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TIPS

The Dressing – Red, or Not – by Marcy Lytle

There are lots of hues to choose from this month, not just red. But if you like red for February, then there are plenty of options! What I like most about the month of love is that February 14th is an excuse to get dressed up in whatever feels good, makes me smile and elevates the moment. So here are some fun ideas for you!

Brown and blue – It's a favorite combo of mine. I happened to have a long blue maxi skirt and found this great brown blouse on Amazon this winter for layering. But these two together – well – I love it! Shop your closet for something brown and blue.

A graphic tee with a long sweater – Did you know Old Navy has cute graphic tees, and they're often on sale for 10 bucks? I recently grabbed a couple I love and they're great on warmish days that fade into cold nights, because you can wear a long cozy cardigan (I found so many great ones on Amazon) or take it off if you're too warm for it!

Lavender – It's a shade that most everyone loves, but I think we forget about it in our closet! This lavender sweater just elevates jeans to the max, and it's so pretty for February. In fact, make a whole evening devoted to lavender scones, lavender scents, or shades of purples in the flowers in your home! Black and white polka dots pair well with lavender, too!

Layers work – I love wearing a long shirt over a white tee, leaving it open. And then adding a longer layer in a neutral sweater that completes the look. Gray and off white – yes to both. And maybe a pearl headband, too. Why not?

Speaking of polka dots – Do you have a polka dot sweater or scarf? Oh my! This scarf has become a favorite, and it goes with so many things. Polka dots are just plain fun. And who doesn't want some fun this month?

A green poncho – I found this on line at J Crew Factory, ordered it, and received it in time for Christmas. It's lightweight, which makes it great for travel. It's a pretty color, and provides just a little extra layer, and a whole lot of class to your outfit. And it folds so nicely.

Red and gray – This is a fun sweater I picked up from Urban Outfitters last year, on sale. It's loosely woven, but rich in color, and just makes me happy when I wear it. Shop their sales. In fact, only shop sales when you shop. You can find surprises like this!

Skinny scarves and necklaces, too – Scarves are in, all shapes and sizes. I love having a pack of skinny ones to wear as a pair, or to layer with a necklace. I'm so serious. A drawer of these, and you'll pull one out so often to add to your outfit.

See, there? Not a shade of red mentioned, for February. But you can definitely wear red if that's your jam! Wear what you like, add color, go for the accessories, and layer! Enjoy your celebrations this month of love...with your kids, your spouse, yourself or a friend!

Seven for You – Favorites – by The Panel

For a few years now, our February offering has been a list of our favorite gifts we received and ones we gave, this past Christmas season. I love hearing about cool gifts and I bet you do, as well. After all, it's the season of gifting again for your Valentine, a friend, for the kids, or just for yourself! Yourself is a good idea! See if you find anything you must have as we share:

My favorite gift I received were some pink day lilies. I decided to remove the orange day lilies from my garden, so I found a gardening friend to come dig them up and take them to her garden. When my husband ordered my pink day lilies (5 of them), they showed up and I immediately planted them. Four days later, guess what showed up....5 MORE pink day lilies! For some reason, they double shipped my day lily order from two different plant suppliers. That automatically makes that my favorite gift! I also love the new OXO salad spinner I received. It's SO much easier to use than the old contraption I owned.

I think my favorite gift I gave has to be a little, but very powerful, flashlight that I bought my husband. He picked it out and he loves it. He's blinded me with it numerous times, shown the neighbors, shown his coworkers, and just keeps talking about how much he loves that flashlight. And I'll tell you one thing: my favorite mode on that flashlight is the "moonlight" mode, of which he rarely seems to use! - Laura

We were all together in November having a Thanksgiving/Christmas celebration when I received my favorite gift for Christmas. It is something I would never buy for myself, never think I would enjoy, and never think I would desire to display at my home. His name is Hamilton. All my kids and grandkids were with me when I unwrapped the box that housed Hamilton. They all knew what it was and were so excited for me to get it! Of course, I graciously complimented the gift and told them how much I loved it, all the while thinking this goes on my front porch? He's really cute, but it's just not something I would have picked for myself. As I sat holding this big plastic goose (and yes, I said goose) all my grandchildren were deciding what to name him. They decided on Hamilton. This goose comes with many different costumes for each holiday and seasons throughout the year. So, my grandkids asked me to dress Hamilton in his Thanksgiving costume. We all laughed and took pictures of Hamilton in his "turkey" costume!

Then came Christmas time at home and Hamilton's costume was the Grinch that I love. Of course, the grands are calling, wanting pictures. Hamilton has now become one of our family! And I love him! He motivates such interaction between us all! And I must add this here, he is a silly old goose!

I really didn't have a favorite gift that I gave, especially since we did Christmas in November but I did do something different this year that might become a favorite. We gave everybody money, even the smallest grands. All my kids have been teaching their kids about money so it was a very fitting gift. And all my kids and grandkids love to shop! We've received pictures of all the toys they picked out! One granddaughter couldn't hardly wait to go spend her money. And she's four. I guess the shopping starts early! - Carole

I was so excited to give the most comfy pajamas to my daughter and DIL this year because I know they don't really buy those for themselves. The ones I gave are so soft, I found them on Amazon, and my daughter already shared that she loves them so much! I too love the luxury of a pajama set on cozy mornings.

I received the softest robe in a red stripe (I did pick it out, though!) from my husband from the company Tommy John. It's honestly the best robe I've ever had! Do I sense a theme here? Comfy, cozy, luxurious and soft...for winter. Yes! – Marcy

My favorite gift I gave was huge, as in large and heavy, but also a huge hit! My son and future DIL just bought a home with a game room and media room. They love to entertain. My DIL loves Star Wars, so when I saw this stunning computerized pinball Star Wars game at Goodwill for \$150.00, I had to buy it for them. It looks brand new and is worth over \$1,000! Some sell as high as \$6,000. I called my son to pick it up right away. It wouldn't fit in my car. They were so happy! I've been called the queen of thrift, and I wear that crown proudly.

