth has such particular characteristics we could never even imagine them all.
- Some spiders do somersaults at a rate of 3 feet per second! What? Can you do a somersault?
- Spiders can pretend to be ants to fool their predators. Pretend to be an ant and see how hard it is.

Lots of spooky things tend to scare us in the dark, mostly because we cannot see well, and shadows often form that cause us to be spooked. But here's what God's word says about scary things:

Isaiah 41:10 says we don't have to fear because God is with us, always. We are never alone. Even in the darkness when we're falling asleep at night.

II Timothy 1:7 says a spirit of fear is not from God. He only gives us power and love. When we feel afraid, we can speak to that fear, and receive his power and love.

Deuteronomy 3:22 says we don't have to be afraid, because the Lord will fight for us. He stands at the rooms of our doors at night and guards us while we sleep!

What other things cause you to be afraid?

Halloween doesn't have to be a scary time. It can be a time to be spooky and silly, but not evil and scary. We are loved by God, he's always with us, and we have the power to rest in his arm when it's dark and the night settles in...

Eight legged creatures. Fascinating and amazing. As all of creation is...

An Adage A Day - The Three Wise Monkeys – An Adage a Day

I have always loved monkeys. When I was a little girl, I wanted a pet monkey so much. We lived in the country, and I had lots of cats and dogs, but having a monkey would have been like having a baby. Monkeys may not be a popular pet now, but this was not a totally uncommon event at that time, and I wanted one. My mom took me to the pet store with the instructions that I could get any pet except a monkey. I hoped maybe I could change her mind when she saw how cute they were in person. I had reassured her I would take care of it and clean up after it. She would not have to do anything. When we got to the pet store, another little girl was there getting a pet. also. She got the monkey, and I came home with a parakeet. That poor bird never knew what she was up against trying to be my pet.

Oh well, we did have those monkey figurines that represented an ancient proverb. Remember the Three Wise Monkeys, “See no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil?” Each monkey had their prospective body part, eyes, ears, and mouth, covered with their hands. I was always fascinated by these monkeys and wondered about their meaning. This is an expression that is used to help us remember to turn away from wrong activities or thoughts. They are called the “Three Wise Monkeys” and originated in the 17th Century in Japan, although China has a similar set of phrases from the 2nd to 4th Century B.C. These phrases also sometimes include a fourth action, “Make no movement,” also described as “Do no evil.”

Whenever I think of these actions toward evil, it brings to my mind another, a fifth, and to me most important action and phrase, “Fear no evil.” We all know where this phrase originated. It was first written in Psalm 23:1-4 by King David in 1000 B.C.

It says, “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

This has been quoted ever since it was written along with the rest of this Psalm 23 verses. What’s so important about these five instructions, actions, and even commands toward evil? We all know the answer to this. They are from God. And when we are our weakest, God is at His strongest.

It’s October, the month of Halloween, another favorite of mine. It’s more fun than a barrel of monkeys! Halloween started out as a religious holiday, but it is now centered around evil, scary, non-religious activities. So, when I’m out and about celebrating Halloween the way we do, I will fear no evil! I will not give in to “monkey see, monkey do” and imitate some of the actions going on around me even though I love Halloween. I know where a lot of these evil fun and games come from, and they are not from God.

I will remember the wise monkeys and the fifth instruction given by God Himself and later by Jesus in Luke 12. To add a little monkey business to these thoughts, another favorite phrase of

mine is "Fear not." I love how it's in the Bible 365 times. That's one a day! I will think of this phrase every day, especially during October, and I hope you will too. That, my friend, is nothing to monkey around about.

Chipped China - Broken and Beautiful... - by Jennifer Lytle

...when life is perfectly imperfect.

On one of those non-essential shopping trips, I found a gold-framed tabletop marquee sign. It could be helpful for just about every imaginable occasion.

Envisioning it as a display for a sign-in sheet at church or as a prop for birthdays and special events helped me decide to place the item in my shopping cart and check out with it. I could use it as church-nursery room decor and a fancy price display for one of the many sales events my daughter hosts.

After choosing and displaying the marquee on a prominent spot on the wall, I walked into the room one morning and found it had crashed to the floor. The frame had broken, and the phrase, *Made to Shine*, was scattered.

For a moment, I considered throwing the marquee out. It wasn't essential to keep the item. I could replace or live without the decoration. Something stopped me from tossing the piece, and I gathered the shards of the frame from the floor. Perhaps I could assemble the broken parts again and put them all together.

After several days, I returned to the pile of shards from the broken frame, determined to reassemble the pieces. At the least, I could find the visibly missing parts from the outer layer and put those in place. After trying for a good 30 seconds to locate the first matching side, I laughed and threw those broken pieces away. Then, I found a new prominent area to display my beautifully broken, framed sign.

Now that I write this, I may need to place it on one wall of my counseling room. Perhaps the sign can read, *Broken and Beautiful*.

That's what a restored life in Christ is. We're not perfect. We don't physically look amazing, though we can look nice. We don't have perfected human relationships, though certainly, we can develop healthier ones.

Restored life is about forgetting what lies behind, whether that's an inexpensive "frame" or a "top-shelf" designer product. It's not WHAT we are that gives us meaning and beauty. It is WHOSE we are that provides us with value, meaning, and purpose. In the same way that I prominently displayed my broken gold-framed marquee, Christ places us in places of honor and blessing for HIS namesake and purpose. May HIS message be the one others read when we give HIM our brokenness in exchange for HIS crown, glory, and beauty.

I Don't Do Teenagers – Mid Semester Smiles – by Marcy Lytle

By now, the first semester of the school year is half over, and your teens have either made friends or not, found their place on a team or in a group or not, and they've made good grades or not, or all the things that teens deal with once school begins. Maybe you're all too busy to even breathe because of activities and lessons and all the things that teens do. Now is a great time to set aside a night for a date with him or her, to affirm, listen, and pray – and have fun – with that soon to be an adult in your home. Here are a few ideas for a night out with your teen:

Dad and son – One Saturday or Sunday afternoon, pick up burgers and shakes and enjoy in a park. Ask him how his life is going, and listen to his answers. Affirm his strengths. Pray with him over any concerns. Then find a mini golf place and go, and play, and laugh. Lots of hugs when the date is over.

Mom and son – Take him shopping for a new pair of shoes, and talk in the car and tell him what you love about him. Ask him about his day. If he drives, let him drive you on this date. Head back home and play video games with him. Learn how to play, and let him teach you. Enjoy his favorite snack. Pray with him before hitting the hay.

Dad and daughter – Tell her you're picking her up right after school to head to the mall. Get a pretzel and lemonade and sit in the food court and visit about her life, her worries, etc. Tell her she's beautiful and how much you love her. Let her pick out a pair of new earrings. On the ride home, stop at a park and listen to some music in the car, then pray with her.

Mom and daughter – Pick a craft or a dessert or something to make together, and set aside an evening for this. First, go for a walk before dark and just talk and enjoy the scenery. Arrive back home and put together your creation as you laugh and talk and share...and then pray. Tell her what you love about her.

Parents with all teens – Maybe you have several teens in your house, as well as toddlers and elementary age kids. Take the family out for an afternoon picnic in the park. Take Frisbees, balls to throw, puzzle books and other books to read, snacks and drinks, blankets and kites. Take time to endorse the family unit away from schedules and homework and lessons and games. Talk, laugh, pray and play together.

All of the above can be tweaked to fit your own kids' needs and your own family's likes. Your teen may scoff and not want to come. She may say she has other plans. They all may despise family outings and only want to hibernate in their rooms. All of that's normal. However, invite him/her/them and make this a regular thing every few months. Make sure the time is spent affirming and loving, and listening, and then praying. Love them. Love them some more. And then love them again.

You're building a foundation of love upon which they will always fall...when they fall...and you'll be there to help them stand again, surrounded by love.

Practical Parenting – The Play Box – by Marcy Lytle

I recently gave my daughter's kiddos a huge box of all sorts of activities, because they were all in quarantine. I loved putting it together and thought it might inspire you moms, aunts or grandmothers to put one together for your kids, too. It can totally be for quarantine, but also would make a great family Christmas gift, or even a great tub (or bag) to have for when the kids come over, or you're asked to watch them!

Here's what was inside:

1. Muck soup ingredients – spices (from the dollar store), smarties, noodles, etc... with a few aluminum pans and a wooden spoon for playing outside on the porch and “creating” soup. Not to be eaten, of course...
2. Popsicle sticks and glue – for building and creating something using their imagination!
3. Wash the car bucket – a bucket with rags and soap and sponges for a day when energy needs to be expended and the family car needs a bit of cleaning!
4. Paint with water – another activity for the driveway or concrete porch. Just include large paintbrushes and that same bucket from above and let the kids fill it with water, and then “paint away.” As it evaporates, they can paint over and over again!
5. Army and Marbles – Those sets of army men are great to have on hand, along with large marbles, for a game in the hallway or foyer of the house. If you don't want to use marbles, use hot wheels! The kids set up the armies on either end of the space, and roll to see how many of the “enemy” they can take out for the win!
6. Hide n Seek in Salt – Using a large box of Epsom salt and a deep small pan, fill it and hide under the salt small things like tiny dinos, dice, gumballs, pencil huggers, etc. As they hide and seek, they can trade landscapes and seek again.
7. Thank you notes – Teach kids the kindness of handwritten notes; and have them sit and write and color and mail a note to at least three people! Or just draw a picture to share!
8. A box of cards – If they kids are old enough, teach them how to play Battle. It's a good time to learn the value of the Jack, Queen, King and Aces!
9. A new movie – Look for those \$3 or \$5 movies in bins at the big stores, and add a couple in the box.
10. Art box – I found a marbling set that included several projects, for the kids to paint and create. Everything was included in the box!

Most of the above items were found from just walking around the dollar store, but some were found in discount stores or on the shelves at Five Below. It's easy to (over time) just collect small activities and ideas, so that their tub or bag is always full, in case someone is stuck at home, has a boring day, or Mom needs a break while the kids play.

Tiny Living – Harder than Ever – by Leyanne Enterline

School is back in session!

Typically we go year round with our studies but our actual physical classes, where we meet in person, are back in session. Homeschooling while tiny living does become a bit challenging. I have found it harder than ever to stay organized in a small space. As the boys get older the books seem to be more in abundance and get larger!

I try to keep the boys books in their backpacks and pull things out one at a time as we work on each subject. The backpacks stay in the “living room” area. But even today one of my son’s books got put in among the others, and so one was missing for class! Luckily, it was the one book that wasn’t needed, but I was prepared for drama! The boys love to be prepared and that incident was going to cause havoc!

I’m finding it hard to stay organized even with scheduling. The boys each go to class on separate days, so it is sort of nice to have that one on one time to really dial in on what each one needs to accomplish. However, keeping track of all assignments and who has what has been a challenge for me. I feel like with the “covid” year, things were much more lax, and now it’s go, go, go!

The kids do have a teacher other than me, which has been such a blessing to have some help! I do, however, need to have all the teacher guides so we can go over more in detail what they learned in class. So now, adding all those books to our tiny space has been an ordeal. The “walkway” on my side of the bed is now the “teachers work area,” if you can call it that. From giant teacher books to extra notebooks, papers, binders, stapler, hole punch, graph paper, reading books, sticky notes, pencils, markers, folders...it’s a bit crowded!

I love what these kiddos are learning and the sweet amazing community that we are a part of, even if we are doing most of our work in a tiny space! We will figure it out and be grateful for what we have!

Remember love grows best in tiny spaces!



YOU

Healthy Habits – *Wordly Wisdom* – by Marcy Lytle

I grew up reading the bible, which is a great thing to be taught to do, because it's definitely a healthy habit for my spiritual and physical well-being! However, as I've grown older, I realize that the way I read it wasn't always the healthiest and didn't produce all of the fruit it could have, had I read it in a better way. I'll explain what I mean below. Reading the Bible is such a good practice, but it can become a ritual that has no meaning at all, except to check off on our to-do list. And that's like using a night cream that expired 10 years ago. All of the good effects have faded, and the product isn't working like it could, were it fresh and new!

- I used to read the bible at night so that I could feel "approved of" by God. I now know that he approves of me without rituals. And I can freely read it as I desire, and that makes it so much more enjoyable!
- I used to read snippets, or pull out verses to help me through the day. For example, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," might help me on a particularly hard day. Now, I read the context around the verse – who it was written to, what else was being said, and richness has erupted from the pages!
- I skipped over the boring books of the bible, except on those years when I tried to read the bible in its entirety because that seemed like a noble thing to do. I recently read a synopsis of each book (just in the contents of my bible) and was blown away by the connection and importance of each book and its message.
- I often felt condemnation from certain verses about attitudes of the heart, and those plagued my mind. I now realize that any instruction is for my good, not for my shame. That's so freeing!
- I listened to sermons and others quote verses or phrases way out of context, to suit their own agenda or message. I now look up things I don't understand or sayings I've never heard, to see if they indeed were taught with good intent.
- I used to feel guilty if I didn't read "spiritual books" that others were reading, for growth and knowledge. I now choose to read only the bible (unless something else grabs me) because it's honestly come alive to me as I study and read the stories, not just the quotes!
- I used to feel guilty as a child if I placed another book on top of my bible on a shelf. How silly is that? But that's what legalism does. I now have the bible available on line so that silliness is gone, and the pressure that came with performance.

Think about your bible reading. Is it boring, do you feel worse after reading, find yourself disinterested, or feel lost because you don't know where to even begin? Start with a topic that's resonating in your own heart – like maybe fear is something you struggle with. Look up the word "fear" on biblegateway.com and skim through some verses. But instead of reading the verse only, click and read the story behind the verse, the context around it, and look up other commentaries on the subject. Listen to His voice as you read and search what prompts you search, and be amazed. Stay away from those sites that do anything other than present the Word in context, and let the Word strengthen you and bless you.

After all, His Word alone is so powerful in making us leap for joy instead of wallow and wonder.
Try it! And your relationship with Him will become healthier than ever...

Life in a Nutshell – Just a Season – by Jill Montz

Mother's Day 2020 my mom bought me a beautiful Ixora (sometimes called the Flame of the Woods) and planted it in what is now one of my all-time favorite pots (elephants are my spirit animal). That summer the delicate clusters of yellow flowers grew and filled the crown of the plant with blooms all summer long. It brought me great joy and many smiles every time I passed the pot. I valued it a great deal, as finding joy during the hard months of 2020 was sometimes difficult to come by.

Because I cared about this plant so much, I brought it inside my home as fall and cooler temperatures began to approach last year. For months, I still smiled as I passed by it sitting next to my windows in my formal dining room (my dining room table has hosted very few large family dinners, but it has held my most precious plants for well over a decade.) Even during Snovid or Snocalypse (whichever you prefer) my Ixora had green leaves and was thriving in my thankfully warm house.

As spring came near, I began to see tiny yellow blossoms throughout the green leaves. They were wound up tight, but I knew they were getting ready to bud and bloom. When Mother's Day came and went, I decided it was time to return the pot to its prominent position in nature where it could feel the warmth of the sun on its budding petals and the wind blowing through its green leaves. But Mother Nature can be a fickle lady at times, and this spring we saw many cool days and nights by Texas standards. Often, I had to pull my Ixora into the garage to shield it from lower than normal nighttime temperatures.

Then one day, I walked outside to find all the leaves and delicate petals had fallen from the plant. I guess the temperature that night (while not close to freezing) was just too low for my precious plant to take. Very few leaves held on and none of the tiny buds remained on what was now basically sticks in dirt, in my favorite pot. I was heartbroken.

But I was determined to keep it alive if at all possible. For weeks there was nothing. I had to get up very close to see any life trying to hold on to the brown twigs. Then after a month or so, some leaves slowly started unfolding in the hot summer sun. It was a slow process and there were no tiny yellow flowers to speak of. However, I still loved the plant and continued to care for it and nurture it as nature ran its course.

Then, as the Texas summer was coming to a close, I passed by my Ixora one morning as I was watering all my pots and with a sweeping glance something caught my eye. I saw the tiniest curled up little yellow buds tucked within the green leaves. To my surprise, I was about to have some very late bloomers show up in my garden. I was overjoyed (seriously my neighbors probably think I am crazy as much as I talk to and take pictures of my plants.) I was jumping up and down and telling my Ixora what a great job it did and how proud I was that it was finally ready to bloom! Better late than never, again in my opinion.

As the days went along and I began to see more and more yellow buds popping out, I was reminded of times in our pecan orchards where our trees have faced similar setbacks. There have been a few over the last 40 years, but one in particular was very rough.

One summer, many years ago, when the pecan trees at our home orchard were very young, they suffered 2,4-D herbicide damage that drastically burned back their leaves and caused severe damage to many of them. This occurred because an aerial applicator was spraying the chemical on mesquite trees down by the Red River several miles from us, but the wind picked

up and the spray drifted to our orchards thus causing the damage. While it didn't kill the trees, it definitely affected their growth and set them back in how they were maturing.

Today if you were to look at these same trees you wouldn't be able to tell they suffered a potentially devastating blow. While the 2,4-D damage harmed them initially, they rebounded and were able to continue to grow and eventually produce pecan crops. This year they are not only big, tall, and full of healthy green leaves ready to turn golden yellow as fall fast approaches, but they are also loaded with a bumper crop of pecans. As we get ready to harvest this month, I am forever grateful that the chemical that was meant to kill trees thankfully only slowed down our pecan trees' progress.

Looking back on my own life, I can see events that caused me to be setback in areas I was once flourishing in. In high school I was bullied for a time. In college I faced bouts of depression off and on. I went through a divorce. I struggled often early on as a single mother, and actually there are days I still question if I am a good enough mom to Dotty. Even now I face many seasons of doubt and struggle in both my professional and personal life.

There are times when I feel like I am blooming bigger and better than ever. And there are times when I feel like I am almost dead in certain areas. Yet during both, I know they are just a season in life. Sometimes my growth is stunted by things out of my control, but nothing has killed me yet. I have survived all the hard days and I take heart knowing that, with the help of God, I will survive many more to come and will reap a bountiful harvest of blessings as well.