My favorite gift to receive was watching the joy on my son's face on Christmas day as we helped my mom go through the old storage sheds on her property. He inherited the junking/antiquing bug from both my mom and me. My parents collected so many things, and they were just sitting in the shed. Watching him get so excited about finding a 1958 Hot Dr. Pepper device made my Christmas.

A Hot Dr. Pepper device was a marketing tool to encourage people to drink Dr. Pepper in the colder months. It heated up your Dr. Pepper...but the device is pretty frightening looking. They have one in the Dr. Pepper museum. – Cathy

The favorite gift I gave this year was to my two year old grandson, Collin. I gave him a kid's basketball set. It was so fun watching him play with his daddy, uncles and grandpas over the Christmas season!

The favorite gift I received was the gift of my husband, Bill, retiring. So glad to have him around for the holidays and not running back and forth to work while our extended family was in town. Grateful that he was home with all of us instead. Not a traditional gift, but definitely the best gift! – Glenna

I love giving and receiving gifts at Christmas. But, the biggest problem is, of course, giving and receiving the gifts that are really wanted and needed. My husband is always hard to buy for. He usually asks for one small thing even though several of us want to buy him a gift. This year I bought that gift for him and I guessed at a couple of related items. I was thrilled that he liked them all. And one was this knife set.

As for my favorite gift, I received a Ninja smoothie maker. I asked for this because I am trying to boost my protein intake. It will now be easy to try new flavors and combinations making protein rich smoothies. I am really excited about it. - Gina

The Cousin Moms – What They Have – by Charissa and Kamrin

“I want what he has.”

“Her room is so big!”

“Gosh, I wish we could get a new car!”

Our kids look and notice what they're missing, and some days we just want to tell them no and send them away. Other days, we feel the same way and wish we too had what others have. So, what's a parent to do? Well, it's not easy...

Kamrin

Talking to our kids about what their desires and wants that other kids have is not easy. Of course, we'd love to give them everything. But even as adults, we don't get to have all that we want! And the truth is that the desire to have more doesn't change as we grow up. It just changes from video games and toys, to cars and a house. We have to model as a parent the right attitude. However, there are also hard conversations like when we put money towards something that the kids then question. Why did I get a chair but they didn't get a PS5?

When our kids used to say they wanted this or that, something a friend had, we just said a flat out, “No.” Now we have deeper and longer conversations about gratefulness and the why. And then giving them money and teaching them the value of a dollar, needs vs. wants.

Our boys are into baseball. And besides the basics, there are cool gloves and bags that are hundreds of dollars, cleats that are unique colors – it's ridiculous! Gear is expensive! They will say they need this or that, and we talk about what they need to play well. If they want the latest and greatest, then they can save up...and they have! And sometimes, they forget about it, because they don't want to spend their own money.

It's not easy for us, either. I have to pay a water bill and not get a new car, because we have to get groceries! And I don't want to say that we sacrifice, but rather it's a joy to get what we need and put aside the wants. It's a privilege to get what we have, instead of wanting what others have. We try to represent a balance, so that we instill gratitude while we also say no.

Our daughter is very creative and needs space for that creativity, but we don't have a huge house! We downsized a few years ago, and I would love a bigger space as well! But we have a blessing in having our home. She might say her friend has the largest room ever, and I encourage her to look at what she does have. Eventually, the kids see their blessings when we put value on what we have.

Our kids put 2-3 huge items on their Christmas lists, and we didn't get those giant ones, but chose smaller ones. They did sound disappointed but we had to talk about what they did get. We explained how we enjoy family time opening gifts. They came back and said they loved the gift and family time as it is...and that made my heart happy.

Our kids watch us more than they listen. And conversations are key. And while our kids do notice what they don't have, they are confident in themselves and who they are. They're learning to not look at him/her but to just focus on their own likes and move forward!

Finally, by no means use the word “broke” in labeling your family. Of course, we fail as parents sometimes. I want things for my house and love buying décor that I see on line! And then we check our hearts, too, when we buy Starbucks just after we told the kids that we have no money. Kids will call us out! So we grow together as a family...as we want and yet have...so much...and that’s a blessing.

Charissa

Our girls are young and in school and have lots of friends, so there are things they see that they don’t have. This causes jealousy and then they hope to have those things, as well. But even as adults, we do have the same mind frame to try and “keep up with the Jones” as we wish for this or that. So we have to focus our thoughts, too, to be thankful for what we have.

When one of our girls wants something she doesn’t have, for financial reasons, or they’re not ready to have that item, we ask what we do have to be thankful for. We look at the blessings of a roof, clothes, food, and all of those necessities we take for granted that some kids don’t even have. We break it down to the things we need, and we have those. We are thankful, instead of wanting that which we don’t have.

One example is that both of our older girls have friends with cell phones, so that’s a hot topic. For our family, we are not ready for our girls to have a phone, and then they ask why we explain. We remind them that we do have other friends whose kids don’t have phones, so we talk about how families are all different. Each one has their own values and financial budget, are in different stages of life, and not everyone is the same. But as their parents, we remind them that we are raising them, and we focus on good reasons why some do and some don’t have a particular thing. We explain how we feel, for them to wait and become responsible, first.

Our girls also ask for a dog. We have a few outside farm animals but don’t have an inside dog. We remind them at this point in our life, it doesn’t work to have an inside dog, but maybe later when they’re older it will. We are so involved in other things, so we don’t have the time to care for another thing! It’s all in the timing, and maybe one day a dog we will get!

Some friends have a hot tub or a pool. We tell the kids how that’s a big ticket item, and we can go places to enjoy like a park or a hotel, but not have to take care of ourselves. Maybe one day we might get one, but working hard for necessities is what we do right now.

Lots of good conversations take place when they see what they want, but then we talk about what’s best for us and being thankful for what we have. And we don’t have to compare with others.

Tried and True – Last Month’s Learning – by Marcy Lytle

Another month, more things observed and learned, all of which makes life so fun. If we’re not learning, we’re not growing! These are things I noted and loved last month. Hope you try some of them!

We got the coolest paint by number sets from Crafteria – a great idea and a great price – so fun and easy – and pretty!

Erin McDermott jewelry – she runs sales all the time – this is my latest piece – check it out!

I saw where it’s a thing to frame a piece of old paper and that’s it – and it’s cute – who knew?

I used to have a coat stand decades ago, and then they were no more. Well, they’re back. And I got one again and love it – as décor – not just a coat stand.

Whole Foods has these decadent super thick ice cream sandwiches in all sorts of flavors and they’re delicious – one is enough for two people!

Is there a PopShelf store in your area? I find the cutest home décor pieces there every time I go!

We finally found a cap rack that works on the back of the door, and it looks nice!

We saw these on vacation. He wanted one. So now it’s hanging in our tree, just outside our kitchen window – a balloon spinner.

J Crew Factory and Madewell have the prettiest necklaces, in case you need one for yourself or a friend. Elegant pieces at affordable prices.

Need a new picnic basket for this spring season coming up. This old-fashioned one comes with a blanket, and the basket is insulated!

I found the prettiest faux berries at the store At Home, for filling in outside pots – so nice!

The Dollar Spot at Target often has the cutest throws for \$5 – I found a nice one for Valentine’s!

“If you can overthink the worst why can’t you overthink the best?” I read that and love it.

My local grocery store had the cutest Valentine’s day welcome mat. I love finding treasures in unlikely places!

And CVS has the cutest zigzag headbands – I just happened to see – and had to have!

Want a hilarious old movie to watch? *Merrily We Live*. So funny.

Target has cute little faux flower bundles for \$6 on an end cap, and cute vases for \$5 in the dollar spot – how pretty the two look together!

We recently made Danish bonfire bread over an open fire – it was easy – the most fun – and tasty! We dipped in butter and jam!

Have you seen the movie David? It’s not just for kids. It has a great message and music (although I thought the boy David looked like Amy Grant - ha!)

My word for the New Year is RELOAD – Read, Exercise, Listen, Obey, Affirm and Delight. Did you choose a word? I’d love to hear!

In the Kitchen – The Hits – by Marcy Lytle

There are hits from the holidays that we made and enjoyed, and then there are misses, every single year. The following are the hits, keepers, recipes we will make again, because we're keeping them in our stash. Hope you enjoy, as well:

Mississippi Pot Roast – We had this at a gathering with other couples and fell in love with it! It's so easy to make, and everyone loves it – even the kids!

- 1 3-4lb chuck roast
- 1 packet Ranch dressing mix
- 1 packet au jus gravy mix
- ¼ c butter
- 4-5 pepperoncini peppers

Place roast in slow cooker and sprinkle top with both mixes. Place peppers on top and add the butter.

Cover and cook over low heat for 8 hours. Serve with noodles, rice or mashed potatoes (We just served with rolls)

Charcuterie in a Blanket - We had these when the family was over and they were eaten up in a flash!

- Pillsbury crescent rolls tube
- 1 c shredded Pepper Jack cheese
- 2 oz salami
- 1/3 c slice green olives

Place the three ingredients on the rolls and roll up.

Melt 2 T butter, mix in ¼ t garlic powder and cracked pepper to taste.

Brush ½ butter mixture over each rolled up roll, on a baking sheet lined with parchment. Bake at 375 for 13-15 minutes. Brush with rest of butter, sprinkle with dried parsley and enjoy.

Cilantro Sunflower Dip – It's pretty and green, and a different sort of dip – and one of my faves.

- 2 bunches roughly chopped cilantro (about 4 cups)
- 1/3 cup salted roasted sunflower seeds
- ½ shallot roughly chopped
- 1 small clove garlic
- ½ jalapeno, chopped (seeds removed)
- 3 T fresh lime juice
- 1 t finely grated orange zest
- ½ c olive oil
- Kosher salt and fresh ground black pepper
- Crackers for serving

Place cilantro, seeds, shallot, garlic and jalapeno in food processor. Process until finely chopped, about 15 seconds. Add lime juice and zest and pulse 3-4 times to combine. With machine running, slowly add oil. Season with S&P. Serve with crackers (We used pita chips)

Muffaletta Dip – What a fun recipe to take the flavors of a Muffaletta sandwich and place them into a dip! We loved this!

- 8 oz cream cheese, softened
- 2 t olive oil
- 1 t minced garlic
- 1 t red wine vinegar
- 1 t minced fresh parsley
- 1/3 c chopped pitted green olives
- 1/3 c chopped pitted Kalamata olives
- 1/4 c chopped roasted red sweet peppers
- 1/4 c chopped pepperoncini
- 1 t capers, drained
- Assorted crackers

In small bowl, beat cream cheese, oil, garlic, vinegar and parsley till well combined. Fold in olives, peppers, pepperoncini, and capers. Serve.

Peanut Butter Balls – No baking involved, only a recipe that is a hit and a winner – you can't stop eating these!

- 1 cup peanut butter creamy or crunchy
- 1 c crushed graham crackers
- 1 c powdered sugar
- 1/4 cup butter, softened
- 8 oz semi sweet chocolate chips

Combine peanut butter, graham cracker crumbs, powdered sugar, and butter in a large bowl. Stir or work with hands till well combined.

Shape into teaspoon sized balls, rolling between your hands, and place on parchment lined sheet. Chill 30 minutes in freezer.

Melt chocolate in small bowl at 30 second intervals in microwave, stirring gently till smooth.

Using a fork, dip balls into melted chocolate and transfer to parchment sheet.

Chill 30 minutes.

February Feature – Heal to be Healed – by Tonni Lea Larson (Michelle Wyatt, and others)

I was honored to be asked to contribute to this book, *Heal to be Healed*.

Tonni Lee Larson was my mentor at the time. She knew my struggles and what I've had to overcome in my life. She and other individuals she worked with, along with myself, share our unique challenges and the ways we've overcome these challenges, in this book.

My chapter, titled "The Powerful Tools" has to do with my worst season of depression, which happened months after my mom passed away. I describe in detail what it was like not being able to get out of bed in the morning. I've heard that phrase before being described as a major depressive episode, but I can state from personal experience what it really means.

I am co-author because I truly believe that lending my "powerful tools" to someone that needs them, they too can then get through their most depressive time.