John 16:33 Jesus says...

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Life Right Now – My Yes – by Hanna Bouck

Have you ever had those moments in your heart when Jesus just talks to you and you know it's Him?

The first time I remember this happening without a doubt was my senior year of high school. I was 17 years old and had left the country for the first time on an overseas missions trip. My heart was disinterested most of the time...until the last couple of days. The last night, before we flew out in the morning, we had a final service saying bye to all the people we met, accompanied by a time of prayer. That is when, for the first time in my life, I was completely overcome with emotion. So much so that a mother figure in my life at the time came over and propped me up on her shoulder as I completely soaked her shirt through with my tears. And they didn't stop there. I had never experienced such emotion of grace and grace speaking through the cracks in my heart in such a way.

In that same moment, I laid down my 'no's and my-ways' that I had been holding onto and let surrender give way to breakthrough. It was also the most audible (not physically audible mind you) that I have ever heard the Lord in my life.

He spoke, "You are going to live your life to serve."
I simply said, "Okay."

At the time I didn't know what that meant or what that looked like, but I knew somehow, I'd find out. And the crying definitely didn't stop there. For what felt like a fleeting time, insecurity left and I began to see the world differently. And as time progressed, I still cried pretty much all the time. It was in one of the many tear-filled moments I was overcome once more while talking to a friend and quickly began to apologize for the sudden tears (I felt like a basket case.) Without hesitation, he paused and refused my apology sharing, "Hannah, don't apologize for what's healing in your heart. It's the Lord beginning to break your heart for what breaks His."

It hit me like a bolt of lightning and like a gentle hug all at once.
What it was the Lord was actually doing in my heart, and the change that was taking place in it. I share all this humbly, as here I am almost 10 years later, still figuring it out.

Over the past few years, specifically, I had begun to lose sight of what the Lord spoke to me on that windy night in Latin America. I had all but lost hope that there was anything He would actually ask me to do or reveal to me. However, in a quiet, alone moment as I was meditating in a time of worship, I looked up to what I was hearing and saw a lady worshipping.

She began to yell boldly into the crowd,
"He is for you! He is for you!"

And in a season where I had felt dry and that the Lord had long forgot about the night shared above, I had this overwhelming feeling that she was speaking on my behalf breathing into existence the words I didn't have the power to say...

And then I heard Him say, "Will you still say yes?"
And to that my reply was, "You know I will. But PLEASE be with me. I don't know 'how' anymore."

And here's the reality. Right now, I don't know what my yes looks like now, just like I didn't know what it looked like when I first said it 10 years ago. I do know it's easier to say a three-letter word than it is to carry it out. So, here's my prayer right now:

Lord, you have my Yes. You had it 10 years ago, now, and 10 more years from now. The only difference is I feel much more tired than I did when I first answered your call. I feel fear in a deeper way and I feel the heaviness around me more, too. Please help me, teach me your ways, continue to break my heart for what breaks yours, and help me share your heart and the healing it brings. Please teach me to pray and how to continue to say yes. Make me aware of your presence. Amen.

Strengthening Your Core – Lifted Arms – by Marcy Lytle

We don't have to open doors to stores any more, as they open wide before us when we walk nearby.

We don't have to turn the key, because keyless entry is a thing in new cars.

We don't even have to move groceries and bags, because curbside and Instacart deliver on demand.

We don't have to lend a hand to a friend in need, because we can donate on line and be done.

In all of the above, our once busy and moving arms are more at rest than they are at moving.

We don't have to flip the pages of a book because earbuds provide easy listening to podcasts.

We don't have to clean the floors or the toilets, because housecleaning services abound.

We don't have to lift our bags since they all have wheels, making them glide beside us.

We don't have to grate or mix or stir, because convenience is available on the shelves before us.

In all of the above, our once working arms that moved and developed muscle are now flabby...

We don't lift our hands in class when we know the answer, because we're learning on line.

We don't stop by the road to lift a tire to change flat, because there's a service for that.

We don't raise our hands in surrender to His ways, because we don't understand so we wait till we do.

We don't push mowers and dig gardens, because there are lawn people and farmers' markets.

We have become a weak-armed society physically,

and yet we have more women and men with bulk and muscle than ever.

I thought about all of the above recently and how we could totally have buff arms if we had to participate in so many things that are now performed for us. I know that some have trended back toward more gardening, more work at home, and even more of the showing up with hands-on giving to neighbors. And that seems like a good trend.

As I wondered, I really thought about the hands up toward Him in surrender, and realized that the act of surrender has become a bad word. Women surrendering to men is for-sure not happening, because of abuse. Surrendering means defeat in a game, so we don't want that. And raising a white flag means the enemy has won.

Check out this verse. “I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands” (Psalm 63:4). There’s another verse that asks God to give us clean hands and pure heart, so that we not lift our souls to another. It seems that hands and souls are connected!

Lifting our hands up to Him acknowledges that He can carry what we cannot.

Lifting our hands in worship is an act of adoration for the One who made us.

Lifting our hands in surrender means our heart is postured to love and obey.

There’s nothing more beautiful, more healthy, more sustaining, and more bulk-building than lifting our arms physically as an act spiritually to the One who can help, open doors, provide a lift when we’re tired, or fill our hands so that we can give to help a friend.

I’m sure there’s nothing wrong with all of the conveniences we have today. I enjoy each one. But I do realize that my arms are probably not near as strong as the arms of the previous generation or two, when arms were used to carry and work and give. And I like to pause and think about things like this once in a while...

So that I remember to use my arms in His presence...always and forever.

Under Pressure – Above All – by Debbie Haynes

Keep guard of your heart – that’s what we are told to do in Proverbs 4:23. Hoping to gain wisdom from Solomon, I was reading over his words. A little background on this guy is that he was son of King David, raised to love and fear God, and blessed with wisdom at an early age. However, God’s plans for his people were not to have a king at all, but rather for God to be their King. Even so, God’s people demanded a king and God allowed it, and laid out very specific rules.

God set up the rules for the good of the people, as he did not want them dependent upon chariots and horses for might and strength for war, but to be only dependent upon Him, their King. In fact, Psalm 20:7 says that some will trust in horses and chariots, but we will trust in the name of the Lord our God.

Let’s fast forward now to I Kings 10 and see how Solomon measured up to these directives. I read that in one year all the gifts brought from admirers to King Solomon amounted to more than \$20 million in gold alone. But God never intended for this kind of wealth to be in the king’s house, as it would become a distraction. God didn’t say the king should be a pauper, but he did say he should not gather great wealth. Solomon went on to disobey all the rules and commands that God had given, including doing evil, taking multiple wives and turning toward other gods. He failed miserably.

God responded to this by taking the kingdom from Solomon and giving it to his servant. God always deals with our hearts! However, God had made a promise to Solomon and with David, Solomon’s father, and saved one part of the kingdom for Solomon’s son. The kingdom was then split up, with 10 tribes going to the north to another guy, and only one to Solomon’s son.

So what does Solomon then have to say to God, after all of his disobedience?

Proverbs 4 has the answer. He speaks to his son and instructs him to keep his steps straight, hold fast to instruction, keep away from evil men, and in doing so he won’t stumble. He also says the path of the just is as a shining light! And by verse 20 he’s actually pleading with his son to not make the same mistakes that he made.

“Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.”

Those words were spoken out of regret from Solomon’s own experience, and he wanted his son to avoid the same pitfalls. His disregard for God’s commands cost an entire nation, all because he didn’t guard his heart.

The only way for us to guard our hearts is to examine our thoughts and cry out to God, like David did when he asked for a clean heart. He asked for help in making his thoughts holy and pure, and even asked God to reveal to him the dark places that might cause him to stumble.

Above all, a pure heart, kept for God, will affect our present generation, the ones after us, and even entire nations...when we obey the one and only King...our God.



MARRIAGE

After 40 Years – Correction – by Marcy Lytle

I've found that as I've grown older with my sweet husband, I've been tempted at times to correct him, instead of compliment him. I've seen it in other couples as well. He does something that perhaps is embarrassing or not approved of, and the wife (or the husband) points it out and criticizes and shames, hoping that will do the job in correcting the behavior. But I have found that correction in a marriage, used like a mom correcting her child, is never a good thing and doesn't produce any good outcome. So I'll confess what I've done...

When eating, I've corrected his chewing habits and given him looks.

When at the theater, I've "shhhhh!" him and turned my head when he comments again...

When in the car, if he bites his nails, I've quickly reprimanded him on the germs he's ingesting.

Surely, you get the picture. It's easy to fall into a habit of correcting our spouses because we're around them so much that we see every little fault. If he leaves the toilet lid up, we slam it in disgust and let him know how rude that is. If he talks too loudly on the phone in a public setting, we grab his arm and lead him outside. I suppose it happens to all of us.

I've lately been focusing on compliments more, rather than correction. And if I truly have a concern, I'm trying to wait until a better time with a better attitude to bring up any subject, IF it needs to be addressed at all. Most of what I correct is just petty annoyances because I'm tired, being judgmental, or thinking bad thoughts towards this person that I love.

I've also tried to stop and think, *would I correct a friend in the same manner*, if that friend were at the table? No way. And yet my husband is my best friend, and I treat him so poorly.

Growing older together has its challenges, both physically and emotionally. We are settled in our ways, we've grown accustomed to just being ourselves, and our conversations perhaps are less well thought out...because time does that.

But my prayer lately is for vision to see all the good in him and speak up about that. Just last night, it was late when we got home and I was showing him a shelf I'd recently decorated and mentioned how it needed light. He proceeded to affix this cool touch light under the cabinet for me, and it wasn't an easy task. He was tired, but he loves to do these kinds of things. If I'd let my tiredness get the best of me, I would have perhaps corrected his method, how he was hanging it, tell him it was too late, and all sorts of things.

For once, I saw this man that loves me on the floor working hard, and I called him my hero.

My gosh. It made the rest of the evening wonderful. He was tired but happy that he'd given light to a dark space. I was tired and pleased with myself for speaking a compliment instead of a correction.

It was a good night. And I'm expecting many more of the same as we grow older and wiser, in word and deed.

Date Night Fun – Retro Ideas – by Marcy Lytle

We recently bought something at a junk store while traveling through the state of Iowa. I love finding old things that are mid-century modern for my daughter-in-law, because she decorates with that style. But I also personally enjoy finding a dish or a piece of garden décor, or anything at all really, that's different and catches my eye. All of that made me realize that date night fun can be had with some of these things, that we all might have or might want to look for, for fun times with him!

Peanuts, Coke and Movie – We found this really cute Planters peanut dish with four tiny serving bowls to go with at that junk store in Iowa. So a fun idea for date night is to use a bowl and four tiny ones, for serving actual peanuts! Why not? And if you haven't poured peanuts into a Coke, you haven't lived...really. Place the cokes on ice, the peanuts in a bowl, and invite another couple over for a movie. If you can find the movie *CODA*, I think it's the best film of the year!

Nostalgia Mini Waffle Makers – Have you seen them? They're so cute! If you don't have one, maybe you have another waffle maker or can purchase one, and have a waffle night with toppings date. This could be a great breakfast date, where you make the waffles together, cut and chop strawberries and pecans, and set a big cloth on the floor while you enjoy every bite. Or a late night date would work, as well. Start now making your Christmas lists, while you visit and enjoy the cooler nights ahead.

Vintage Vibes – Make a list of 3-5 vintage or junk or thrift stores and make your date night all about the hunt for something "new" to you. It could be a yard art, a new bowl or set of glasses, or an ice bucket, or a book or an old album. Dream of what you'll do with what you buy, then go home and use it! How fun would that be?

The Record Player – Do you have one? Maybe it would be fun to buy one, and a few records. Or did you know there are now coffee shops with record bars? There's one in Austin, where I live. Or perhaps a friend has one. Make it a night of playing records and albums, and dancing to the music. Look up a nostalgic recipe that brings you back to your childhood – maybe meatloaf and mac n cheese? Enjoy the evening.

Caramel Apples and Festivals – It's that time of year, so look up festivals in your area and go! Dress up in the hues of fall, and take home apples – or even go apple picking! Chop nuts, and dark chocolate, and make caramel sauce, and melt and slice and dip (see apple ideas on the TIPS page!)

Take Me Out to the Ballgame – We recently bought season tickets to watch ultimate frisbee. Maybe there are season tickets or high school games, or other sporting events you've not attended in forever. This could be a regular date night event – showing up at a game, enjoying the concession food fare, and rooting for a local team!

For Better or Worse – One in a Million – by Kaelin Scott

As I was pondering what to write about marriage this month, my mind kept drifting back to a conversation I had with my kids. We were talking about the story of Noah's ark and how, out of all the people on the planet, only one family was faithful to God. *Crazy, right?*

Then somehow, my scattered brain connected that line of thinking to marriage. I couldn't help thinking how, out of all the people on the planet, there's only one special enough to spend my life with. *That's crazy!*

Isn't it weird and cool how we find that one person? There are literally billions of fish in the sea, but only one is for me. I don't know why, but that's just incredible to me. And it has the fingerprints of God all over it. Only He could be talented enough to orchestrate something like that.

Sometimes it's easy to get irritated by my husband or put off by little things he does. And I know I annoy the heck out of him often, as well. But when I think about our story, how we came together, all we've been through...a little bit of that annoyance chips off and melts away. He's my person, through thick or thin. And no matter how much we bug each other, we fit together perfectly.

Just like Noah and the ark, God designed us with a purpose, and part of that purpose is being together. My husband is part of my purpose. It sure is hard to be mad at him when I think about our marriage like that.

God gave marriage to us as a wonderful gift: a reprieve from the rushing waters of life all around us. It's something special and sacred and really cool. And when God brings two people together out of the millions of possibilities, it's never by accident. He knows exactly what He's doing. *That's crazy awesome!*

In This Together – Anything But Simple – by Bekah Holland

I'm going to be really honest with you. I have been struggling to put proverbial "pen to paper" (fingers to keyboard?). And I don't have a great answer for why that is. Nothing out of the ordinary is going on. Everyone is healthy. The kids are in in-person school. No crazy changes at work or in my marriage. In fact, I don't even know if what I'm writing right now is going to have anything to do with marriage, which in any other writing I do would be fine. Except the whole point of my being included in this magazine is that I am writing a marriage column.

Maybe I'm just off. Actually, that's sugar coating it. And I think we have enough sunshine-y facades out there without adding to it by sweeping my own messes under the rug. So here is the real deal. I'm not okay right now. I don't know if it's hormones, or chemical imbalance, just being drained, going too long without finding ways to fill my own cup, all of the above.

All of my life, I have been a glass half full, optimistic, find the good and lighten the mood kind of gal. Some of that I think stems from my people-pleasing side. I want people to feel happy and safe and comfortable, worthy and loved. Which sounds all sparkly and sweet, right? However, it says more about my selfishness than anything. Yes, I want everyone to be happy. But why am I so desperate for it? Willing to sacrifice myself to ensure it?

If I'm being honest, it's at least partially out of a desire to avoid conflict for my own comfort. I'm a highly sensitive person. I used to think those were just some descriptive words to describe how I feel. Apparently it's a whole thing and there are all kinds of articles and books on the topic. Who knew? So what does it mean? I can only tell you about my experience with it.

Even when I was a little girl, I remember feeling overwhelming fear or sadness but couldn't see anything around me that might cause it. I felt physical pain and did not have any logical explanation for the stomach ache, or body tension that would envelop me. I think it's just the way that God made me. He made me sensitive to the pain, hurt and struggle of the people around me. He made me sensitive to the joy and light and contentment, too.

But today it's hard to remember that part. I can be in a room full of people who are happy and smiling, but feel completely dark, like I'm taking on the weight of what those smiling faces are hiding behind the mask. I can't watch television shows or movies that show someone actively being harmed. Not just in an *I don't like this kind of thing* way, but even in works of fiction, watching or imagining someone in pain elicits a visceral response in me.

Sounds ridiculous. I know. If I didn't experience it, I would probably be skeptical too. And normally, after many years of practice, I can snap myself out of it. I go for a walk or sit in the sunshine, have a good cry, read a book. I know the things I can do to crawl out of the darkness that sometimes threatens to crowd out the light. Lately though, it's been harder and harder to find a way to breathe deep, and see the sun peeking through the clouds. My brain knows the right things I need to do. I need to exercise. I need to walk and feel the sunshine on my face. I need to reach out, talk to my friends, my husband. I need to figure out how to get out of my own head. I need to find something that brings me joy, makes me feel appreciated and brings me some sense of value.

It sounds simple. I already know what steps I should take. Just one foot in front of the other. But it feels anything but simple. Maybe some of you have felt this way. Maybe you felt alone. Maybe you thought you might be going crazy. Or maybe you think, "If I could just get past this

thing or the other thing and then I'll be able to take some time to take care of me." Take it from someone who is in the throes of denial. Nothing is going to make this better except you. No new milestone, achieved goal or phase you get through is going to fix this feeling. This dark, empty, lonely place you're pretending isn't real. It won't go away without a fight.

I know from experience. I know from times I've completely broken down after hiding my bit of darkness from my husband and people who love me. After "faking it til I make it" almost breaks me beyond repair. And I know what I have to do next. I know I have to walk from my office, straight into the arms of my husband who knows all about being in the depths of that darkness. Who wants to stand strong for me when I can't do it on my own. Who wants me to trust him with my ugliness, and not just continue to pretend I'm fine.

I hope you have a person who you can trust with your dark places, too. Because if you're anything like me, you have to work extra hard to believe that you are worthy of that kind of comfort and care. That the parts of you that you keep hidden are not too much for someone else to love you, because and in spite of. It's an exercise in trust. It is an exercise is being vulnerable. It's finding someone with a flashlight that will not just shine a light on your path, but will hold your hand, moving as slowly as you need, and reminding you that you are strong enough and capable enough to hold that flashlight and walk out of that tunnel, while they love you back into the light of day.

So I'm taking my first step now. Maybe you can take that step with me. And maybe, just maybe, we'll soon be able to see the rainbow after the rain, and know, without a doubt, that even the darkest night ends with the sunrise. And we can walk in the grace and mercy of a fresh start, each and every day.

"I will love the light, for it shows me the way.

Yet I will endure the darkness, for it shows me the stars."

OG Mandino



ENCOURAGEMENT

I notice plants.

Which plants are planted where, whether they're thriving or just surviving, are they natives, perennials or annuals, are they planted in sun or shade—these are some things I take note of. I notice beautiful landscapes, or it could simply be a healthy specimen, like the perfectly straight, well-shaped Little Gem Magnolia I saw the other day. It makes me happy to see plants placed in a spot well-suited to them, pruned and watered attentively so they can attain their full potential. On the other hand, sometimes I see shade-loving plants baking in the sun or sun-lovers shivering in the shade, some are pruned unnaturally to make them fit too small a space, and some are neglected so they become a tangled mess. Possibly the worst thing is seeing a plant so overgrown with vines or weeds that its natural attributes are almost completely lost—it's hard to see its true "self."

This *really* bothers me.

In spite of all the things we do to plants unintentionally or otherwise, it's remarkable how they manage to hang in there, clinging to life. They may be stunted or misshapen, withered or flowerless—they may not be living their best life, but they're alive, and there is always a chance for rescue. Considering these misplaced, overgrown, under watered botanical fellow earth-dwellers, my mind moves toward people I know or have known who are in the same boat. Plants and people, sharing a "boat"—yes, it's quite possible. Every living thing is part of God's miraculous interwoven creation. Maybe, in his goodness, he gives us hidden messages we can learn from if we observe and pay attention.

Truth be told, I once was like a misplaced, overgrown, and under watered plant. My nature is quiet and introverted. I prefer to blend into the background, if not be completely invisible, but, as a child, I unintentionally got the wrong message: "Your true self isn't ok, you should be different." Besides feeling uncomfortable in my own skin, I didn't know how to process my unconventional way of thinking. The Vietnam War protests, hitchhiking across the country, living in school buses and Woodstock were happening at the time. The status-quo seemed so meaningless; I was drawn to that sub-culture that appeared to be seeking something different—a better way. I eventually found out it had its own problems with its own set of vexing expectations.

Fast forward many years of living a crazy life of bad choices; I turned back to Christianity and was soon immersed in a new set of expectations—another mold, another kind of pressure to be and think "a certain way," to live up to standards that honestly felt unattainable. I tried—for too long. This way of living led me to strive unproductively, to compare detrimentally, and to judge unfairly. But there was something within me that, like a compass, steered me in the direction of true north. This is a unique benefit of turning one's life over to Yeshua (Hebrew for Jesus). He began to change me from the inside out. I began to understand God's grace. The more of me I surrendered, the more of the true me I found.

I recently attended a retreat where we did some soul work related to the ideas presented in Peter Scazzero's book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. Basically, he contends that in order to know God, we must know ourselves. This is an idea with ancient origins. Understanding how our past affects our present, being honest about ourselves, accepting our limitations, applying healthy boundaries, not pretending, and being the person God created us to be instead of letting the expectations of others dictate to us are some of the things discussed in the book. Most of us agree these are good things, but from personal experience, I know that, like the frog, it's sometimes hard to recognize that we're in the boiling pot.

Over time, I've learned that God's acceptance and love don't depend on my performance. I've learned to be at peace with myself and don't wrestle as often with simple things like when to say yes and no because I'm more comfortable with my limitations and setting boundaries. The closer my friendship with God becomes, the less I'm bound by "outside" expectations. Truth and transparency with him (and others) lets his surgical light shine through me, doing what only he can do in my soul. I feel more firmly planted in the right spot than ever before, and the tangle of weeds that obscured my true self are gone, for the most part.

So what does all this have to do with plants?

I think you can figure it out.

Moving Forward – Rest – by Pam Charro

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."
Matthew 11:28

I have been sorely in need of rest lately. Every area of life has just felt so exhausting and overwhelming. Don't get me wrong, I have been making time for God every morning. I re-surrender my life to him every day. I am well aware that his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

Yet it's been an unusually tough season and I have been tired.

Some periods of life just have to be uncomfortable in order for growth to occur. When I'm especially thirsty, a tall glass of ice cold water seems especially refreshing. When I haven't seen a close friend in several months, our fellowship feels particularly sweet.

I really needed this last break.

And, yes, I have made progress in laying down my burdens, in trusting God with them. He has a way of bringing a good outcome when I can't see one. No matter how awful events may seem, he's got this; it's never really the end of the world. And he loves it when I can just curl up into his arms and fall asleep.

" .. he grants sleep to those he loves."
Psalm 127:2

So, if, like me, you have felt a little too much of the weight of the world on your shoulders lately, may you be able to receive his loving rest today. All of the things you value most, every care and concern that is too heavy for you...

it is all safe with Him.

Rooted in Love - Finding Balance – by Kaelin Scott

Sometimes being a mom feels like the biggest contradiction. I'm always telling my kids that they can do anything, but then I'm also always saying, "Don't do that." Or I teach them that their voice matters, only to say, "Quiet down." I tell them to slow down so they don't fall and get hurt, but then I tell them to hurry up.

As I realized all of these inconsistencies in my parenting it sort of made me feel like a fraud. Or like maybe I'm messing my kids up. But then I put it all into perspective, and I see that it all comes down to one thing.

Balance

Moderation is key. Yes, what my children have to say is important, but that doesn't mean they have to scream at the top of their lungs. And just because they *can* do anything they set their minds to, doesn't mean they should climb up the fridge like a pair of monkeys.

I guess what I'm trying to say is this. Kids need to learn balance. They need to understand the concept of limitations. I absolutely want my kids to reach for the stars and believe that they can be anything. But at the same time, I want them to have common sense. If that makes me sound contradictory, I guess I'll take it.

But this lesson doesn't only apply to our kids. It's for us too. We have to have balance. We have to know our limitations. It's wonderful to apply ourselves and strive to achieve our goals, but we also need to know when it's time to rest. Along those lines, it's great for our voices to be heard, but we don't have to shout our opinions at everyone we meet (or write ugly comments anytime we disagree with something on Facebook.) Moderation is key. Too much of a good thing can sometimes be a bad thing.

Personally, I'm jumping headfirst into a lot of new seasons in my life right now. It's my first year of homeschooling, combined with starting a new job, and turning a new leaf in my writing career. All those things are amazing, but I have to find balance or I will spin out of control. Yes, I have to work hard. But I also need to rest. Yes, I have to dream big. But I also need to stay humble.

Sometimes in order to keep ourselves grounded, we have to be a little contradicting. We can't run too fast in one direction. We've got to keep ourselves balanced.

If I confused you with this, I apologize. My intention was just to share a little bit of what I'm going through – a little bit of my feelings – in hopes that someone might be able to relate. I hope you all are having a fantastic start to fall. And I hope you remember to keep your eyes on Jesus. He's with you, whatever you're going through.

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens."

Ecclesiastes 3:1

Simple Truths – Both are Good – by Marcy Lytle

On our recent trip this summer, we drove through an old Amish community, called the Amana Colonies, in Iowa. It was so fun. The old buildings where the Amish people lived and worked were still lined along the street, but now they were shops. And the communal buildings where they gathered to have meals together were now restaurants. We stopped in one for lunch. We read and heard about the Amish ways of sharing and having meals together, and it all sounds so pleasant and simple and calm. In fact, it sounds like maybe the way we ought to be – sharing and having “all things in common.”

However, also on our trip, we had dinner with a friend that grew up in the Amish way of life and when her family decided to leave, they were shunned. And shunning cannot be pleasant for anyone, and that practice certainly doesn't seem healthy or good or representative of Christ or his followers.

I began thinking about all of this and how life is so very different in the big cities. Everything belongs to individuals, we have fences to shut out neighbors and noise, and we park inside our garages, and perhaps may never even be seen by our neighbors. We work hard at our individual jobs and earn our wages, and we are taught to tolerate and accept everything that comes across our path, and nothing and no one is shunned. Some of this way of life is really nice as well, and we've come a long way and made progress, and we like our lives as they are.

However, it seems that we are a race that has to have either or, and we cannot meet somewhere in the middle. I find that many times we even place this thought pattern on God and our ways of representing Him. Here's what I mean:

In the New Testament we do read about how the people shared meals from house to house and had all things in common. But what can happen if we take that to an extreme is that we then become very insular and shut others out. And that wasn't the purpose or the outcome intended for a people of community.

There are other verses in the bible that talk of going out and calling others in off the streets, eating in homes of sinners, befriending and love our neighbors as ourselves. Again, what can happen is that we become so “open” that we have no boundaries for those in our homes, and even for our children. We can, if we're not careful, become judgmental and haughty because we're so *free* and we've realized what it means to reach out, that we shun those so-called Christians who haven't “arrived” like we have.

This is all a result of only reading the Bible in parts and pieces. It's a big YES that we should have community and gather and have meals with others, and share what we have among ourselves. But it's a big NO that we then block out the stranger or shun one of our own. And it's a big YES that we are to love every single person regardless of color, race or religion. But it's a huge NO that we then to develop attitudes that are not Christlike or take on the practices of the world like lying, cheating and stealing.

I'm not sure where we ever got the idea that somewhere in the middle of the openness and the closeness might not be the place to be. There will forever be this tension between those that

gather and close themselves in and those that leave their yards open with tables for all. And that tension, those looks of shame, and that judgment that arises on both sides of the fences or the open yards is not pleasant. It's not appealing. And it's not a way to live that represents our God.

Visiting that Amish community was so peaceful and I wondered what it would be like to live such a simple life of gardening and sharing. But there is certainly unrest and people break away when they're made to obey and perform, and the heart is of love is not present. Visiting the big city, like New York, is also appealing to me with its busyness and big lights and shows and people, such fanfare and fun! But it's expensive, it comes with its dangers, I wouldn't be able to keep up – I'm sure!

If we read the book of Ecclesiastes, we realize that the writer of those words also struggled with the enjoyment of life and the work that life required. And I don't know why there can't be beauty in the struggle. There can be family gatherings that are intimate and sweet, and then there can always be a chair open for the stranger too, one who's invited in to feast with us. It can totally be both, while we live and work and play and eat...and wait for the huge gathering of all who know Him.

After all, that's the purpose in the gatherings and the joy and the work and the play, of each and every day...to eventually wind up at the same table with every person far and wide.

Unearthly Thing - “Who Rescued Who?” – by Angela Dolbear

My precious 7-year old Chocolate Labrador, Abby, adores other dogs. She barks greetings, and wags her entire body when another dog walks by the black chain-link fence in front of our home.

She always seemed lonely whenever there wasn't another pup around. So, I began to pray asking God for another dog.

Periodically, I would remind myself that God would bring the perfect dog to our household. One that gets along well with our Abby, and also with our 10-year old black cat, Maddy. And that the new dog would be docile, and quiet, so I could continue to spend time writing uninterrupted by puppy antics.

This seemed like a tall order. And it was a very important decision, and I learned long ago to put all important decisions in God's hands. So I prayed confidently that He would do it.

And He did.

Scrolling through social media one day, on a post from a good neighbor—a saintly person who regularly rescue dogs—was a super sweet-looking pup, with over-sized ears and sparkly eyes. And a big smile.

I stopped scrolling and stared at the sweet doggy face for a few moments. I started to feel that familiar gentle tapping on my spiritual shoulder, along with a soft, “*That’s her.*”

I messaged my neighbor, and she brought the pup over so we could meet her. She seemed to fit right in our home, getting along like a long lost family member with me and my animal pals.

We started the adoption process to be the forever home for her.

“*Who rescued who?*” I saw this question on a site about adopting animals. Not that I needed rescuing—God has got me, every second of every day, that's for sure. But adopting a puppy brought up some deep down stuff that I needed help getting out from under. I did need rescuing from some bad habits.

Our new pup is an Australian Cattle Dog, also known as a Blue Heeler. How cool! Not that we have cattle that need herding, but I remember seeing this breed of dogs on the various vet shows my husband Tim and I love to watch on Disney+, and remembering how cool we thought the dogs were.

We named her Sally, after “Sally” from *Nightmare before Christmas*, because of her patchwork coloring, and because that movie means a lot to me (please see my [June 2020 article in THYME, “Judging Doesn’t Go with My Outfit.”](#) to learn why).

Since I knew nothing about this breed of dogs, I turned to the internet to begin my research to learn more about my new pup.

In my daily chore of walking the grounds of my yard, filling my industrial-size shovel with their processed dog food, I take this time to pray and generally, have a conversation with God, about all kinds of things.

Many years ago during my Doody Duty, God asked me if I would write a novel (something I had not done before). Of course I said yes! By the end of picking up after my dogs, God had given

me the premise, main characters, and title of the book, which would become my first novel, [The Garden Key](#).

On a more recent day's trip around our property, I reflected on the aspects of Sally's breed. [Dogtime.com](#) talked about how Australian Cattle dogs are extremely loyal to their family.

"*That is like you,*" God said in my spirit. It's true. I am a fiercely loyal person. And loyalty is important to me. I was glad to have Sally on the same page with me, as far as loyalty is concerned.

When someone is disloyal to me I back away from that person, pushing them away from my heart, because they have hurt me deeply. It takes a long time for me trust that person again, and rebuild the respect I had for them. Something else Sally and I have in common.

I also read on Dogtime.com, that Australian Cattle dogs are attached and loyal to one person. And it takes a long time for them to build trust and confidence in others.

"*That is like you,*" God said to me again. "*And you need not be like that.*"

He showed me that I need to be quicker to forgive, and to forgive without residual mindsets. Even if I try to persuade myself that it's to protect myself, I need to hold nothing back and forgive.

Just like God does with me.

I didn't realize I did this. I needed this lesson.

I thought I needed a quiet, low key dog, who will just sit by my side while I write. I thought a super-active herding dog with ancestral roots in the wild Australian Dingo, was not right for me. But I was wrong.

Turns out Sally and I both love snuggling into pillows and blankets, on the couch, or on a bed. We both also love long hugs and kisses. And we are loyal to those who love us.

I'm so grateful we could give this sweet pup a fur-ever home. Abby loves playing with her little pup-sister, and she is never lonely with her new pack-mate around. I wish I knew Sally's story, if she was treated well in the previous 10 months of her young life. But for the rest of her days we write a new story together. Which will be filled with treats, snuggles, and love.

Sally is perfect for me. And God knew it.

So, I praise Him for His wisdom, and love. 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!



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – What a Picture – by Marcy Lytle

Getting on the plane on time, changing planes and making a quick connection, and arriving at our destination with everything we need, and then getting the rental car, or returning home, is really quite a feat when you think about it! Every time we travel and then return home, I marvel at the miles traveled, and how we made it from point A to point B on time, and I give thanks. Every time.

This recent vacation was no exception. And there was something else I noticed on this vacation, something that warmed my heart and made me feel so good. Something that spoke to me of peace and provision. Something worth sharing...

Because it was a fairly long trip, we packed two huge suitcases. And because we bought souvenirs and gifts, we had two extra carry-on bags, plus our individual backpacks. In other words, we were loaded. When we flew home, we were both tired, and we had a connecting flight with only 30 minutes to change planes. When we arrived back in Austin, we were happy to see that our luggage arrived (because it was delayed when we were going!).

Here's the picture:

When we were making that connecting flight we had to hurry, carrying our heaving backpacks and two carry-ons (and no, they didn't have wheels – *note to self* – buy ones with wheels). My husband was ahead moving at a faster speed than I, but he kept looking back and saying, "You okay?" as I hurried behind him, following him as he weaved through the crowd.

When we arrived home; however, is when that peaceful stretch of time hit me, as we got our large bags and started the walk outside the airport toward the bus, to ride to the parking lot:

I was tired.

He was faster.

He was stronger.

I started wheeling my large bag with the smaller one perched on top, following behind him as we made our way down the long sidewalk to try and catch the next bus – which we could barely see. It was super late at night and we were both tired. I tried to stay at his pace, but it was hard and my back was a bit sore. He turned around and kept checking on me, and finally came and said, "Let me take your bags." He then proceeded to wheel both of our large bags and carry-ons, and his backpack, down the sidewalk ahead of me. All I had to do was follow.

His eyes never left me. He knew where to go. He made sure I was always behind him.

And guess what? We made it.

I was smiling big inside my beating heart as we climbed the steps and took our seats, just as the bus was ready to pull out. I felt so loved by this man that too was tired, but this man that loved me enough to make sure I was behind him at all times. He recognized that I was tired, and he

just took my bags from me without chiding, hurrying me up, or sighing at my slow pace. I appreciated his kindness and I felt so light, as I stepped onto the bus behind him and we took our seats.

He then took my hand and held it tight. We were happy to be back safely, after storms that delayed the flights, a complete rerouting of the flight path, and we even arrived earlier than originally scheduled. We both looked into each other's eyes and gave thanks for all the fun, the safety, the health, the food, the sights, the sheer joy of the journey we'd made together.

I just recently read about the rod and the staff of the Shepherd in Psalm 23. The rod of a shepherd is used to count sheep, to make sure not one is missing, as he taps them on the head. I was thankful that my husband was a picture of the Good Shepherd that late evening. If I had fallen down or gotten lost in the crowd, he would have seen me and come to rescue me. But I had fallen behind, so he came and carried my load.

There's great peace in knowing the One we're following never leads us too fast, knows where we're headed and the best route to take, and will lighten our load any time it becomes too heavy for us to carry.

Isn't that a great picture? I thought it was...

FRESH THYME – In God We Trust

Trust has been a big issue in our world over the past couple of years. We hear “Trust the science.” Yet everyone argues over which science to trust, what person to listen to, and which article to read. We also find ourselves divided into camps of those that trust certain news stations, or certain leaders, and others that despise those same sources. And then there are some (and I perhaps fall into that category) that believe nothing they hear, very little they read, and just breathe one day at a time.