Other subjects included in the book are surviving PTSD, written by a veteran, a story from a survivor of domestic violence, and a few other impactful shares.

The saying "helping others helps ourselves" describes in words what drives the stories shared in this book. I hope it helps you, too...



HOME

Practical Parenting – Consequences – by Marcy Lytle

I watch young parents navigate parenthood now and I feel for them. We live in a world where we are watched by those around us, we hear horror stories of discipline gone wrong, and want so badly to raise our kids to be loving adults, while we love them in the best way when they're little.

I was spanked a few times when I was growing up, by my mom, mostly! She picked a belt and swatted me for what seemed to me to be the most insignificant things – like not being still! I remember my dad taking his plastic comb and thumping me on the side of my head when we were getting ready for church, if I misbehaved. That smarted! Perhaps both of those would be frowned up on today and seen as child abuse, and maybe it was...I don't know. But I'm here and still alive and have never once thought back to those acts of discipline and seen them as ruining my psyche or my heart. But yeah, I didn't do those things with my kids.

I remember when my kids were small, time out was a big thing. We sat our kids in the corner until they were ready to apologize and move forward. I had a friend who knew a lady that drew a line in her kitchen with tape and wouldn't allow her kids to cross it. Remember the kids in school that had to write an affirmative statement of good behavior when they did something wrong? Maybe like 100 times?

So parents of young children, I feel for you. Discipline and child-rearing has changed over the decades and some things have changed for good, and other things are still evolving...because parenting these kids that run off, disobey, act out – it's hard stuff! And every child is different in how they receive discipline. I had one child that enjoyed being yelled at by coaches, and responded to that just fine. My other child cringed when someone yelled, and it hurt them to the heart.

What are young parents to do, when it comes to offering consequences for bad behavior? I'm thinking you could read a different book every day of the year by different authors, all with slight variations on what works and what doesn't. And then next year, there will be new ideas.

However, here are a few of hard and fast "rules" that you might consider, ones that have stood the test of time:

Disciplining out of anger is never good. We make threats we can't keep and don't mean, later. We might use our hand in a way that is harmful and hurtful, if we're correcting when we're angry. So if anger is present when our children disobey, it's best to calm down and sit down and offer consequences when the steam is gone.

Praying about your specific children is good. I believe God will guide the sincere parent when picking consequences. Some children aim to please, so if they disobey it hurts their heart that they disappointed Mom and Dad, and a stern word is enough. Other kids need LOTS of explaining and tough love. Ask God for creative ways to lovingly steer your kids back to obedience.

Be consistent. If you say you're going to take away TV time or play time, then do it. Kids learn quickly whether or not Mom and Dad's word mean anything at all. If you said no to that and then the other parent says yes, it sends mixed signals and causes a rift between Mom and Dad. Be united and consistent.

Listen and learn, but don't be a copycat just because. Maybe your friends discipline one way and you feel "less than" because you don't operate like they do. Consider, but don't copy. Yes, learning and trying is good, but copying, just because, is not good.

Ask for help. Don't ask someone who's judgmental or someone that's never had kids. Ask someone who will honestly pray and listen and encourage you as you discipline. Some kids require a lot more strategy as they are a lot more challenging. Challenging is hard, but that's okay. Needing and asking for help is wise and mature.

Read if you will, but always be still. Settle your own soul and be still and discipline with love, rather than react in the moment. Yes, you might need to snatch and save a kid from harm in the moment. But you can delay the consequence until everyone has settled down. Allow time for stillness, so that both can hold each other when it's time to talk.

Encourage yourself and others. Unite with your spouse, or a friend, or someone that's in your corner and offers you encouraging words. When you see other friends who parent well, or who are struggling, offering kind words and prayers. No one needs a shaking finger.

Parenting is hard, and it always will be. And you will make mistakes. We all do. But God covers our kids all the time, and heals and builds us up as parents, and loves our children, as we grow together and navigate from year to year!

I Don't Do Teens – Their Best Friend – by Marcy Lytle

Do your teens know who their best friend is? Most likely, it has changed from year to year, depending on which kids are in their classes, or which ones are less annoying, or which ones turn out to be loyal – all sorts of “which ones.” I remember having best friends in elementary school that then stayed best friends the rest of my life, but they were few. And then other friends I adored moved across the country, and we lost touch, or not. I have one friend that is still close, and she moved away in 3rd grade!

However, our teens need to know who their BEST FRIEND is of all time. Maybe we should coin a new acronym GFOAT in addition to the GOAT. GFOAT can be greatest friend of all time.

As I observe the teens in our family, I see that their best friends are the ones that cause no drama. They don't compete or talk glibly or gossip, but instead they're just plain fun and enjoyable to be with. In fact, those friends are confident in who they are, and it makes them easy to be around. I also observe that best friends come from families with nice parents, which is important. Other best friends make our teens laugh and they feel good after a day spent with these friends.

The Bible has a lot to say about friendship, but I think my favorite verse is the one that says there is a friend that sticks closer than a brother, from Proverbs 18:24. This means that there is a friendship that transcends even family connections. Your teens probably argue with their siblings and may not even count them among their best friends now...or forever. That's always sad. But the truth our teens need to know is that all friends will fall short...

But Jesus will not.

John 15 tells us that greater love has no one than to lay down his life for a friend. And Jesus did just that. Our kids need to know this truth and grab hold of the implications. My goodness. We, as the adults, need the reminder as well!

This chapter also tells us that Jesus shares everything he's learned from his Father, and that too is true friendship. We are privy and connected to the Father, in the same way that Jesus is. Wow!

James 2 says Abraham was called a friend of God because he believed. Our teens need some truth to believe, and when they choose the love of Jesus, they instantly receive the benefits of a lifelong friend in Him.

Jesus covers all our offenses in forgiveness, when we ask. He doesn't hold them against us, like a friend might do if we offend him/her.

When we choose to follow God's word, we are a friend of God.

Jesus was tempted in every way that we are tempted, and he sympathizes with our struggles, like no other friend can do.

And, Jesus is with us always and forever.

It might be good this February, to sit with our teens as a family and consider the friendship of Jesus. When we know him as friend, then it doesn't hurt so much when our other friends disappoint, when we fail, or when we feel as we don't even have a friend at all. He is with us and cares, and hears every prayer.