But seriously, trust is a big issue. Kids don't trust their parents any more, often because they've been neglected or abandoned...so why should they? So many movies today have parents that are stupid, teens that are confused, and young adults finding their own way in the world without parameters or boundaries, because there's no one and nothing to trust!

Like I said, trust is a big issue. We are even a generation that has no trust left in the Church, and that translates to no trust in God. And who is God, anyway? He certainly doesn't seem to be around while all of these disasters are happening and people are dying. The Church itself has proven to be untrustworthy due to fallen leaders, fights and splits among members, and judgments railed at those “out there” that don't look like those “inside.”

I was looking at a \$10 bill in my purse today. I've hardly been carrying any cash these days, but we needed some on vacation, so I had a few bills when we got home. It still says this on the back “In God We Trust.” Do our kids even know that it's there and what it means?

Trust must be a big issue, if it's on the back of our bills!

So what does it mean to trust in God, in a world where people are not trustworthy, our only little kingdoms have crumbled, words and promises have been unfulfilled, and vows and love change like the seasons?

1. It means to not lean on our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5)
2. It means knowing the character of God (Psalm 9:10)
3. It means not trusting in our own strength (Psalm 20:7)
4. It means delighting while we wait for help (Psalm 22:8)
5. It means speaking to our heart and telling it to trust (Psalm 25:1)
6. It means rejoicing in his holy name (Psalm 33:21)
7. It means laying aside fear (Psalm 56:3)
8. It means making the better choice (Psalm 118:8)
9. It means having a steadfast mind (Isaiah 26:3)
10. It means believing in His word (Revelation 22:6)

I confess that I have been guilty of placing my trust in others, in things, in my own understanding, and always have come away disappointed and confused. And I've even placed my trust in God and felt the same way. However, each time that happened I lost sight of who God is, and chosen to believe the whispers in my ears that He doesn't care, He isn't aware, and He's not listening. It takes discipline and it's a choice to place our trust in God, daily.

That \$10 bill will be in my bag today and be spent tomorrow, and I'll have to go to the bank to get more cash. And I hope I don't need to read the back of a bill to be reminded of where I've misplaced my trust once again.

"In God we Trust" – it's a big deal – and it's a deal breaker if we don't.

FRESH THYME - Silent Killers

There are seasons or experiences in life that I guess I'd call Silent Killers, because we go through them in silence and we feel like a part of us is slowly dying in the process. I think there might be two reasons for this silence and this dying, and one is that we feel we are alone in our thoughts and what we're going through. Therefore, we stay silent and don't share with others. The second reason is that we did dare to share and someone commented with words that hurt, so we then became silent. *Can you relate?*

I decided that I would share the "silent killers" I've experienced in life so that you can be encouraged, if you've been through the same, or if you haven't – you can apply or nod or give a thumbs up – because you've had the same feelings or thoughts! So here we go...

Family disappointments – We teased with some friends this past weekend about how we all thought our families were "normal" as children, but now as adults – we realize we all had skeletons that have emerged out of the closets! Our family attended church regularly, Dad was the pastor, and we were this no-drama family that lived our lives without incident. However, as we kids grew up and divorced happened to one, loss of a home to another, and the third moved far away, attitudes and actions emerged among all of us that sent us into dungeons of our own. I felt like I had disappointed my parents when we suffered a great loss, and for years that loss and that shame silently played a deathly number that hurt my ears and my heart.

Children leaving – I recall when my children grew up and left the home and got married, with lives of their own, my mother's heart ached and hurt badly. I began to be careful with whom I shared those feelings; however, because some said they were glad when their children left. Others made comments about my kids and how they'd lived at home during college, so that's why it was harder. And still others just didn't share my feelings, so I began to take a silent stance on sharing how I felt. I've done this repeatedly over other things with my children, afraid to ask for prayer or share my feelings, because of the fear of being judged.

Menopause – Wow, this is a biggie for women. In fact, any woman-related issue can be a silent killer. When I hit menopause symptoms at the ripe young age of 40, I was taken aback and thought surely it couldn't be. And when I had started having all sorts of odd emotions and body reactions (I didn't want anyone to touch me – and I lost a lot of hair!) I panicked. I even went to the library and found a book on the long list of menopausal symptoms and asked my husband to read it with me. I felt so alone, and wasn't comfortable telling others about my odd thoughts and feelings. And I felt even distant from my husband because he didn't "have to suffer" like I was suffering, because he was a male. Silently, I slipped into a bit of depressing moments here and there, and it was not fun, one bit!

Loss and Starting Over – As I mentioned above, we lost a home and all that happened over the next several years was hard on my ego, because my friends were moving on up, while we were moving on down... I began to compare our situation with those of my friends, and I felt ashamed and jealous of them at the same time. I also began a silent journey into a pit of being disappointed in God for not answering our prayers for provision and not blessing us when we had been so "faithful" to give. I had such boxed in views of God! It was a hard time, and I

certainly felt like I experienced death a few times over. Death to self, things, pride, and all things that were pretty ugly, as a matter of fact. It was a silent killer of about a decade or more before I began to see that He was with us, set us in a better place, matured us into compassionate people, and lots of other good things. But that experience was a killer, of sorts, and I can now say a life-giver time as well!

I could list lots more seasons and experiences of silent killers. Staying silent for a while or at certain times is healthy. But remaining silent and never asking for help or prayer can be totally unhealthy. When something dies inside of us, it can be a good thing as well. But others times, things die that need to be resurrected.

So what should be done if we are in a season of one of these silent killers? I've honestly found the best thing to do is stay in the Word so that I can read about his character and his goodness (because the killer lie is that He's not a good God), and to pour out my heart in tears and angst to the One who really hears. I have to often accompany that with visualizing myself laying down my burdens at his feet. And the final action is to leave these heavy things there, as I trust Him to lead me, care for me, cover me, and feed me, until I'm well and whole again.

Don't let silent killers keep you in the dark. Don't let others and their words cut you to the bone. And by all means, don't carry these killers with you throughout your life until all light that once shined within you is put out for good. The One that conquered death on the cross and offered us eternal life also conquered the death experiences that we encounter each day and offers us a hand up, to emerge a better person, full of joy and hope.

FRESH THYME - You Don't Say...

I've said things and had things said to me that were not helpful at all, in times of need. We all mean well, and our friends are only trying to help, but you know what I'm talking about. We're mourning and someone tries to comfort us, but it only makes us feel worse. Or maybe we've been the one to pat someone on the shoulder to offer advice, when only a listening ear would have been better. I thought of several things I've either said or had said to me, that probably weren't the best...so I thought I'd list them. See what you think. Leave a comment and share your own after you read...

"At least you had them for a long time" – said to me when my mom passed. She was old, so I suppose this person thought this was a comforting thought. It was, later, but not the week that she passed. Timing is everything, when we choose to say.

"That's the dumbest thing you've ever said" – me to my husband when I've disagreed with something he's spoken. First of all, I'm belittling him. And second of all, I'm judging his character and not even taking time to listen or understand why he said it. Not cool...

"Maybe you deserved it" – the sentiment passed on to Job in the middle of his suffering. Providing an assessment of someone else's plight when we have no idea what is going on, is never helpful or beneficial.

"You look like you've gained a little weight" – said to me a few months after the birth of my second child. This is never a comment to be made to anyone at any time, at any place. I was so bothered by the comment that I hated myself for days...

"Have you tried reading scripture?" - While this is a great thing to do in the middle of any circumstance, most of the time it's said to someone that knows the scripture. Our simple question implies that they've forgotten about it, which is just silly. Probably better left unsaid, and a silent prayer might be a better response.

"Just pretend it never happened" – said by a mom to her daughter who was abused, hoping the matter would be swept under the rug. Only it wasn't, and it never is, and pretense is not helpful. Confession and acceptance and healing, without judgment, is.

"You just don't have enough faith" – said to me when my son had an ear infection for the third time, and was about to have tube inserted in surgery. That comment made me feel two inches high, and I avoided that woman from then on.

"Did you have cancer?" – Yes, in my young years I said that to a young woman at a register in a store, to which she replied, "I didn't have cancer." Her hair was super thin and I assumed, and I spoke, and I learned my lesson. And I'm ashamed to admit that I did this!

"God's punishing you" – said to me when we got sick with the flu one year, and this person felt because we had a pumpkin in our house, evil was invited in. This phrase didn't land on me at all, because I knew it was absurd. Thank you, God.

I'm sure you can think of lots of phrases that either broke you or made you, or times you wish you could take back what just slid between your own lips. I've found that it helps to stop and think before I speak, and very often I hear a little voice that whispers, "You don't say..." and I hope I have the willpower to zip my lips shut.



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

November 2021



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&searchText=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 Portale 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 ¼ to ½ 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 whirl 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 then 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 stinch 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 and 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 times 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.



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

December 2021



TIPS

December Calendar!

I haven't done one of these since July, so I figure we all like some ideas and lists that someone else thinks up for us – so we can just go and enjoy! My sister and her husband recently hosted us for a few days and it was awesome just doing what they listed out for us to enjoy. Here's a list of something fun to do every day/night in December to keep your holidays cheery and bright! Print it out. Hang it on the fridge. Mark it off. And leap for joy...as a family, as a couple, with your friends, or even by yourself!

1. Make Christmas cookies. Eat some. Give some away.
2. Light candles and have a picnic on the floor watching a Hallmark movie.
3. Put together a Christmas jigsaw puzzle.
4. Drink hot cider and watch the stars emerge at dark.
5. Take a drive for hot cocoa/coffee and pastries, while reading.
6. Play Christmas music and dance.
7. Shop and purchase a little treat for yourself.
8. Invite a few friends to go caroling and get it on the calendar. Why not?
9. Find a Christmas show/movie and go see it.
10. Take a stroll through your neighborhood for a few blocks, to see the lights.
11. Send a few Christmas cards via snail mail or email, or even a text!
12. Make someone's day by leaving them a treat at their door.
13. Stop in Trader Joe's for a few of their Christmas goodies/snacks. Try the Kringle!
14. Sit by your tree, cuddle up in a blanket, and take a nice nap.
15. Wrap a few gifts while watching a show. Enjoy milk and cookies.
16. Pull out a board game, grab some apples, caramel and chocolate, and enjoy both!
17. Pack a thermos and some trail mix, and go for a winter hike in a nearby park.
18. Look in your fridge and pantry and make a charcuterie spread on a Christmas tray!
19. Stuff the stockings tonight, while you enjoy s'mores inside by the fire.
20. Check on or text at least five friends to see how they are, and bring them good cheer.
21. Finish that jigsaw puzzle and ask Google for a joke every few minutes, and laugh.
22. Sit around the tree and play "I Spy" with items in the room or on the tree.
23. Hit the mall and the chaos and get an Auntie Anne's Pretzel and people watch.
24. Make stovetop potpourri with apples, oranges, cloves and cinnamon. Simmer all day...
25. Hide dollar bills in the tree for an extra Christmas morning surprise!
26. Enjoy the day without expectation, but only thanksgiving. Thank him for five things!
27. Movie marathon and snacks...all day long.
28. Order pizza and play board games.
29. Invite a few friends over for a chocolate bar (Google ideas for a simple spread...)
30. Make a run for after-Christmas sales and bins and things...and eat dinner out.
31. It's NY EVE – dress up whether staying in or out, dance, and try something new to eat!

The Dressing – Christmas Color – by Marcy Lytle

It's the holiday season, and I could post pics of red and green, sparkles and sequins, and all things dressy and dazzling, but... I decided to just post color! Red and green are the usual suspects in our Christmas décor, but they don't have to be in our outfits! There are so many color combos that we can put together and then dress them up or down, depending whether or not we're going out or staying in for the holiday festivities!

Any of these looks can be perfect for a family gathering for dinner, for a date night with another couple for a Christmas movie and appetizers, or for that outdoor stroll to look at lights! Just think color combos, and enjoy them all!

Brown and blue – This is one of those trendy sweater vests in a rich brown, and I've paired it with a dressy blue blouse underneath. Brown and blue can be a rich color, and elevated with silver or gold accessories!

Red and caramel – I love a red purse. And carrying one at Christmastime is so fun. This one accessory adds a fun pop of color to any outfit. Don't have a red purse? Go shopping for one!

Khaki green and pink – I don't think I would have ever paired pink with green years ago, but once I tried it – I liked it! Look through your closet and see if you have either color and try wearing both pieces together. Add a whimsical pin for some holiday flare!

Neutrals with brights – I have this beige wrap and a solid tee that both needed something bright, so I slipped on a colorful skirt I found at Walmart for the zing! I bet you have some neutrals hanging around, and a bright something to pair with!

Golds and grays – Mustard or gold is a great holiday pair with a rich gray. One can be a sweater and the other a pair of pants or a tee underneath. Add that red purse mentioned above, and you've got yourself an outfit!

Plaids and graphics – I found this long shacked in a plaid that I fell in love with, and found it to be so comfortable to wear. But instead of just picking a color in the plaid and adding a solid tee, a graphic one adds so much interest. The shacked is a trend, so don't pay a lot – grab one off the racks at a discount store!

Blues and blues – I recently was gifted this beautiful sky blue sweater from the brand Socookei found on Amazon. I also have a favorite pair of pants from Walmart in a darker blue. There's nothing more Christmassy than something so blue. It welcomes in that first snowfall – it's true!

Green and black – I found this cute corduroy skirt at a vintage sale – it's an old Ralph Lauren and it was \$16. The sweater is also Socookei from Amazon and it's a rich black with vintage buttons and a hood. Trying out some thigh high tights, I put together this outfit that might be one of my faves for the holiday season.

Stand in your closet. Pair color combos. Go shopping for yourself. Make plans and put them on the calendar – from simple to spectacular. And dress yourself to make the season merry and bright. Why not? Christmas won't come again for another year...

Seven for You – Games Galore!

Games we played as kids, with the family, or even alone are times we don't forget – if they were fun! So we asked our panel of women to share their favorite games so that you might be inspired to try one of them this Christmas season. Games are a great way to bring the family together, enjoy an activity that's fun and maybe a bit competitive, or to just gather around to snack and be silly and laugh. After all, it's the time of year for great joy!

We played Left, Right, Center. Kids love this, especially if played for money. We've played it for the last three years and we tell everybody to bring \$3 for the game. Only one person gets the jackpot. The game can be purchased on Amazon for about \$8. – Debbie H.

https://www.amazon.com/Beatway-Right-Center-Dices-Colorful/dp/B07WC8RYBW/ref=sr_1_1_sspa?dchild=1&keywords=left%2Bright%2Bcenter&qid=1635852184&sr=8-1-spons&spLa=ZW5jcnldGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUF0VOTIiWDBMRUhhVVIEmZW5jcnldGVkSWQ9QTA5MzMTdHTDIWUDJPQVo4SVQmZW5jcnldGVkQWRJZD1BMDk2NjY5N1U3NDRQVERFV1IGMyZ3aWRnZXROYW1IPXNwX2F0ZiZhY3Rpb249Y2xpY2tSZWRpcmVjdCZkb05vdExvZ0NsaWNrPXRydWU&th=1

One “game” we enjoy as a family from the beginning of December until Christmas is “Countdown until Christmas” where we make paper chain links. We can use any paper we have, and the kiddos can decorate each link with stickers, stamps, or a regular marker. By Christmas we have a long link! As for games, Battleship and Guess Who are our go-to! – Jennifer L.

Our family's game of choice was [Monopoly](#), Classic Monopoly. I always picked the shoe as my player piece. We made adjustments to the rules though, such as we started with more orange \$500 bills than the rules say, to speed the game up a bit. Also, whenever a fee had to be paid, the funds went into “Free Parking” so whenever a player landed on that square, they won all the cash! Fun times. – Angela

The games I played growing up included Dominoes and card games like Old Maid and Go Fish. My children grew up with Chutes and Ladders, Clue, Candy Land, and of course, Monopoly. My grandkids are growing up with all the previously mentioned games and my new personal favorites, PieFace, and Whack-a-Mole. Also, there's the one activity that pleases most, either for a short time or a long time, and that is puzzles. Games are such a good learning tool. And playing together builds bonds as well as teamwork and harmony during competition. Not to mention they are just plain fun! (Especially PieFace!) – Carole

My grandkids' favorite part of opening the Christmas gifts is to find their main gift from us by a scavenger hunt. I hide their gift and they receive clues that are written in rhyme form that leads them inside & out (based on weather) to their gift. I usually have the first clue lead them to a second clue and then last clue is actually the gift! - Sherril

Aggravation is an all-time family favorite. I remember playing a homemade version of this game with my grandparents and parents when I was a kid, and now we play it with our grandchildren. Everybody loves this game, but beware...you will get aggravated.

For outside fun - Bottle Bash is a blast. Play with two or with teams. – Edith

One game my college friends and I have really been enjoying recently is Two Rooms and a Boom! It's a bit pricey to purchase but you can play with up to 30 people! There are two teams, one has a president and one has a bomber. Players are equally distributed between two rooms and there are five timed rounds. At the end of each round, some players will be swapped into opposing rooms. If the Red Team's Bomber is in the same room as the President at the end of the game, then the Red Team wins; otherwise the Blue Team wins. We've played this game for hours on end as there are so many roles within the game that contribute to each team! Would say it's best for teens and up! – Sofia

Our family loves playing Mexican Train when we are all together, as well as 42 dominoes. We also have a marble board game that we like to play (only play 4 at a time) but it's lots of fun. I can't remember the exact name. It's where you start off and you have to get all your marbles around the board and back home. (Sorry!) The younger kids love Candy Land, and we are teaching them to play dominoes. Another favorite is Go Fish and those card games where you turn the cards over and you have to remember where the card is to match it up. And Millie has this silly game about a dog that when you feed it, it eventually "poops" – the kids just think that is so funny.

When we are outside the kids just love for Pops to pretend to be a monster and chase them around the yard. They pretend to attack him and of course they have a safe spot that they run to, where he can't get them. I am sure our neighbors love all the screaming. Not sure why but whenever the kids come over, they always ask Pops to be the monster and chase them. – Melissa

During the years that our three children were in school the Christmas holiday season was busy with celebrations and activities. It was also easy for the time to slip over into being chaotic and energy draining. Consequently, I always looked forward to the restful week between Christmas and New Year's. For several years, we used this week to read one of the *Chronicles of Narnia* as a family. Although several of us had read them individually, it was a replenishing and refreshing time for us to relax and enjoy them together. It did not become a forever tradition for our family but I did appreciate the years that we read together. – Shelley

When we are eating at Christmas or on other family gatherings, we often have trivia questions or just "get to know you" questions under our plates, and this starts conversation, and we learn so much! We recently asked the kids "what do you know..." and asked what kind of job their parents did, and the adults had to guess the kids' favorite colors, etc. It was so fun hearing the kids' funny answers and finding out how much we really don't know about each other!

War was a favorite childhood game with my brother. We lined up a package of army men at two ends of our hallway and rolled a marble at each other's "army." The first one to knock out the other army won. And one more fun game was hallway balloon volleyball. A string was attached across the hallway and we played volleyball with a balloon. – Marcy

Games are a great way to slow down, settle our minds, and enjoy family time. And sometimes, like the picture above, just an old classic like Checkers is simple and sweet for two members of the family to retreat from the rest and enjoy life's best...

THREE MOMS - Disappointed – by the Cousins

Christmas might be a morning where kids are disappointed, no matter what they get. Maybe they're expecting what they asked for and Mom and Dad didn't think they were ready, or maybe that gift was too expensive. Our kiddos deal with disappointment, just like we do, whether it's on the playing field, at home, or at school with events and performances. However, they don't have the tools to deal with disappointment, unless we as parents give them these tools. That's the question we asked our moms...what tools do they share with their kids to deal when disappointments come!

Mom of Three

With three kids, disappointment comes in various forms. The kids don't necessarily respond the same!

Our boys play sports so when they lose, they respond differently. The oldest is very quiet and disappointed in himself. We let him be quiet, process and then talk to him. He needs his space for a bit. If the disappointment turns into anger or frustrated, we talk through it. We then focus on how he can improve and be a better team player. Our daughter's disappointment is more associated with not being able to get out – because she's super social. Covid was hard on her, missing time with friends. We did have to talk about bigger life questions, because that experience was out of our control – a new thing. “Doing what we can with what we are right now” (as their great grandpa says) we learned what we could do instead – pivot – and lead by example. We had to change how to do birthdays and social things. Our youngest is disappointed when he can't see friends, because he always wants to be outside. He gets very vocal and frustrated. He has to be in his room a bit to calm down and process. We remind him and tell him when the next time is that he CAN play with friends. He has a one-track mind so he needs time to calm himself. In sports, however, he just shrugs it off and moves on.

At Christmas, we usually only have three or four gifts for them and they don't seem to struggle with disappointment at not getting more. However, one thing we talk about is that it's okay to be frustrated, but you don't SIT in that. A couple of years ago our son had lost a game and then in anger sent a ball through our window. We had a good conversation about acting out in frustration. We discussed about taking time to chill, but not to be rude. It's not okay to be rude when you're disappointed, to respond to Mom and Dad or others if spoken to, during disappointment mode, then we talked through that. But as far as gifts at Christmas, we talk about being grateful for one or ten gifts. They do make lists, but it's an ongoing list throughout the year as they mark off things, and we talk about saving up, and choosing. Actually, their lists are so long I think they forget what they asked for!

Disappointments are more around sports or missing out on activities, for our kiddos. Or even when they don't make a good grade at school. We talk about life and what can we do differently, and ask, “Where is the good?” The Lord is so faithful. But we also allow them to have their own emotions and work through them, giving them time, and talking with them. It's okay to sit and process, but disappointment doesn't define us or allow us to be rude to others.

Mom of Two

I think a lot of our disappointments stem from either unrealistic or not setting expectations beforehand. My girls are still so young that they don't show a lot of disappointment, yet. Their disappointments are small – like no candy after supper!

However, the biggest thing in regards to my girls is how my husband and I set expectations with them. When it comes to Christmas gifts, we set the expectation that Christmas is coming and we want to give gifts. They're not picky, due to their age, so they are just now grasping the idea of choosing what they want. They are still excited no matter what they open, because opening gifts is so fun.

Recently, we were at church for a kids program and a guy stood up and did the Pledge of Allegiance and Allegiance to the Bible, etc. He picked a volunteer to lead, and my daughter did not get chosen, so she really cried. She was bawling! I had to take her to the side.

So maybe the best thing we can do as parents is to take our children aside for quiet time to themselves, not in front of others. Allowing them to process then leads to a conversation, it allows time to breathe, for affirmation, etc. We did talk with our daughter through her emotions and reminded her that maybe next time it might be her!

And guess what? She did get picked the next week!

We can just start with ourselves as parents, whether it's a game we're attending, or opening gifts on Christmas morning, and we can set expectations that sometimes we won't get all that we want. And then if there are disappointments, being available to pull them aside and talking through the experience is so helpful and good for all!

Mom of Four

We all experience disappointment, and our kids do as well at school, in athletics, and with friends.

Anna, our 9 year old, recently tried out for Oral Reading, a UIL event, something she has participated for a couple of years. She tried this year and did not make it. I was disappointed for her, as well! She just didn't have a good tryout, so she was devastated and crying. We talked, and a couple of things we talked about were:

God always has a plan and His plans are always good. We can rest in that.

Ask the teacher what you can do next time and know that you can try out again.

We encouraged her to think through and ask God for his plan, maybe it's different for this year. Or another activity to focus on.

Besides that it was the only UIL event she tried out for! Maybe next year, we told her she can try out for many events!

At Christmas, our kids typically get so much. An example of a disappointment might be an i-phone – which the kids are not ready for yet but they want! We talk about being ready for gifts and not being ready for gifts. We refer to knives we use in the kitchen as adults, but when we're younger we cannot use them because they're so dangerous. They understand that analogy. We then move to comparing that to the i-phone. It's not that they're not good kids but there's a time to wait with patience.

In the Kitchen – Pretty on the Plate – by Marcy Lytle

Christmas meals that are colorful are a good choice for this month, to bring cheer and flavor to a party, just a family night at home, or dinner for two by the fire. Even just simple snacks can be colorful and flavorful! We thought we'd share some meal/snack recipes that will make you smile as you look at your plate and take that first bite...on a chilly wintry night...

Greens and Pesto in the Pasta

Ingredients:

A pretty pasta dish is a great meal to serve and enjoy for all!

Kosher salt

- ¾ lb large shell pasta
- 1 T unsalted butter
- 1 T EVVO (extra virgin olive oil)
- 1 large shallot finely chopped
- 1 large clove garlic minced
- 1 15oz cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
- ¼ c pitted Kalamata olives, roughly chopped
- Ground pepper
- 1 T grated lemon zest, plus 2 T lemon juice
- 6 T grated Parmesan
- ½ c chopped fresh parsley

In salted boiling water, cook pasta according to directions, reserving ¾ c of the cooking water, and then drain. Meanwhile, add butter and oil to large skillet over med-hi heat, add shallot and garlic and cook, stirring about 3 minutes. Add the beans and olives and cook til warmed through, about 2 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.

Remove pan from heat and stir in pasta, zest and juice, and ½ c of that reserved water. Toss well, adding more water if needed. Stir in ¼ c of the Parm and parsley. Divide pasta among bowls and top with more parm and parsley!

Red Apples on a Green Tray

We made these in October, but they're pretty for Christmas, as well!

Ingredients:

- 8 wooden lollipops (or twigs!)
- 8 medium apples (use red or green!)
- 1 14oz bag caramels unwrapped
- A Christmas tray (IKEA has cute green and white ones!)

Line large baking sheet with nonstick foil. Insert twig or pop into stem of each apple.

In med saucepan, combine caramels and 2 T water. Cook, stirring, on med-lo until completely melted and smooth.

Spoon caramel over top of each apple, letting it drip as you spin the apple. Transfer to sheet and repeat. Add chocolate chips if you like. Refrigerate til set, about 10 minutes. Remove, and serve on your pretty tray.

Christmas Picnic Berries on a Pretzel

Maybe you can go outside, or even just set up on the floor at home, but have a picnic in December with color and fun! This little delight is so easy to put together and so satisfyingly good!

Ingredients:

- Large pretzels (Trader Joe's frozen are great – just thaw and enjoy!)
- Blackberries, rinsed and dried
- Cubed cheese
- Franks, slice and grilled
- Pickle slices
- Shortbread cookies
- Mustard
- Skewers

Set the pretzel on a plate. Fill a tiny cup with mustard and place in one section of the pretzel. Skewer the cubes, franks and pickles and place around, with one on the pretzel. Add a small pile of blackberries in another section of the pretzel. Add a cookie on the side!

Green on Top, Speckles of Red Underneath

This meal was seriously delicious. I loved how it turned out on the plate and it was SO delicious!

Ingredients:

- Black bean burger patty
- Queso (HEB brisket queso is to die for...)
- Avocado
- Lettuce, tomato, onion
- Buns or toasted bread
- Elote corn chips

Make your black bean burgers or just use purchased ones. Place on a bun or slice of toasted bread. Drizzle warm queso until it spills over. Top with sliced avocado. Place lettuce, tomato and red onion on the side. Add your favorite chip on the side.

Tried and True – Carols at Night – by Marcy Lytle

Some historical accounts say that the poor “sang for their supper” – receiving food or drink for their songs.

Some say people went “wassailing” drinking warm drinks from house to house, wishing others well with their songs.

And on occasion, apparently drunks wassailed a bit too much and banged on doors!

Whatever the true history is of how caroling began, I don’t know. But I do know that caroling at Christmas, wearing a coat and a scarf, carrying a flashlight and words on a sheet, is one of my most favorite traditions of all – one that doesn’t happen enough.

So maybe, you might want to gather a few friends this holiday season and go caroling one evening. Here’s how you might make it happen:

1. Make a list of friends/family that might be interested and invite them via email. Will you include kids? Sure! Parents can bring wagons or strollers!
2. Prepare a plate of goodies (store bought or homemade – Trader Joe’s has great snacks!) and some hot cider for afterwards, or beforehand. People could even bring their own thermos to fill before everyone sets out!
3. Print out a list of say 7 Christmas carols that can be sung over and over. Make the print large.
4. Provide (from the dollar store) or ask each one to bring a flashlight for good viewing.
5. Prepare your route – will it be in your neighborhood or where? Make it safe, where sidewalks are available and plenty.
6. Keep your distance and be courteous. Sing from the sidewalk so you’re not trespassing on a lawn, and be sure to smile at your neighbors!
7. Designate a singer/leader that can start each song as the others follow along.
8. Look at the weather and pick a good night that’s not too “frightful,” when the stars are brightly shining!
9. Ask the singers to dress a certain way or in a specific color – this would be SO FUN! maybe all wear a scarf and a sock hat, or all in red!
10. Be prepared for those that love the songs and those that might not. Caroling is not about “making” everyone celebrate Christmas, but rather about sharing the Light of the season.

Some folks hate going caroling, or maybe one likes it and another doesn’t, in the same house. Talk about the good and the bad, the why’s and the why nots, and perhaps consider this tradition in your area. I think some of the best memories are made on a cold night singing about the Savior’s birth, or about bring joy to the world, or even Rudolph’s red nose. And spreading joy? Well, Christmas carols do just that, and with smiling faces behind them, there’s a whole lot of good that can come from a few neighbors caroling together, hot drink in hand, all over this land...

TIPS - SUGAR + Spice – by Angela Dolbear

Welcome to **SUGAR + SPICE**, and everything nice in the world of beauty.

Your Holiday Face

I like a little bit of sparkle to my Holiday make-up. Not like a Disco Queen kind of sparkle...not that there's anything wrong with Disco Queens!

My favorite Holiday party or gathering make-up is this: soft sparkly eyes, minimal highlighter, fake eyelashes, and a red matte lip. So pretty!

EYES: A few years ago, Stila cosmetics came out with a liquid sparkle eye shadow, called [Glitter & Glow Liquid Eye Shadow](#) which is still my favorite. "Diamond Dust" is my go-to shade, but, truthfully, I think I own all the shades. Whenever I see a Glitter & Glow shadow on sale, I snap it up.

This eye shadow stays in place. This is key, since many sparkly eyeshadows end up all over your face. Place a small dab on the center of the eye lid, then dab lightly with your ring finger to blend out. It adds just enough product to catch the light, making your eyes sparkle. Swipe a soft natural matte shade in the crease of your eyelid, and blend upward to finish the look.

LASHES: False eyelashes frame eyes so beautifully. And now there are not only glue-on lashes, but magnetic lashes that stick to a magnetic eyeliner. These are my current favorite. They are more comfortable, and cause no damage to my real lashes. My favorite glue-on lashes are made by KISS (lots of different sizes and shapes available at Ulta and Target), which I use with Tarte's [Tarteist PRO Lash Adhesive](#) in clear (hands down the best at ease of application and sticking power!).

My favorite magnetic lashes are also made by KISS. Their magnet eyeliner goes on so smooth I can actually draw a little wing, even with my hooded eyes! Target has the [KISS liner and lashes kit](#) for \$15.

FACE: A light dusting of highlighter on the tip of the nose, then sweep a little highlighter across the top of the blush on your cheek bones (just under your eyes) and up the side of your eyes, and apply a little more above your eyebrows. Think of a "C" pattern framing the outside of your eyes.

There so many highlighters on the market. SO MANY. I'm big fan of cheek palettes that have a blush, bronzer and highlighter all in one. I was faithful to such a palette from Urban Decay, but they changed the formula and raised the price (sigh), so now I'm in search of my new "holy grail" product.

LIPS: Red lips are a commitment for the day/night, and need more maintenance than a natural lip. But red lips are so flattering and festive. For special events, I go to my go-to liquid lipstick [NARS Powermatte Lip Pigment](#) in the shade "Starwoman," a flattering true blue red. It's pricey at \$28, but Ulta has coupons on prestige products, and this lipstick will last a long, long time, as well as all night! Treat yourself to this beauty product. A light swipe of lip balm before applying the liquid lip will keep your lips moist, since liquid lipstick can be a little dry. Clear away any smudges or undefined lip line with a lip brush and concealer.

“Deserted Island” Product: Not that I would wear makeup on a deserted island, but if I did, one of the products I would definitely need is a shadow switching brush cleaner. Between shades, I swipe my favorite makeup brushes across the little sponge before dipping back into any product. I currently use Ulta’s [Beauty Smarts New Hue Shadow Switching Pan](#). It’s easy to clean and keeps my brushes clean as well.

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!



HOME

Practical Parenting – Give Us Clean Rooms – by Marcy Lytle

There's a verse in a song that cries out "Give us clean hands..." but I'm thinking that during the holidays, with company coming, and new toys being unwrapped, we're crying out at our kids to give us clean rooms! It's always a huge chore to clean out the old before the new comes, so that the kids' rooms aren't a wreck! Whether you give a toy to receive a toy, or fill bins and label them to give away, maybe you need some more encouragement on how to get your kids' rooms clean before Christmas morning, so that the new has a place to be...once the packages are open. Am I right?

Here are some practical ways to perhaps get the job done:

Since you're probably the only one that knows what to throw away and what to keep, and you need to be the one doing the job, enlist a sitter or your husband or a friend, to watch the kids for a couple of hours while you perform this task.

Since your kids will scream and shout to keep this and that, don't let them near when you're cleaning. You're the mom and you know. And if you don't, you can ask them later. Take a deep breath, and start by yourself, music playing, and snacks nearby for enjoyment.

Since you're going to toss out a lot, get a big trash bag and start with the things to be thrown away. Broken toys (ones you're never going to fix), ruined clothes, random papers, you know the drill. And it will be a thrill to toss them. Take the bag to the garbage can and don't look back.

Since you're there, you can tackle the giveaways now. Don't fret or worry over who or where to give, just fill the sack with the outgrown clothes, the un-played with toys, and the items they never liked or use. Fill one sack, take it to His car and ask him to deliver to Salvation Army. One place, one drive, all done.

Since you've cleared space now, you can organize and clean. Take pictures of the piles and groups you've now made room for, and you'll have those pictures on your phone after Christmas, when bins and boxes are on a big sale.

Since you've done all of that, you can relax and know that when the packages are opened, and the toys fill the room, you've got your pictures, you'll go in January, and you'll help them organize then...not now.

Since you've got other things to do now, like wrap and bake and shop, give thanks for your kiddos and what they have and even what they don't have, and ask Him to be present around your tree. Sigh and set your mind on all the good, and don't stress over what you can't buy or provide.

Leave the room, don't look back, and if the kids complain about this or that...remind them that Christmas is coming...but only to those who have "room" in their hearts and spaces for something new!

I Don't Do Teens – Sand Box to Steering Wheel – by Marcy Lytle

There's that awkward age of when our kids no longer want to sit at the kids table at Christmas, but they're not quite ready for adult conversation either, and that makes them feel awkward. They want to retreat to their rooms. Or maybe we noticed this year that Halloween was fun for them, but they knew they were near the end of an era of trick or treating, and this made them sad (and it made us sad, too.) And when family arrives, our teens want to appear older and more respected and noticed, but that same relative pats them on the head and treats them as if they're forever four years old...

Being a teen has so many awkward stages, and it helps us to be aware as they clumsily navigate their way to adulthood. So this holiday season, as families gather, gifts are opened, food is prepared, and songs are sung, notice them and call them to sit with the adults...and to let them linger a bit longer as a kid...in that awkward balance where you love them in both:

- Allow them a new wardrobe purchase for that grown-up look if they want, or if not – let them wear that goofy hat that makes them feel warm and cozy.
- If there's something silly on their wish list, grab it anyway. They won't be this age for long, and let them enjoy their youth. But if there's something like perfume or a special lamp for their room, grab that too, and encourage their soon coming adulthood.
- Let them in on the planning of the menu and invite them to purchase the groceries, or even make one of the recipes, if they'd like to. And while at the store, let them grab that kiddo snack that they so enjoy, as well...while they teeter between being a kid and being grown up.
- When the family sings or participates in charades and they feel awkward about their voice, or unsure of who they are, offer encouraging words and compliment their efforts. Include them and make them a part of, and let them retreat for a bit if it's too much.
- When saying goodnight on Christmas Eve, or wearing those pajamas that match the family, if they snarl or they roll their eyes...offer them some slack as you hug them anyway. They aren't being mean necessarily; they're just dealing with hormones and bones that are growing, and thoughts that are soaring.