What a friend we have in Jesus. And the lyrics of a cartoon your teens probably loved can remind them as well...

You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me
When the road looks rough ahead
And you're miles and miles
From your nice warm bed
You just remember what your old pal said
Boy, you've got a friend in me
Yeah, you've got a friend in me

And that friend is Jesus.

Homesteading – Happy Him, Happy Us – by Leyanne Enterline

We have a tenant! Well, kind of...

We have a friend that wanted to move into our old home, our RV. We hadn't decided for sure what to do with it when we built our new home, whether we should sell the RV or rent it out. I told Brian that we should hold off and pray about it, because I felt like we might need it for someone. And not too long after that, we got the call! Crazyness!

Our friend from New Mexico needed a fresh start and wanted to move to the Austin area. He's 21 and felt like there would be more job opportunities than in the little town he was living in, and he was ready to make a change as soon as possible. We said, "Of course!" And within that week he was in!

We were NOT ready for someone to be living in the RV, as it needed some minor fixes, but he said he just needed a roof over his head. So that's what he got! Brian had been around to fix things pretty quickly but we also needed to order a part or two, so that took some time to get those. The place is still a work in progress, but our new tenant seems happy. So far, things are working properly. Praise the Lord!

I pray my kids get the same opportunity one day. I love that our friend can get adjusted to living on his own but having a caring family right next door. He's been friends with my kiddos for years as well, so they think it's great, like having an older brother! He comes over to workout, play games, watch movies... they love it! He's learning to cook and clean on his own, deal with interviews, jobs, and insurance. You know...all the *adulting* things. And we are happy to help him learn!

Who would have guessed that something we were so ready to move out of would be such a blessing for someone else? I never would have thought that! All the things we hate about the RV, he loves! It makes me giggle to be reminded of how beauty really is in the eye of the beholder. It's all about perspective! We had the right perspective in the beginning of living in the RV, but eight years later we lost that. It's so fun to hear how great our friend thinks our once tiny home now is, for him!

Thank you Lord for our blessing, to bless someone else in need!

A Night to Remember – Love Your Neighbor – by Marcy Lytle

We talk about teaching our kids to love God a lot, which is the first commandment, isn't it? But that second one is also about love. It says to love our neighbors as ourselves. And February is the month to show love, so why not to a neighbor. But why, and how, and who? Well...hopefully we can answer those questions with the kiddos...

Preparation: You'll need a big white board or large sheet of paper with three columns. Title them: Who, Why, How. Then fill in as you talk. Always provide a fun snack – maybe conversation hearts for fun!

Who is our neighbor?

Do the kids know the story of the Good Samaritan? (Luke 10:25-37). The man in that story stopped to help a fellow traveler, because he was in need, and because it was the right thing to do. A neighbor can be anyone we pass by as we go to school, church, to the store, or in our neighborhood.

Who are some of the neighbors in our life that we know? Let's make a list. (Use the big pad to write their names...try to list at least 7)

Why are we told to love our neighbor?

What if we don't know them or they're not nice?

The bible doesn't say love your neighbor if they're nice. God made humans in his image; therefore, they are all lovable. What happens when we're not nice? God loves us and forgives us. And loving others does something good in our own hearts. In kindness and cooperation, we thrive!

Do we know anyone on our neighbor list in need? Or someone that might need a kind word? (Write down the needs you might know of the list you just made.)

How do we love our neighbors?

The Good Samaritan took care of the person's needs. But there are so many ways to love neighbors!

First, know their name. Do you know your neighbors' names that live next to you? Meet them!

Listening is neighborly. If a friend or a person we meet tells us a story, we can tune in and listen, with no distractions.

Offer help. If we see a neighbor with a bag of groceries, we can offer to help. We can bring up a trash can. We can bake cookies for friends and neighbors. We can offer a kind word or smile, or a wave. These are little things that are easy to do! (Fill in the third column with ideas, using the suggestions below, etc.)

Sharing is loving a neighbor. Sharing our things, our time, and our prayers with those nearby can bring them hope and joy and life.

We can keep things tidy. If our yard is a mess, that's not being a good neighbor.

We can share our own stories. We can tell how God is with us, for us, and hears our prayers. We can make cards, draw pictures, or share space with others.

Let's look at our list and hang it up to remind us this February to focus on loving our neighbor. After all, God first loved us. Therefore, we can freely love others.

Love your neighbor. It's not hard. And it's oh, so nice. After all, want to be loved, too. God so loved the world...and that includes us, our family, our neighbors and those we haven't yet met!

In Each Room – The Jewelry Counter – by Marcy Lytle

If you're like me, you probably have a drawer full, or stands full, of necklaces, earrings and bracelets. And perhaps you're completely organized, which is awesome! I tend to get organized and then disorganized, back and forth, and it's maddening. Lately, I've found a few things that help my bathroom counter stay pretty and neat, with all the jewelry!

A stand. A necklace stand is great, but then if the necklaces are a mess, it's not so great. I have found that grouping necklaces by size works best for me. The thin dainty necklaces hang together and that way, I can see the pendants and which necklace is which. The heavy chunkier necklaces hang on a different bar, and they're easy to see as well, and they don't get jumbled up with the dainty! So...dainty hangs separate from the chunky!

A canister. If you have canister type candle jar or other small canister type containers, don't throw them away. They make the perfect vessel for bracelets, when filled to the top. And they look pretty sitting by the necklace stand! I used to have bracelets in a drawer and it was hard to find a particular one to wear. And since they were out of sight, I forgot about them. Now, I see this stack and choose one – so fun! So...canisters hold bracelets...who knew?

Candle jars. This pumpkin candle jar sits on my counter all year, not just in the fall. It's an open jar that's perfect for hanging hoop earrings around the side. So cute!

Tobacco baskets. These aren't on my counter, but they're on the wall just to the side! Big earrings hang here, because they take up drawer room, they need to be seen in order to be worn and I love the "art" the baskets provide in the bathroom!

Earring cards. I found these on Amazon and they're so great for all those tiny studs I have, ones that I wear in my second pierced hole in my ears. These were in a drawer box as well before, and I'd have to shuffle through them all to find the matches. These little leather earring "cards" stand up nicely in another used candle jar, one that is shaped like a big cube. These sit over to the side, making their own statement on the counter. So...earring cards...have you heard of them?

Ring slots. Well, I haven't figured this one out yet, because I don't really like the steeple-like ring holders, but I do have a jewelry box in the drawer with slots, and that works okay. I keep the rings hidden away, because I only wear different rings for special occasions or holidays.

I know that big jewelry box stands are nice, if you have the space. Or a wall hanging jewelry organizer is great for the closet. I have one of those, too. But I love having all of my current pieces on my counter by the sink, because it's where I look in the mirror after dressing and then down at the array of colors and shapes below, and I can pick something to coordinate so easily.

I bet I rearrange again in a year or so, because jewelry will change, I'll clean out and donate, and buy more. Jewelry is so fun. But only if you see it, wear it, can find it easily, and enjoy the process!

Rooted in Love - Dust Me Off – by Kaelin Scott

If there's one thing I think is pointless, it's dusting. Or perhaps *pointless* isn't the right word, but rather *futile*. Maybe it's worse because I live on a ranch, where there are dirt roads and dust constantly blowing around, but it just seems like a waste of time to dust my house. I can spend an entire afternoon wiping up every speck of dust, and then the next day it almost looks like it did before. Talk about frustrating! It makes me wonder why I even bothered in the first place, especially because it gets me sneezing and sniffing every single time.

Sometimes I feel like this about myself, too. There are certain aspects of my character I try to work on and improve, and I constantly pray to look more like Jesus. I put in time and effort into dying to the flesh and walking in the Spirit, and sometimes it feels like I'm doing a good job. But then a day comes where I feel all dusty and dirty again. It seems like all the work I've done – all the pruning the Lord has done in me – goes out the window and I'm the old me again. The one who barks at her husband and kids, the one who worries constantly instead of trusting, the one who judges people and also worries what people think. I wonder why I even bothered when I'm still just a sinful, prideful, anxious person who doesn't deserve grace at all.

But that's just the thing. None of us deserves grace. Ever. It doesn't matter how much work we put into being "good." It doesn't matter how much money we give or how many hours we serve at church. It doesn't matter how many Bible verses we can recite or how much fruit of the Spirit we exhibit. No matter what, we will always fall short. We will never be clean enough or pure enough or good enough, and that can be discouraging if we look at it the wrong way. It can feel daunting and impossible to be a good person. It can seem futile to even try to emulate Christ.

If, however, we have a Christ-centered perspective instead of a me-centered one, we will realize that His grace is free for the taking. It doesn't matter that we're not good enough. It doesn't matter that we mess up or fall back or stumble. It's not about earning His love. It's about accepting the free gift of grace. A gift that He offers to everyone – including anxious, stubborn, irritable, dusty old me. And including you, too.

Yes, it's important for us to work toward being more Christ-like, but we also need to have grace for ourselves. If Jesus can give us grace, then we should give ourselves a little bit, too. It's okay to have tough days. It's okay to make mistakes. The beautiful part of being a child of God is not attaining perfection; it's knowing that His power is made perfect in our weakness. It's through His strength that we grow and become courageous women of faith. It's by His power that we are able to shine a light into this world. It's not about what we can do, but what He can do through us.

If you start to feel discouraged or down on yourself, look up and remember whose you are. You belong to the God of the Universe, and He's not afraid of a little dust. His mercies are new every morning, dusting you off when you need it and making you shine again. There's nothing hopeless or futile about you, sister. You are a daughter of the King.



YOU

Pablo Neruda was a poet from Chili. I bought his book of love poems and fell in love with his writing. This section of one of his works, inspired me to write mine. This is the section:

"I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.

I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;

So I love you because I know no other way"

Inner Strength – Grateful – by Michelle Wyatt

My son Matthew says his grateful prayers in his head. Brendan starts our prayer time by saying what he's grateful for out loud. Where and when do you share what you're grateful for?

There is a lot of content from social media, church, television, even the stores, surrounding the significance of being grateful. Keep a grateful journal, begin your day saying three things you're grateful for...I could name more. The point is, despite all this advice, I've discovered a perspective that offers less pressure of one more thing we "should" do and simplifies life. I share it so you may add it to your own personal toolkit and hopefully feel less pressure yourself, even if it is just for brief moment

It is impossible to be grateful and suffer at the same time. I can't remember where I heard this said first, and *suffer* is a strong word. It almost seems unbalanced with the word *grateful*. That got me thinking. When was the last time I embraced being grateful so deeply that it gave me a sigh of relief or even a smile? I have often thanked God for "this day." I've thought to myself that I'm grateful that I have bed on which to lay (I'm dealing with lack of permanent housing). I'm thankful for my boys. I'm thankful I have people in my life that care about me. These are some examples. Even as I write these down though, they are just words. Until I let that gratitude into my heart, I'm still carrying sadness with it. I know I've had deep moments of sadness where it hurt so much that I couldn't say thank you. And I'm still pondering the idea of deep sadness and suffering. But right now I'm happy to share a couple examples of not just saying what I'm grateful for but actually *feeling* it.

Recently, my rheumatoid arthritis flared up and my knee joint and elbow joint lost some range of motion, I experienced pain everywhere, extreme fatigue, and to top it all off - sinus congestion. So, clearly I needed rest. I then had the opportunity to rest A LOT over a 48 hour period. I woke up from a nap and realized that I actually felt less congested and felt a little better overall. I took more than a second to embrace that feeling of the benefits of rest and my true gratitude actually brought some relief and a gentle smile to my face.

Another example includes by boys, of course. My son Brendan hasn't always had much of a sense of humor. Most of that has to do with his much needed help with social skills due to his autism. However, now at 13, he has developed a strong sarcastic sense of humor (which runs on my dad's side of the family, actually.) While he likes to have me be the target of his humor when we're together, he truly is funny and I can't tell you how grateful I am that humor has come alive in him. This makes our time together even more fun!