Always talk and communicate and love on these teens that have one hand in the sand box and the other behind the wheel. It's a hard transition, and sometimes a lengthy one. Sometimes they need a leash and other times they need some space. It's hard to know which to give, but just continue to give...and they'll notice and they'll love and they'll eventually emerge into an adult you will barely recognize and love all the more...

An Adage A Day - Not this Christmas – by Carole Gilbert

Ever wonder what not to do at Christmas? Here are five points to ponder to help you have a wonderful warmhearted Christmastime.

1. You never want to be “A day late and a dollar short.” In other words, you never want to miss out on something by having too little too late, by not stepping out or by waiting to start. Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today. We must get up and get going. And that leads us to point 2.
2. Time is ticking, but at Christmas we need all we can get. No need to worry and there’s no rush, but time is ticking. This phrase derived from the idiom “clock is ticking” and it simply means you can’t stop time. So don’t wait to do what you need to do. Start that shopping, planning, and cooking early.
3. Never make promises you can’t keep. It is better to not promise at all. You can always say you’ll do your best at something and it’s also best to really try hard to do whatever you said you would. However, if something does come up or happen, you haven’t broken a promise. And this goes especially for a child. Kids think literally, so a promise means a promise to them, and a broken promise can be very hard for a child to understand.
4. This point is to all those “armchair quarterbacks” on Christmas Day. Not this Christmas! Try to make a positive impact this year. While this idiom started in the good ole USA in the 1960’s over football, it’s meaning serves us in other areas as well. It refers to someone being judgmental over something that they are not a participant in. We can think we know better but until we have our hands in the action, whether it is a football game, the food, the company, or just our thoughts in general, we can simply enjoy the blessing of being on the sideline. And this brings us to point 5.
5. Remember the saying, “If you can’t say anything nice, then don’t say anything at all.” I know this may be hard at times, especially watching football or being with all those family members, but it’s worth a try.

So go away, Scrooge! Go away, bah humbug! Put the Grinch back in his mountain! Not this Christmas. Leave us to our “chestnuts roasting by an open fire” while “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas” with “Jack Frost nipping at my nose.” Let us enjoy “Rocking around the Christmas tree.”

This Christmas, even think about breaking tradition. Try your hand at something new and off-the-wall.

But don’t forget to look up and remember, “The stars in the bright sky looked down where He lay, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.”

This Christmas, let us meditate on 2 Thessalonians 3:16,

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way.

The Lord be with you all.

Tiny Living – Ready or Not - by Leyanne Enterline

The holidays are here! Are you ready?

I AM NOT!

I always feel like this time of year just sneaks up on me like I'm totally shocked, because it comes so quickly! I am a procrastinator by nature, so the fact that I'm even thinking about Christmas gift shopping before December is a plus! But that's all it usually is, just a thought.

I start to get overwhelmed by the amount of crap (excuse my language) that's in this tiny place that I can't even imagine any more items fitting in here! Then I think too, the kids really don't need much. They can't fit more "stuff" anywhere anyway, so we should just get one gift and do a trip or something instead. But, no. I then feel guilty and think the boys need more (which is not true). It's just mom guilt.

So I begin "nesting," so it feels! I start on a rampage thinking we need to get rid of everything and do it now! No one likes it when I get into this craziness, because of course that "favorite" toy was just placed into the donation pile. Though it hasn't been played with in a year, the boys just need to keep it...so they say. Then it's played with for one day and disappears into the clutter until the next year. It's a terrible cycle! Living tiny does limit on how much we can truly fit! So at some point, the old has to go - to bring in the new!

It just takes a while to "let go."

Being gone over Thanksgiving until beginning of December really puts the pressure on me to get everything done! Especially, I've been hearing that we're in a "shortage" and to "shop early" because there isn't a lot to choose from, because of so many issues. We haven't really seen the effects of that yet where we are, but I hear it's to come!

I am trying this year to get on top of the holiday bustle.

What about you?

Ready or not, here it comes!

Letting go, the craziness of shopping, dealing with mom guilt, and the time pressure of it all – isn't it wonderful? Of course, it is!

Remember love grows best in tiny spaces.

A Night to Remember – The Stars at Night – by Marcy Lytle

That famous star that led the wise men to the baby Jesus, those stars that march out one by one at night when the darkness appears, and those stars that twinkle and top our trees this time of year. What are these stars all about, and what does the Bible have to say about stars? It's worth calling the kids outside to find out!

Preparation: Look at your forecast and pick a starry clear night, prepare hot cider, and have gloves and coats ready to sit and observe them as they appear in the sky. If your neighborhood is too bright, take a family drive to a dark spot where the stars can be seen as they emerge.

Psalms 137 says he calls the stars by name and knows the number. That's incredible, because there are supposedly 200 billion trillion stars – that's a lot! This shows us that God knows every detail of his creation, just like he knows the number of hairs on our heads. That's an amazing, loving God! (Ask one kid to count the hairs on Mom's head – to see how difficult it is!)

Look at the constellations and let's find the Big and Little Dipper. Did you know there's a study of the stars called astrology? Some people even follow the stars like a religion, but we are warned in the Bible not to worship creation, but rather the creator. Deuteronomy 4:19.

Psalms 82:3 says God set the moon and the stars and the sun in their places and nothing can remove them. He did the same with the oceans and the lands. He is in charge of the things that he made, so we can trust him to take care of our lives, as well. This truth reminds us that his love lasts forever. Guess how many stars we can see with our eyes on a clear night? (The answer is about 7000!)

Listen to these verses from I Corinthians 5 - *The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable...* It's important to believe in the resurrection – because death is only temporary – but eternal life has its own splendor. What does splendor mean? It means magnificent!!! What do you think you've ever seen that was magnificent? Did you know that stars don't actually twinkle?

Philippians 2:15 says we will shine like stars in the sky – illuminating the darkness. In what ways can we shine the light of God's love to a dark and dying world? Stars shine because they are extremely hot – and we need to be hot with God's love for others!

Matthew 2:9 says the wise men followed the star and it led them to the baby Jesus, as it stopped over the manger where he was born. Do you remember why Jesus was born on a cold hard stone bed instead of a comfy crib in a fancy inn?

Pick a Christmas carol and sing together as a family as you sit in wonder at the God of the universe that created all things magnificent, including you and me. The God that so loved the World that he gave his only son. And the God that knows the stars by name, and knows our names as well, and keeps us in his loving Hands all the days of our lives.

Chipped China - Glitter Ain't Gold – by Jennifer Lytle

My daughter has a friend in elementary school whose mom I rather enjoy the company of. They have a little boy, like we do in our family, so the six of us visited a park and a stream early this fall.

They had recently come back from a vacation in Colorado. Everett, the youngest, was so excited about the visit and a mining experience. It had been on his bucket list (that's funny to consider as he was five at the time) for years. He excitedly showed us his treasure from mining. He held two vials filled with water. Each vial also contained a speck of something else. One speck was bright and attracted my eye immediately. The other vial had a small pebble of something deeply golden. It almost appeared brown and I visually rejected it in my initial scan.

Erica told me about the experience. Her son was relentless in his pursuit and the family was ready to go well before he had "struck gold." As he was digging through the shallow stream and sifting the rocks from his pan, he discovered it is hard to find gold. Yet it was frustratingly easy to find what is known as fool's gold.

Pyrite has a brassy, gold appearance. Pyrite is shiny and when you're mining for gold, it is easy to spot! I imagine that the design of it yells out to those in the area, "Hey, come check me out. Take a look!" A miner, or little boy in this case, is easily drawn to the shine. Each time, however, the brilliant display would visually register with the miner and be dismissed after fingers scan the piece. Pyrite not only has a difference in color, but has a different weight. Pyrite is much lighter than gold. It is also jagged and sharp in texture. Gold is more curved along the edges, almost soft. These differences make me reflect on God's design.

My heart asks the question, "Is God revealing something here? Has the whole scenario of Pyrite versus gold been an illustration and lesson for us to witness and internalize?"

I wonder if sometimes our appetites are like Tamatoa, the early minor antagonist in Moana. He is a despicably lovely character. His presence and propensity for shiny objects marks the initial obstacle for Moawanna and Maui's adventure. His solo is a nod to humanity and our inner pleasure and attraction for brilliance. "I'd rather be shiny," the coconut crab sings in a catchy, unabashed praise of glitter.

But glitter ain't gold! And discernment is needed to identify what is real, valuable, and worthy of our attention. With the season upon us, may we be like skilled miners, discerning the value of what we give and what we seek.



YOU

Strengthening Your Core - Lessons from the Pit – by Marcy Lytle

I learned a valuable lesson from the avocado, recently. It's amazing to me how one can learn so much from simple kitchen tasks, like removing the pit from an avocado. I've learned so many things from observing nature, watching children, even cleaning the bathroom; but this time it was an eye-opener about that big seed in the middle of that awesome food...the avocado.

Throughout my married life, others have gifted me, and I've even bought myself, little kitchen gadgets. Years ago I received an avocado slicer that took up lots of room in my utensil drawer, and it was supposed to nicely cut the avocado into perfect slices. I also watched on the cooking channel a way to use a sharp knife to remove the pit of an avocado succinctly, and carefully. One can purchase an entire kit of tools for the avocado, including one that removes the pit!

And just recently, after all these decades, I saw a video of how one can just hold the avocado in hand and gently press the back of the side with the pit...and out it pops! I felt so silly having fretted over how to remove the pit all these years, and being a sucker for all the gadgets for this favorite food of mine.

As I was popping out the seed today so effortlessly without a tool, I thought about all of the times in life we've been sucker or swindled into believing all sorts of things were "necessary" or needed to live a joyful life, pleasing to Him. And we fall into these pits (no pun intended) of constant effort and performance on our part, struggling to keep our relationship with Him free and good. But then one day we realize something so simple as a little push from the back, and we're like – what? It was that easy?

Here some examples of tools I've been given or sold, that weren't necessary at all:

If I read the bible through each year, God will smile at me.

If I go to church and give regularly, blessings have to fall on me.

If I never use a curse word, holiness will be my middle name.

If I find myself sick, I must have not done one of the above.

You get what I'm saying, if you've been a Christian any length of time. We somehow pick up gadgets and gizmos and this and that behavior that we think will fill our utensil drawer with all the things we need to present ourselves pleasing to Him, like a perfect meal served on a plate.

And the truth of the matter, we finally realize, is that there's really no obstacle in the way of His love. We don't have to have the right tool in our toolbox to ward off danger and illness, gain blessings from His hands, or engage in a friendly smile with our Creator.

I bought into the commercials on television, and I saw cool tools in others' kitchens, and I thought I needed them all in order to efficiently remove the pit so the avocado could be enjoyed. And all the while, it was an easy pop out with a gentle push.

God loves me, and I know that now. I don't have to remove the dark seeds on my own, so that I'm tasty and presentable. I was all of that and more when he created me and thought of me before the world began. I belong to Him and always have, and Jesus' work on the cross was the final push of all the darkness; and my drawers only have to be full of praise and obedience and thanksgiving. And none of those are "tools" to keep God's anger at bay. They are responses to a loving God that sees me as I am, provides all that I need, and gives me rest from trying this and that.

Lessons from the pit I learned, and I'm so glad. What lessons have you learned?

Life in a Nutshell – My Christmas List – by Jill Montz

Working retail during the holidays means customers are usually the only ones who get my “holiday cheer.” By the time I get home from a ten or twelve-hour work day I just don’t feel like shopping for my loved ones, liked ones, or even those obligatory ones who eventually end up with something from Hickory Farms. I will say I try to do all of my shopping early...like Hallmark Christmas Movie start date early. If I haven’t crossed your name off my list by the end of October, then I sure hope you didn’t decide to go vegan for the holidays because I smell a meat and cheese tray with your name on the gift tag.

This year, as December was fast approaching, when I wrote this article I decided I could do better than even the Hickory Farms Grand Holiday Gift Basket filled with three kinds of summer sausages, four kinds of cheeses and all kinds of spreads and goodies galore (although that thing could feed a family of four until New Year’s.) What I had in mind seemed even better...and no it wasn’t the Happiest Holidays Wine Gift Basket...although I did see how much shipping it to myself would run me.

No...I decided that this holiday season, starting December 1st, I would pick 25 different people or groups of people and pray for one each day. Here is my list...

1. Dotty – my daughter and my greatest gift from God ever.
2. My immediate family – we are like fudge...mostly sweet with a few nuts.
3. My *family* – friends I chose to be my family.
4. Dotty’s friends – these young people will help shape her into who she becomes.
5. My Pecan Shed store staff – without them I wouldn’t get to do things like eat, sleep and shower in November and December
6. My Pecan Shed customers – without them I would have to get another job.
7. My extended family – we don’t talk as often as I would like but they know I love them and vice-versa.
8. Dotty’s teachers and coaches – they spend most of the time with her from August to May and impact her in big and small ways.
9. My church family – they feed my soul.
10. My number one fans – they support me when I cannot support myself.
11. My biggest critics – they push me to do greater things than even I knew I was capable of.
12. Those who love me on my worst days – when even I can’t love myself.
13. Those who have left scars on my soul – they showed me how to heal.
14. The old friends I haven’t seen in years – memories of them bring joy to my heart.
15. The strangers I pass daily – I don’t know the battles they face but I pray they know God is their mighty defender.
16. Those who are welcoming home loved ones – this Christmas might be the best yet.
17. Those who have lost loved ones this year – this Christmas and many days to come might be the hardest to face.
18. Those starting a life together – finding new traditions can be so fun.
19. Those learning how to start over alone – finding new traditions can be so hard.
20. Those who work retail/restaurant/any service industry – I feel their pain (physically, mentally, and emotionally).
21. Those working in healthcare – may God bless them and keep them well.
22. Teachers and all those in education – may God give them rest over the holiday break so they are renewed when children return to their class.

23. Those in leadership – may they ask God for guidance and may they listen to Him and to the people they are called to serve.
24. For those who don't know God – may they find Him and develop a relationship with Him sooner rather than later.
25. For those who do know God – may they cling to Him and praise Him every day until He calls them home.

While this list may look different from someone else's and it is certainly not complete, my hope is that each day it will remind me to pray. So often for me, especially as the days get hectic and hard, I forget to talk to God. My prayer is that this list will not only bless those who I am praying for but also bless me by rooting myself even deeper in a prayer life.

Of course I am sure I will be checking out the Hickory Farms website before December is over...I mean it is kind of a tradition for me and I hate to break tradition. All jokes aside, their products are yummy and if you need a gift idea for me let me know and I can shoot you my address!

Just know that I am praying for each of you that read this story, as well. Whether I personally know you or not, I pray that God blesses you during the holidays and as we wrap up 2021. I pray you find joy and peace only God can bring, and I pray that each of you has a very merry Christmas.

Healthy Habits – Level Up – by Marcy Lytle

There's a verse in the bible about how God's ways are higher than ours, and I've always heard that shared when we don't understand something in life. We chalk it up to - *Oh well, God's ways are higher so we just can't understand them.* While this may be true, when I re-read those verses, it was really a call to step up and elevate our thoughts to think those thoughts that He thinks! Now, that's a different viewpoint altogether!

A healthy way to end this year is to level up our thinking to those higher thoughts, instead of staying in the habit of thinking poorly. Here are some suggestions:

- Level up thoughts about others. Instead of thinking the worst when she doesn't respond to a text, give her the benefit of the doubt and let it go. And keep loving her so...
- Level up thoughts about him/her. Instead of thinking so poorly of our partner, let's think the best and expect the best and pray for the best, and then let God do the rest.
- Level up thoughts about ourselves. Let's don't be so rough with our own selves when we fall short, can't perform, or tire out. We are loved and it's okay to rest, and He sees us flawless – so why can't we?
- Level up thoughts about leaders. Yes, some of them frustrate us to no end! However, thinking poorly does no good except bring us down. Elevate their names and families through prayer and trusting Him to move.
- Level up thoughts about those that hurt us. Who knows, maybe we hurt them as well. Thinking more highly of others above ourselves is always a good habit, and healthy for the soul.
- Level up thoughts on our appearance. So we didn't lose those 10 pounds this year, we didn't make exercise a daily habit, and we can't seem to see anything good when we look in the mirror. We are wonderfully and fearfully made, and that's the truth – so we can look and stare – and give thanks for that image staring back at us.
- Leave up our thoughts about God. Instead of wallowing in lies about his goodness and favor only being for those and not us, choose to believe that he pursues us daily with goodness and mercy ALL the days of our lives.

I think elevating our thoughts is one of the hardest exercises we can perform. And it's also one that has to be done daily, practiced often, and a must for healthy living. And if we can't do it alone, we can ask for help, pour out our hearts to Him, and ask him to renew our minds. After all, we belong to Him and he cares about all the things that concern us. Including those thoughts that destroy us...

End the year by leveling up, and see if those carols you sing don't have a bit more ring!

Life Right Now - When the Cookie Crumbles - by: Jennifer Stephens

Is there ever a moment in December that isn't filled with...*something*? All the things meant to get us ready for gathering with friends and family so we can celebrate Christmas together in style. Making lists. Shopping for just-right gifts and lovingly wrapping each one. Decorating every nook and cranny. And my favorite Christmas tradition – baking (and decorating) sugar cookies!