There were years when Brendan's attempt to be silly were annoying to his younger brother. I appreciated his attempt, but yes, I could see where it would be hard for Matthew to understand that. Now that it's very clear, the three of us, for the first time, can blend our senses of humor together.

My friends will ask, "How was your visit with your boys?" I'll say "Great!" They then ask what we did. My *great* is now more sincere, because I'm letting my heart actually *feel* the appreciation of Brendan's humor, for example. I had a one-liner for a while. My response used to be, "It's always

great to see my boys.” My heart wasn’t feeling the sense of gratitude necessarily though, as I’d say that. It was feeling sadness from having to say bye to them so quickly.

So the next time you hear a message around gratitude, I hope you will let your heart *feel it*. Go at your own pace. I hope you find what I did that you cannot suffer and be grateful at the same time.

If I can do it, so can you!

A Hopeful Heart - Things I Know Now That I Didn't at 25 – by Christina Oberon

At twenty-five, I thought wisdom would feel like confidence. Like walking into a room knowing exactly who I was, what I wanted, and where I was going. I thought maturity would feel loud and solid, like answers finally settling into place. It turns out, wisdom feels much quieter than that. It feels more like knowing when to leave the room. More like learning how to rest without guilt. More like realizing that not every question needs an immediate answer... or a Google search at 1 a.m.

As I enter another year of life, here are a few things I know now that I didn't at twenty-five. Because I've lived a little longer, made a few more mistakes, and finally learned that I don't actually have to learn everything the hard way!

Growth can feel like a slow process and that's not a problem. Instead of feeling like I've "arrived," I feel rooted. Like a tree that's stopped trying to grow taller every season and has started growing deeper instead. Depth matters more than speed.

Peace is more valuable than being impressive. At twenty-five, I chased a lot of what looked good from the outside. Now I choose what feels good on the inside. A quiet morning, a steady heart, a life that fits instead of one that performs (more nights in than nights out).

Not every hard thing is a sign I'm doing something wrong. Sometimes difficulty isn't a detour. It's the path. Some of the most formative, sacred work in my life has happened in seasons I would have never chosen for myself, and definitely would not have signed up for voluntarily.

God's faithfulness is usually subtle, not cinematic. I used to expect Him in the big moments like the breakthroughs, the answered prayers, the dramatic turns. Now I recognize Him in the small ones, in timing that makes sense later, in strength I didn't know I had, in grace that meets me where I am instead of where I think I should be (which is usually ten steps ahead).

You don't outgrow your need for hope, you deepen into it. Hope isn't something you graduate from once life gets stable. It becomes something you hold softly, more intentionally, more reverently as you realize how fragile and beautiful life actually is.

Being soft is not the same as being weak. It takes far more courage to remain open, kind, forgiving, and tender in a world that rewards hardness. Softness is strength with restraint and a surprising amount of bravery.

And finally, you're allowed to change. Who I am now would surprise who I was then, and that feels like a good thing. Growth isn't betrayal. It's faithfulness to the person you're becoming. Someone to be proud of.

I don't necessarily feel more certain about life than I did at twenty-five. But I feel more at peace inside of it. I trust God more. I trust myself more. I trust the process more, even when that process looks like finding myself back in school in my forties, studying toward a career I couldn't have imagined for myself back then. It turns out, not having it all figured out isn't a failure. It's an invitation to keep becoming, listening, and saying yes to possibilities.

I'm entering this birthday month with the courage to keep walking forward with open hands, wherever God leads next.

Healthy Habits – Once You've Fallen – by Marcy Lytle

Last June, I was dressed in a really long pair of flowy trousers, along with a flat pair of pointed shoes – not a good combo! I realized the pants were too long and before I could get to the closet to change, I took a step and the toe of my shoe caught in the bottom of my trousers. In an instant, I felt like I was hurled to the ground, hitting my shoulder on the edge of a bench near my bed. It hurt, and I was nauseated, so I knew it wasn't good. I was surprised, though, to find out that I had a small fracture and a tear, and I had to baby that shoulder for a long time – with some minor permanent disabilities! Not so cool.

After that fall, I was so careful and nervous to even walk anywhere. But over time, I got my confidence back and began to think of some things I had learned after that fall that might help us all, to stay upright and safe:

Don't get in a hurry. I'm a hurrying type of person, when I shop and even work around the house – I hurry along. It's probably not a wise practice, because I'm always running into the corner of something when I hurry. Hurrying also makes for poor judgment when stepping somewhere.

Have a good view of your feet. Both my husband and I caution each other when we're carrying boxes or other things that might block our vision as we step out the front door and down a step to carry something to the car. Gotta be able to see your feet before you step!

Long trousers, beware. I see lots of (especially young women) wear pants that drag the floor. If they get caught under your shoe, like mine did, you too could hurl forward. Long, flowy trousers are a double whammy, even if they're leisure pants. One time some loose pants sort of blew in the wind as I was going down steps and got under my sneaker! Thankfully, I saw it and caught myself.

Grab an arm. When I fell, for a while after that, I grabbed my husband's arm when walking places, just to regain my confidence. I kept having visions of seeing myself hurled forward and it unsteadied me. Just having an arm to hold while crossing a street or parking lot made me feel so secure. Grab a friend or a kid – they won't mind!

Get dressed and hold on. You know, what I'm talking about. Standing on one leg to put in the other leg in a pair of pants, or pajamas, or underwear, even for the best balanced person can sometimes result in a fall. You might think that second foot will aim and slip in that second leg, but it could catch and you could get off balance. I find that holding a desk or drawer or even something in the closet with one hand, helps steady while I lift that other leg into place.

No platform sneakers. These were a thing, and I still see women of all ages wear sneakers with a very thick sole. The problem with these is that if you step off a curb or sidewalk and it's uneven, your ankle can turn very easily, and down you go! I had a friend break her ankle like this!

Heels with caution. I only wear block heels if I need height now. I loved wearing tall heels when younger and I even see young moms carrying babies wearing high heels and running! Oh, gosh, did I do that? Heels can get caught in tiny holes, or if you have narrow feet like I do – your foot may slide sideways. When I do opt for higher heels, I only wear them when I'm going to be sitting for the evening, like in a wedding or an indoor event, and not when I have to walk blocks and blocks.