After collecting all the ingredients and mixing up the dough, I roll it out so it's ready to be pressed into trees, candy canes, stars, stockings, and holiday dresses. Then each tray goes into the oven to be transformed into perfectly edible yumminess. And most of the time, they do turn out just right. But, sometimes, opening that oven door reveals a smooshed together mess where nine cookies have become one unidentifiable blob. Or maybe the cookies slide onto the cooling rack looking okay but then crumble at the slightest touch.

Despite having the recipe and all the right ingredients, something went wrong. There are many reasons why this can happen – too much of one thing, not enough of another (or, YIKES, accidentally leaving something out!). I've even been known to let impatience win and skip the "chill the dough" step altogether. This can happen in my walk with God, too. I know all the things I *should* do – I have all the ingredients (praying, reading the Bible, serving others, telling others about Jesus). But sometimes I've given my time and attention to just one or two areas and left one out altogether (like telling myself I'll read my Bible *tomorrow* because right now I'm comfy on the couch binging Netflix).

When this happens, I'm a mess. An unrecognizable blob of anxiety and worry. Feeling completely overwhelmed. Snapping at the first person I see. And sometimes I might look okay on the outside, but if something strays from my perceived plan of how I *think* it should go, I'll crumble into a million pieces. Crying at the most insignificant little thing.

Just like those smooshed and broken Christmas cookies.

Even when the cookies leave the oven intact, decorating sugar cookies can be a time-consuming task. Filling the plastic bags with various colors of icing, precisely piping and flooding each shape, then adding the sandy colored sprinkles to each individual cookie requires a patient, steady hand. When I've been at it for several hours with only a handful of completely decorated cookies on my plate, I want to give up! This is when I tend to get impatient with God, too. When it seems like I've been at it, praying and praying, wondering why my prayers seem to go unanswered - wanting things to happen on MY timetable.

All because I'm not following the recipe God has written for me. I'm not using ALL the ingredients in my fully stocked God-sized pantry.

When I follow the cookie recipe, use the right ingredients in the exact right amounts, and patiently decorate each and every cookie, I will have created a plate of deliciously beautiful Christmas cookies ready to serve to friends and family. And when I follow God's recipe for me, use all the ingredients He has provided, and remember to pray with a patient heart...I will be the *me* He has created me to be.

Under Pressure - Christmas Conviction – by Debbie Haynes

Are you living with conviction? Someone said to me this week, “I get it. You care where your money goes because you live with your convictions.” I didn’t think about that word too much until...

I recently read through the book of Malachi, and have realized that we all live our convictions. Let me explain what I mean...

This book was written to the elite of the priesthood, yet we read of sin after sin that was dishonoring God among them. They were offering lame and putrid sacrifices to God, and God was very upset that their actions were causing others to stumble and fall by their own lack of conviction. They were blatantly excusing sin, justifying their wickedness and tempting God. And appallingly, they thought the actions of the wicked were “above” the judgments of God. These folks even had the audacity to answer God with indignation when He challenged them to rethink their attitudes and words.

In Chapter 4 a pronouncement is read that says the wicked will be stubble and burned up and nothing will be left of them – gone – wiped out! But by contrast, God’s love is read before that where he says those that fear his name will be “mine” and in that day will be jewels, and He will arise with healing in his wings...lots of hope for those that live with conviction! Those with conviction often spoke to one another and thought upon His name.

So, just what is conviction?

It’s a strong persuasion or belief of being convinced about something. So conviction in the Christian sense is to speak well of His name and be convinced of who He is.

It might seem that things appear bleak in our dark world, even during the season of joy. It may appear that all things wicked are winning, and that God is even being laughed at in his very face. And perhaps it seems as though God is looking the other way...for a time.

However, wickedness will be destroyed, and those that are living by their conviction of who God is, will be covered by His wings and go forth in strength and power.

Spend this holiday season singing songs that speak of your convictions, and strengthen the convictions of your children and their children by speaking well of His name. And come – let us all adore him – Christ the King of Kings – Jesus!



MARRIAGE

In This Together – One Simple Thing – by Bekah Holland

It's the most wonderful time of the year! At this point on the calendar, I usually find myself wondering how the year feels like I blinked in July and woke up in November, while simultaneously seeming to crawl like a turtle in peanut butter.

It's been a tough year. For the whole world. For our country. For our communities. For our families. We have dealt with uncertainty, fear, illness, anxiety, depression, addiction, suicide, loss, all while we continue to work and live when we can. And if you are like most of us mere mortals, you have been on high alert for the last 613 days. Y'all, we just weren't made to be "on" like that all of the time! I literally just changed my screen on my phone as a reminder. Want to know what it says? Sure you do. It says, "Stop scrolling, unclench your jaw, push your shoulders back. Take a deep breath." It also says, "Shine on, you beautiful creature." I was going to try to save a little bit of dignity by leaving that bit out....but obviously I ran out of most of my dignity around the time I had kids, and the rest is long gone after almost two years of switching from my nighttime pajamas to my fancy daytime pajamas. Classy, right? But I digress...

We are all tired. And not normal tired, like I'm-40-and-I-forgot-to-exercise-for-the-last-decade-and-now-I-have-regrets kind of tired. We are DONE. We have worried and prayed. We have protected our families. We have figured out how to teach/learn/work from home. We have been balancing all of the spinning plates in suspense, waiting to slip on a puddle of doggie drool and have everything come crashing down. And most of us (I'm assuming it's not just me) are trying to find the ever elusive "self-care" thing everyone keeps talking about.

I used to roll my eyes, or even just ignore people who talked about self-care, like it was actually something I could do. I both can't afford to and don't have time for mani/pedi sessions very often. I haven't spent the night away from my family since I was pregnant with my youngest (he's 10, in case you are wondering). This isn't a Calgon commercial. But I think we have a bit of a skewed view of what the term self-care really means.

One of my favorite procrastination tools is research, so I went in search of some info from a source not looking to profit from a country full of depleted women (people). Harvard Medical Journal published an article on the topic, and while the closest I have come to attending there is watching *Good Will Hunting*, I feel pretty confident in my source, well, because Harvard. So, according to some of the most brilliant minds in Ivy League education, "Self-care means paying attention to and supporting one's *own* physical and mental health." It is also a big part of treatment for many physical and mental health disorders. Well, we can't function very well if we aren't very well. If it is important to us to be able to take care of others, then we *must* pay attention to our own well-being.

My favorite analogy for this is clichéd, but totally on point. When you get on an airplane and the flight attendant gives that safety spiel and they get to the part about the oxygen masks, the first thing they tell you is: "If you're traveling with children or others who need assistance, put *your* oxygen mask on *first*."

Think about this. Let's say you don't do that and you fall unconscious due to lack of oxygen. It's like a made for TV movie where everyone dies. Lose/lose situation there. It's the same deal in everyday life. When we don't take care of ourselves, no one wins.

And yet there is a pervasive cultural pressure to keep pushing ourselves, to ignore the physical needs of our bodies and the emotional needs of our souls, which invariably leads to chronic stress, burnout, and depression. Data shows that burned-out healthcare providers provide crappy service, depressed parents can't effectively parent, and the list goes on.

So while I'm working to adjust my concept of "self-care," I'm trying to find one simple thing every day that I can do for myself. Some days I make myself take a nice long walk, read a book, pour a glass of wine. Some days, the closest I get is telling the minions that live here that they can figure out their own dinner, or yes cereal does have the necessary dietary requirements to make it a meal (I mean, close enough). But it's progress.

And these days, I think progress rates up there with perfection for me. So maybe find one little thing you can do that fills your cup a little bit. Turn off the news and on podcast. Have a little solo dance party in place of a meltdown (or during one-you do you). Find a quiet spot to just sit and not have anyone asking you where their car keys are, or who was supposed to wash the dishes and didn't (again). Sometimes, finding a quiet space for yourself is a little like mining for gold. But you are important. Your needs, your health, your heart, those are important.

So let's start treating ourselves like we matter, too. God thought we mattered enough to sacrifice His Son, so the least we can do is take better care of this body He gave us and live this life we created a little bit better than yesterday.

"Look, if cauliflower can become pizza....you, my friend, can do anything!"

Date Night Fun – Lights! Action! – by Marcy Lytle

It's all about the lights at Christmas, isn't it? Lights on the trees, down the streets, in the stores, and all around town – they twinkle and they shine. So why not enjoy every place and every light you can observe and behold! That's the focus of our fun nights out on dates in this most wonderful time of the year...

Lights by the tree – Spread a blanket, fill a thermos, line a tray, and sit by the tree and observe and chat. Look at the lights, the tree topper, the ornaments and talk about the beauty, the memories, and the fun that each thing brings. Sip on cider and make your own array of veggies and dips, or soups and crackers, and enjoy!

Lights down the street – Bundle up and take a stroll (don't drive, but rather walk) around your neighborhood and observe the lights. Vote on your favorite yard décor. Walk for an hour or more, holding hands, thinking of nothing else but the lights you see and the neighbors you pass...

Lights around town – Take a drive together across town just to see the lights. Maybe invite another couple, as well. Stop for an appetizer, and then drive some more. Finish with a dessert and coffee. How fun would that be?

Lights in the lobbies – Pick a couple of big hotels and make a plan to visit the lobbies as you people watch and observe the twinkles. Bring a game, orders some sips, and enjoy the night surrounded by light.

Lights that flicker – Set out at least five areas of the room with candles and light them, and watch a movie. Then blow out each candle one by one, talking and cuddling and praying between each extinction. Pray for family, friends, neighbors, and countries. Then sit in silence and sing Silent Night.

Observe the lights this season, and burn bright together for Him. After all, it's when they saw the light that they rejoiced with great joy!

After 40 Years – But for the Joy – by Marcy Lytle

It's easy to let word fly out of our mouths when we're in good company, like friends or relatives – especially in the holiday season – when family time might be a little too long and a little too much. Maybe we're around our own family where we feel so comfortable, so a little dig flies out of our mouth about our spouse. Have you ever experienced that?

We recently visited my sister and family and we traveled for days in the car, sightseeing and having such words. My husband grew up in East Texas where the southern accent is strong, and I guess I must think I'm better because I grew up in Austin. I don't know what I think, but it came out – in fun – where I teased him about his pronunciation of a few words.

Okay, so maybe that's not so bad. But I realized that when I get on “a roll” with the punches, sometimes I can go too far. I don't speak better than he does, and his way of pronouncing words is not inferior to mine, but I can come across that way with my tone and my jabs, although they're just made lightly in conversation. I can go too far, is what I'm saying.

So this Christmas, when family is around and visits perhaps seem long, and our guards come down, we can all take note of how we represent our spouses. It's definitely not wise to talk behind their backs. But often, because they are the “outsider” or the in-law, we make remarks in front of our inner circle, and it makes them feel excluded.

My husband just laughed and we all did, as I noticed his way of saying things versus my way – which obviously I was saying was the better way. That's the problem. Jabs might be in good fun, but often they're not.

Maybe he's not dressing up for an event like we want him to.

Maybe he's not using a napkin at the table.

Maybe he's dominating a conversation.

Maybe he's doing any number of things that – truth be told – embarrass us. But who's to say that we don't embarrass him, as well? My husband is really secure in himself and he allows me to be me, all the time. But I don't give him that same consideration. My mouth flies open and judgment flies, sometimes. And I feel bad about it, later, because I know that the main attitude behind my words is that the way I think and talk and behave is the better way.

Christmas can be the loveliest time of the year where memories are made and good cheer is spread...or it can be the most hurtful time of the year where words fly and attitudes stink up the house.

I think this Christmas it might be a good idea for me to shine the light on my own heart, my own mouth, and my own behavior to see if it's less than stellar. I want to choose uplifting words, kind comments, and encouragement to him as we shop, wrap, sip, and open on Christmas Day. I really do.

I want this Christmas to be one to remember, not for the jabs, but for the joy.

For Better or Worse- Gifts of the Heart – by Kaelin Scott

What comes to mind when you think about the holiday season?

I bet one of the top answers is gifts!

Personally, I love buying people gifts. Seeing my children open up their presents and knowing they're going to love what I picked out is so much fun. Same with my hubby! I love getting him gifts, and luckily he's easy to shop for because he knows exactly what he wants. And I'm terrible at keeping secrets from him!

Giving and receiving gifts is always fun. But the most valuable and priceless gifts can't be wrapped or put under a tree. Some of the best things we can give to our spouses (and other loved ones) aren't things at all. And best of all, they don't cost anything!

The most precious gift we can give to our husbands and children is **simply ourselves**. Being present in their day to day lives. Making sure they know we love them and support them and care for them. Showing up when they need us and encouraging them when they're feeling down. It sounds so simple, but it's also so very meaningful. The most important thing we can ever do for our families is just being there for them.

What other gifts can we give? I think a big one is **fun**. Life is too short to be serious all the time. Our husbands and children need us to let loose so we can all enjoy ourselves. They need to see our smiles and hear our laughter. We need to make memories together, because they will certainly outlast any material gifts.

Another treasured gift is **servitude**. Taking care of the ones we love. Even on the days when we're tired and grumpy and don't feel like it. Humbly serving our families is a huge sacrifice of love, and it's also something Jesus calls us to do. It's something He even did Himself. It may not seem big or important to wash the dishes or mop the floors, but it is. Our families need our hard work, whether they recognize it or not.

I could go on listing many other things, but I think you see what I mean. Of course, it's still fun to buy our husbands and children gifts, wrap them, and put them under the tree. But Christmas is about so much more than packages and bows. True gifts come from the heart, and the best ones involve everyday life. So as you make your holiday shopping list this year, think about a few ways you could bless your family without spending any money. Maybe it's organizing your husband's office, taking your kids on a scavenger hunt at the park, or spending a little extra time together. Be creative, have fun, and make sure to spread the love!

May the Lord give you peace at all times and in every way...

Merry Christmas, friends!



ENCOURAGEMENT

Simple Truths – Hands Down – by Marcy Lytle

I've heard all of my life that giving without expecting anything in return, and also giving anonymously, is the highest level of giving. Giving anonymously doesn't seem too hard, in my opinion, but giving without expectation is downright difficult.

In a marriage, we give by serving and loving each other, but how dull and drab would a marriage be if only one performed those actions? It would be super hard to continue to give without expecting reciprocation, or at least an occasional, "Thank you."

In friendships, it gets old if we are the ones always checking on, inviting out, or giving to, that friend or that couple, or that group. One gets weary in well-doing for sure, and isn't it just normal to expect reciprocation?

At work, we certainly don't put out our time and energy and expect nothing. We expect accolades, a nice pay check, and eventually a promotion...for all the effort we have expended.

So how can we give this holiday season without expecting anything in return, is it even possible, and is that truly the best and highest form of giving?

I suppose the term for this type of giving would be selfless giving. Giving of our time, resources and love without thinking of ourselves, at all. But doesn't that make one tired, depressed, and feeling worthless?

I listened to a video on this topic and the speaker reminded us that giving out of necessity all the time creates the weariness. In other words, feeling the "burden" of giving out of guilt is not what we're talking about here. It's not giving when we're totally spent and worn out. It's more of a lighthearted giving, the freedom to give, and the joy in giving – just because we want to give.

Also, in our world in which we live it's "normal" to give and expect return. We pay for a service, we get our tires fixed. We give of our time, we get a paycheck. We expend energy as a parent, we expect our kids to be grateful. That's the mundane, routine we live in and hope to experience daily.

But giving without expecting anything in return is **CREATING**. It's creating a new friendship, cultivating this selfless heart we all need to cultivate, and it's putting out good into the world without the exchange of something back – and that's beautiful!

Having our hand held out with palm facing upwards is asking to always receive. But with our palm sideways to help out, or facing down to drop off, is still rare and still something we have to practice!

Giving without expectation also creates **OPPORTUNITY** for that person that received to then pass it on, and for our own hearts to grow ten sizes bigger in room and space for others.

But what if we just want a little respect, love and affection for the giving that we offer? Aren't these good things? Sure, they are! But we all know that even those things come and go with the wind, depending on the mood and circumstances of those to whom we give!

So here's what the Good Book says – give and it will be given unto you – good measure, pressed down, shaken together.

We once did a family devo on this verse and we “gave” a trash can gently wadded up paper, then we pressed it down, and added more, and continued until the paper ran over the top. It was to demonstrate the power of giving and how our return is so great.

But who gives us these things? God said he will. He sees what we do in secret, he sees our heart, and he gives. In fact, he's already given acceptance, love, forgiveness, affection, eternal life, and more. So when we look at what's already been given and is running over in our lives, it makes it easier to give without expectation from anyone else.

I'll be honest. I'm not there, yet. I give gifts at Christmas and I enjoy receiving gifts. I make dinner and I appreciate a “thank you.” I pray for others and hope they pray for me. So I'm still learning and growing.

My challenge to myself this month is to find a few places where I can give cheerfully and lightheartedly to offer a hand up, or release something from a palm down, and walk away without ever knowing how the person received it, or without any reciprocation at all.

I'm thinking if we truly believed that God sees and God gives and God makes sure we are loved and cared for, we'd have no problem with this concept. We just don't get it, quite yet. But at least we're thinking about it and considering the position of our hands that are out this season of giving. Up or down? Which position are they, the most?

Food for thought, anyway...right?

Firmly Planted - Pledge of Allegiance – by Dina Cavazos

The whole of nature is astounding. The abundance and variety of life-forms, the ecosystem, the interdependency, not to mention the beauty...it throws me into fits of A.W.E. (Astonished Wonder of Everything!) Bringing it down to my backyard prayer garden, it's a tiny slice of botanical wonder with some biological specimens that make their home in various hiding places, i.e. frogs and toads, annals, lizards, mice, a zillion insects, and things that only appear when I'm sleeping. Gazing and contemplating (one of my favorite pastimes), it brings to mind God's love for his creation--especially us, created out of love, to love. A little farther down that path of thought...*do my plants love each other, or at least their neighbors?* If the trees and the hills clap their hands...well, who knows?

I grew up in a small town that was about 10 years behind the times. In my high school in the early 70's, girls were only allowed to wear pant suits. Pant suits! The rage was cool bell-bottom jeans—it seemed so unfair! We protested (mildly, back then) and staged a “walk-out.” Eventually we were allowed to wear jeans, because the times they were *a'changin*.

The personal freedom to wear jeans is one thing, but defying patriotic tradition is another. Through most of high school I refused to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. If I couldn't get away with sitting, I would stand, but wouldn't say it. Now hold those thoughts of judgment please! Let me explain my youthful /naïve, altruistic thinking. Blame my Enneagram 9 personality, but I've always felt like a “citizen of the world.” As in....*The entire world is God's creation. He loves everyone. He is love. And so, he loves every nation under God. Shouldn't we have a “whole earth” mentality and pledge to bring love, peace, and justice everywhere?* In my idealistic, purely honest heart, I couldn't relate to pledging allegiance to a piece of cloth that represented only one small part of the world.

Maturity brought a perspective and understanding that made me grateful for our country and the Pledge became more meaningful. I'm so grateful for the freedom, privileges, abundance and choices we have as Americans, and I try not to take them for granted. Truthfully, my thinking has changed a little. I still believe God loves everyone, in every nation, without exception. But now I think of myself as a citizen of heaven first, the world second, and America third. I'm fortunate to live where I live (though what it might be like to live in France, Sweden, or New Zealand I can't say!) Now, I can recite the Pledge of Allegiance with gratitude, but in my spirit I know there's only One to whom I can truly pledge allegiance in the deepest sense of the word—Christ's atonement and love is for all mankind, and my allegiance to him overrides everything else.

...But my thoughts are just my thoughts—how does God see it and what does that world-view look like?

Revelation 7:9-12

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen.”

Moving Forward – My Groove – by Pam Charro

After 4 1/2 months of working at my temporary job, I got let go today. They didn't give me any warning, but I believe God let me know a few weeks ago. Nevertheless, I am stunned and hurt. I really gave 110% of myself to be excellent at that job, and I feel humiliated and rejected.

Why didn't they want to hire me?

It's interesting, though, because I really was not happy there. I wanted to shine, and I do believe that God put me there on purpose. I met some wonderful people and I gained great experience to put on my resume.

But, it just was not a good fit.

God knew what I wanted: I wanted to build. I wanted raises, vacations, medical benefits. I wanted security and stability! But would those things really have been blessings if I had continued to stay where I didn't belong? No, those very things I wanted would have further cemented me in a position that was a constant struggle. And, while struggling isn't always a bad thing, it shouldn't continue on endlessly.

So, I haven't found my groove yet.

And that's okay, because now I am free again to keep looking. God sees me, he has great plans for me, and he doesn't want me to keep trying to make myself fit where I don't belong.

I thank him for the experience.

The struggle, the new friendships, the income that was made. But I especially appreciate the opportunity to trust him for what is next, as he leads me to where I really do belong. The path may be rocky in places, but I know he will faithfully bring me to the place I am meant to be. I look forward to the day when I can settle into my groove.

Rooted in Love - Choosing Favorites – by Kaelin Scott

Several friends have added me to various mom groups on Facebook over the years. I don't really get on them much because they tend to mostly be gossip and complaining, but it is nice to get advice from other moms once in a while. The other day I saw a post in one of these groups that stopped me in my tracks. It was an entire thread where all the moms were talking about which of their children was their favorite. I was appalled by this. Most of them seemed almost proud of the fact that they favored one of their children over the others. I can't imagine ever feeling that way, much less saying it out loud. I was truly in shock and couldn't stop thinking about it.

This whole thing made me realize how very grateful I am that God does not play favorites. He doesn't choose any of us over the others or like anyone better. He loves us all equally. When He sent baby Jesus to the earth, it was for everyone. All of us are able to receive that precious gift. And isn't that beautiful?

Maybe as humans, it's harder for us not to show favoritism. I know, we're not God, and some people tend to get under our skin. We just get along with some people more easily and mesh better with certain friends. But maybe this holiday season, we could focus on showing kindness to everyone. Even the people who annoy us, or hurt us, or really make us mad. Maybe those are the ones who need our love the most. Maybe our kindness and love could be a wonderful gift to them, and it might just lead them to discovering the greatest gift of all – the amazing love of Jesus.

It can be so hard to show kindness to someone we feel doesn't deserve it. Our comfort zones can really get stretched by this challenge. But the truth is that none of us deserve God's gifts either, yet He is gracious enough to extend them to everyone. If He can show that kind of love for the entire planet full of sinful people, surely we can show a little bit of love to the people around us. And what better time to spread some cheer than Christmas?

As always, I love each and every person who reads this, and I'm so grateful to take this journey with you. I hope you all have a very merry Christmas, and remember how loved and precious you are. XOXO

"For God does not show favoritism." Romans 2:11

Unearthly Thing - Gifts That Don't Requiring Wrapping – by Angela Dolbear

Some people overflow with talent. I am in awe and appreciation of their gifts, especially people who can draw or paint. To bring something beautiful to life that didn't exist before, is a Divine trait given by the Creator.

This December, I want to focus on the gifts people have (no long list of shopping and wrapping here!).

My favorite artist is Donna Mibus. I have several of her prints hanging in my home. I love their style and color, and they inspire me. I was abundantly blessed to get to know Donna when she agreed to design the refreshed covers for the reissue of my [Garden Key Tales novels](#).

I was excited when she agreed to let me interview her for THYME Magazine!

Angela Dolbear: Where are you from, and how does that affect your work?

Donna Mibus: I'm from Houston, Texas. Growing up my Mother would take us to visit the NASA Space Center there. Oh boy, did I love that! I wanted to grow up and be an astronaut, and I loved all the new and modern space age stuff. I used to flip through the Sears catalog at all the modern furniture and accessories and dream of my future apartment. These same modern and futuristic furniture pieces and accessories fill the room scenes in my artwork. I never outgrew my love for them.

AD: When did you start creating art?

DM: I've loved to do art my whole life. Drew things as a child, and then did artsy stuff with my children and even volunteered to teach art class at their Christian Day school. But I got serious about it when I turned 50. I was using a computer program to design church banners for our church and played around with designing room scenes. My scenes had a chair and floor lamp and wall art in them. I had been teaching my granddaughters art and had just bought some paints for us to use, so I tried my hand at painting the room scenes. I loved it!

AD: Who are your biggest artistic influences?

DM: I love David Weidman, Jim Flora, Evelyn Ackerman, Charley Harper and Bernard Buffet. Their works all inspire me.

AD: Tell me about your favorite medium.

DM: I work mostly with acrylic paint on canvas. It requires only soap and water cleanup and is fast drying, which is good, since I'm impatient (laughs).

AD: Which medium would you aspire to work with in the future?

DM: Watercolors. I was inspired to try watercolor painting by seeing watercolor paintings by other artists. I had no idea watercolors could be so versatile.

AD: Where do you find inspiration?

DM: Vintage photos. I look at photos of modern rooms from the 50s, 60s and 70s.

AD: When is your favorite time of day to create?

DM: Afternoons. Mornings are taken up with my Etsy and Ebay orders, and walking the dogs.

AD: Describe how art, and the use of gifts, is important to society.

DM: I believe art is good for both the artist who creates it, as well as the people who see it. I think when we use our God given gifts we are happier people to be around, and I think when we share our work with society then they are happier, too.

AD: What motivates you to create?

DM: Usually an idea pops into my head, and I can't wait to make it real, either through the computer or with drawing or painting.

AD: How do you define success as an artist?

DM: When your artwork makes others happy. I am touched by the number of letters I've received from folks telling me my art makes them happy.

AD: Does art help you in other areas of your life?

DM: It puts me in a happy mood and keeps my mind off any worries I might have. It also helps keep me in touch with the outside world through interacting with other artists, customers and social media followers.

AD: How do you develop your art skills?

DM: By working at it daily. I will also watch how-to videos on things I'm not familiar with. I love learning new skills and techniques.

AD: What do you think about artistic gifts?

DM: Some people would like to think they "made it on their own" in the art world and they give no credit to God. But they would not have gotten anywhere without the artistic abilities God gave to them. These abilities are gifts from God, and once you realize you've been given a gift, you should use it to glorify Him.

AD: Do habits help (or hinder) creativity?

DM: Both. I have settled down into a comfortable routine and that seems to foster creativity in me. I'm comfortable with my paints and I'm comfortable with my computer art program, etc. But habits can sometimes prevent you from branching out. For ten years, I did not even think of trying different paints. It was my habit to use acrylic. I was happy using acrylic. But I recently gave watercolors a try and found a whole new adventure. I think we get stuck in a bit of a rut, and use the same old things out of habit, and don't give thought to what else might be fun to try.

AD: What do you like most about being an artist?

DM: Working with colors. I treasure being able to see colors. I love trying out new colors and color combinations.

AD: Where can I get prints of your paintings?

DM: Both my [Etsy shop](#) and [Pixels](#).

AD: How do you know when a painting is done?

DM: When I'm pleased with it. Not when others are pleased with it, but when I'm pleased with it. And I'm hard to please!

AD: What if you're not inspired to paint?

DM: Then I don't paint. If I don't feel like painting, I draw. Or I'll do digital art on the computer. Or I'll make magnets or ornaments. Or make vinyl decals. I'm usually always in the mood for art, but I'm not always in the mood to paint. It's a blessings to have all the artistic outlets that I have.

AD: How much time does it take to complete a painting?

DM: Gosh, that depends on the design and size. On a small "easy" painting maybe an hour or two. A large detailed one will take days.

AD: Do you listen to music when you're painting?

DM: No, never. Sometimes I will listen to talk radio.

AD: What does 'vulnerability' mean to you?

DM: It was really hard to put my first paintings online for sale. I mean, what if nobody wanted them? To me that's vulnerability. It never goes completely away, the fear of opening yourself up to possible criticism, or rejections, of your work.

AD: What is success?

DM: One of my favorite books I read to my children was [Miss Rumphius](#) by Barbara Cooney. Her grandfather is an artist and he tells Alice (Miss Rumphius) that she, "must do something to make the world more beautiful." For an artist to achieve that, to me, is success.

AD: What advice would you give to your younger self?

DM: Not to beat myself up over past mistakes.

Wise and inspiring words from Donna Mibus. Big thanks to her for sharing her thoughts on art and gifts. Please take a moment to view her work at her [Etsy shop](#) and at [Pixels](#).

May you find an opportunity to share your gifts with someone else today, and on the days to come. Blessings to you!

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!



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - After Christmas – by Marcy Lytle

I realize that not everyone feels this way, because some are glad to see Christmas come and go. I get it. Memories were painful, loss has occurred, maybe funds were tight, or no family came to visit, and we're just ready to get back to life as usual. But then there are some of us that get so excited about the holiday season and the family around the tree that we set ourselves up for being totally deflated when all the festivities are over. Seriously, it's such a let-down for some of us, and it doesn't feel good.

Of course, there's New Year's Eve to celebrate. But then when January arrives, it's just sad to take down the tree, put away all of the color and lights, and get back to work and cleaning and no more gifts to open and all of the fun just - stopped.

I'm the world's worst. I even feel this way after a vacation away. I get way too excited about trips and tinsel and presents and parties, and then I feel this huge sadness that can sometimes envelop me when the hoopla ends, and the mundane begins.

I've found a few things that help me, and I really have to work at choosing to avoid the after Christmas blues:

1. Who says it has to end? Plan something on the calendar for January! For us, it's my husband's birthday, so we usually go away for a night or two, and that's fun to look forward to.
2. Giving thanks chases away the blues! I journal or record or reminisce over the season and thank Him out loud for all of the cheer that came my way through friends or gifts or health or food.
3. Exercise helps immensely. Taking walks daily lightens my heart every single time I go. Somehow observing the trees and the sky and getting my heart rate up, just elevates every thought.
4. New lists emerge. I love making lists, so I start with organizing lists, new winter recipes for January, some sort of new arrangement of a room after all the décor is put away, something to get my creative juices flowing.
5. After Christmas sales. It might sound silly, but these are some of my faves. I love looking for decorations AFTER the season is over. It's like a treasure hunt at the stores, scanning each aisle for that cute pair of socks, that Santa figurine, or something cute to put away until next year.
6. Music and movies don't have to end once the season is over. Save a few of those really Christmassy movies until January, and keep those goodies on hand for eating by the fire – because yes – keep the fire burning!
7. Friends. Plan now to have a time to visit friends for a baked potato bar, for example. Get it on the calendar now for mid-January and make it happen. It's a very easy thing to put together, and you can eat, chat about the holidays, and dream about the new year – and give thanks together!

By the time you've done these things, you've been busy, you've brightened your mood, and before you know it...Christmas blues will be gone. It works. But we might need a nudge to get

off the sofa and make it happen, so ask someone to hold us accountable to avoid the blues that come with the news that Christmas day is over... because a New Year is about to begin!

FRESH THYME – Choose Rest – by Marcy Lytle

This past weekend we took a very long walk on the boardwalk in downtown Austin around a beautiful lake in the center of the city, and it winds under bridges and overpasses, and along and behind grassy hills, with views that are the best! It's one of our favorite spots to walk, although it's awfully crowded on the weekends with bicyclists that do not warn when they are passing to the left!

On this particular walk, we were nearing a part of a trail where I heard a noise that sounded like rushing water to me. I remarked, "Hey, is there a waterfall over there?" My husband quickly realized there was no water, but rather there was a road through the trees in the distance, and the noise we were hearing was cars, whirring by. I was really surprised that I thought car noise was the sound of a waterfall.

All of a sudden, I realized that in my life I often hear sounds as well. There are soothing sounds like waterfalls that invite me to come and stand under, sit by, gaze at and listen. And then there are noisy sounds like cars whirring, trucks lumbering, and people chattering and dogs barking that all together can "sound" like a normal way of life, indistinguishable from the quiet of the day.

Let me explain.

We had chosen this path on a Sunday morning to take a day of rest. My mind was cluttered, I was a bit sad and melancholy, and we decided we both needed a day outside on a pretty November day, away from the noise. But there it was, the noise – the cars in the distance – which I mistook for a waterfall!

I am guilty of staying so busy that the buzz of the duties of the day, the to-do lists, the cluttered mind sound like normal life that pushes me forward...but then I crash when I realize I've never stopped to light a candle, sit by the fire, eat a piece of dark chocolate and listen to the other soothing sound calling me to stillness.

January is coming, and I often lay aside a few treats for myself so that I'm not blue after all the busyness of Christmas. I actually thrive on busyness, as it's just my nature to stay busy. But I do value and realize the beauty and necessity of the soothing sound of the waterfalls and the call to sit and listen to that, instead of the noise.

- I save January issues of magazines to look at on January 1, instead of when they arrive in December.
- I set aside my book of the month that arrives in the busyness of the season, to start in the new year.
- I order myself a couple of devotional/reflection journals I can't wait to begin after 2020 ends.
- I place them in a basket with a blanket that awaits me once the tree is removed, and quiet has returned.

What noises do you hear daily? Sometimes it's hard to distinguish between the call to be busy and the call to rest, because we're so used to them blending together. But the truth is, often the

restful call is drowned out by the noisy pounding. And when they start to sound the same, we need to stop and take note of which is which.

We kept walking on that trail past the noise of the cars in the distance, and I made a mental note to realize the difference between noise and rest, and choose rest a lot more in the days ahead.

FRESH THYME – Knees or Not – by Marcy Lytle

“If you’re the praying type,” I recently read on a Facebook post, as someone asked their friends to pray for a need. I sort of chuckled at that phrase, because I think every human is the praying type at some point in his/her life – that point being trouble. When we’re in trouble, we pray. Whether we believe someone is listening or not; when we are desperate we cry out for help, just in case. So in that sense, we are all the praying type.

But I get what she meant. There are those that really believe in the power of prayer and when they say they will pray for you, they do! I have a few such friends that I can count on to pray for any need I present to them, because they believe God hears and will move when we pray.

But what if we’re not the “praying type?”

Sometimes, we don’t know how to pray.

Sometimes, we pray and feel empty when finished, as if no one was listening.

Sometimes, we give up because we’ve prayed so long and the answer has always been no.

Sometimes, we fall asleep when we pray because it feels like a one-way conversation.

I remember as a child thinking prayer had to be this on-the-knee situation, bible nearby, words of wisdom offered, and lots of faith...or He just wouldn’t be pleased with my time spent with Him. I’ve also heard so many times that it’s important to have quiet time with God first thing in the morning, and without that quiet time we aren’t quite living to our full potential in our walk with God.

While there are some good ideas about kneeling, setting aside time, and all the habits of a diligent prayer life, we often just give up if we’re unable to do any of the above. So we might place ourselves outside the category of the “praying type.”

But what I’ve found as I’ve grown older is that just smiling in the morning at God for another day to live is a great way to start the day, and that counts as thanksgiving. Driving to the store and noticing the beauty of his handiwork as the leaves fall or the rain hits the windshield or the clouds part is all part of worship, and with that He is pleased. Also, stopping for a second to remember a friend and ask for healing is pure gold, even as much as the laments and the cries of those that spend hours on their knees. And laying our heads to rest at night on our pillows after reading one verse that rings true and offering one praise that acknowledges who He is – that’s a great end to a great day of the praying type.

So if you’re one of those people that never feels like you pray enough, measure up enough, or lift up others enough, be reminded that as you live and breathe and notice and acknowledge the God that loves you and the others you meet, you are enough. You may cry out in desperation more than you do in adoration, but that’s okay. He will meet you in either situation and love you always and forever.

Making ourselves fit into a formula of the praying type often feels like wearing an ill-fitting pair of jeans that's too tight and uncomfortable. You know. The kind that you can't wait to pull off at the end of the day and replace with those cozy sweatpants and fuzzy slippers.

In reality, prayer is faith, worship and love offered to Jesus in a life lived to the fullest in service to Him and others, and I bet...I just bet...that we are all more the praying type than we realize. Let that sink in, as you work on your to-do list today and offer thanks for that sale you just snagged, whisper a prayer for that friend that just texted, and look up at the sun that just appeared.

He's aware and he listens to all of it, all day long, whether we're on our knees or standing in line...

Merry Christmas.