Falling isn't fun, at any age. And when an orthopedic doctor warns you about falling at a mature age, it sort of rattles your cage. At least it did mine. I'm more mindful now of balance, uneven surfaces, the shoes I wear, and yes...the length of my pants. And once you've fallen, it's scary to keep walking again without thinking of the fall. So be careful out there! I know, I am...

Life Right Now – It's Game Day! By Jennifer Stephens

It's game day! IT'S GAME DAY! No, I'm not referring to the latest professional sports team playing to win the championship trophy. Game day means it's the day I gather with the ladies so we can muddle our way through the latest craze – Mahjong! Originating in 19th century China, Mahjong means “sparrow,” which some say refers to the clanking sound of tiles dancing on the table. While this game has been around for years, it's recently had a resurgence and become all the rage. Never heard of it? It's the clink of the acrylic tiles, the sweep of the pusher, the card resting on the table, with each element showcased on an artfully decorated game mat while surrounded by friends. Learning a new game isn't easy. Especially for those of us on the other side of the hill. It takes lots of practice. And patience. LOTS of patience!

Growing up I loved playing games. Memories of collecting \$200 after each trip around the Monopoly board, getting tangled up in Twister, rolling the Yahtzee dice, and organizing the ships on my side of the wall just to hear my opponent yell, “You sunk my Battleship!” still roam through my mind. And I still remember the jumpscare when the Perfection game pieces flew skyward at the buzzer's signal. Playing games as a kid was fun! But the best thing about game play is the learning that happens in the midst of so much excitement. Each of these games taught us things like budgeting, probability, and spatial reasoning as well as fine motor control and focus. Even that crazy game Perfection helped us learn to manage heart racing anxiety. Learning through play is one of the greatest gifts of childhood.

But I wonder, must learning end just because the candles on our cake keep multiplying? Can we, as adults, still learn important life skills through game play? Absolutely!

Five lessons I've learned while learning to play Mahjong:

1. *Be a rule follower* – To win this game, players must collect tiles that match a line on the official card. Tiles must be specific suits and numbers, aligned with what's on the card. It's easy to think you have exactly what is needed only to find a rule was overlooked (Never, ever, EVER use a Joker in a pair). Following the rules ensures a successful outcome!
2. *Practice makes progress* – At first playing (or attempting to play) seemed overwhelming. Bams? Craks? Pungs? What do these words even mean? We build a wall? How many tiles? Can I use a Joker? It's an all-new vocabulary. But, with practice, we're getting it. We're understanding. We are definitely improving our skills!
3. *Be pivotable* – Since the goal of this game is be the first player to complete a line on the card with the correct tiles in the correct order, it's easy to find yourself stuck wearing tunnel vision goggles while attempting to acquire specific tiles. It's important to realize when it's not working - it's time to pivot and switch to a different line on the card. Pivoting before it's too late might just be all it takes to make the winning hand!
4. *Don't be afraid to discard* – Each turn consists of a draw and discard. Draw a tile and toss a tile. Gameplay can move at a fairly fast clip, so it's necessary to make quick strategic decisions. It's important to let go of tiles that aren't needed. Letting go of unneeded tiles might make space for the exact right tile!

5. *Life is better with friends* – Practicing this game at home solo is a huge help in learning the possible lines on the card and building confidence to make quick decisions. But playing alone all the time wouldn't be much fun. Playing with others creates new friendships, grows existing friendships, and provides a built-in support system to help answer any questions. And if you're lucky enough to play with encouraging women, they'll celebrate everybody's wins together!

So how do we take these lessons from the game table into the world as we navigate daily life? First, we follow God's word. We apply the principles we read about in the Bible to our relationships with others. We strive to be like Jesus and remember our need for Jesus when we fall short. Second, we practice by spending time with God. We pray. We do our daily Bible readings. We choose kindness. Third, we recognize when we need to shift. Whether that's our mindset, career, or lifestyle, we notice when the old way isn't serving us and we pivot. Next, we release what isn't helping us. Let. It. Go. Discard those things that keep us from being the person Jesus wants us to be. Finally, gather with others. Make plans. Show up. Invite. Fellowship is at the heart of God's plan for us to grow.

Mahjong is a challenging brain stretching game. When a player completes a line, they call out, "Mahjong!" Life isn't a game, but it certainly presents its own challenges. Win or lose, we can always call on the name of "Jesus!"



MARRIAGE

In Unison - Pain & Peace Cycle – by Terri Barnes

Given a chance to grow and improve your marriage, would you seize it?
Even if it requires being vulnerable, pride aside, and time?

In marriage you might not feel ready to make that leap. Or want to.
After all, if things seem to be going okay, why do so?
It is extra effort, and with everything, work, kids, and countless responsibilities—life is just way too busy.

With that said, Chris and I intentionally took time together.
We attended a workshop for married couples.
Our goal was to pick up tools to deepen the connection in our marital relationship.

The room was filled with many couples.
We immediately felt a sense of safety and warmth in the atmosphere.
There's something inspiring about mutual support and encouragement within this setting.
Couples listen, engage, and aim to gain something valuable for their marriage.
The importance of that is magnificent!

This marriage workshop taught how to recognize and shift from pain triggers to healthier responses.
When your pain cycle arises, you can cope or choose a peace cycle based on truth.
The aim is to move from negative reactions to positive interactions.
We were given a list of feelings, coping skills, truths, and actions – each choose our own.
Seeing and discussing together led to greater understanding, love & grace.

We learned four steps:
Step 1: Say what you feel.
Step 2: Say what you normally do.
Step 3: Say the truth.
Step 4: Say what you will do differently.

More than a year has passed since the two of us attended the workshop and been to a second since.
The experience was truly eye-opening for us and marked the start of a rejuvenating chapter in our marriage.

Previously, we lacked understanding or clarity.
Now with strategies and tools, we are now equipped & know our truths & can choose them.
All it took was our vulnerability, pride aside, and time.

After 40 Years – One Single Day – by Marcy Lytle

I wake up	He wakes up
Head to the kitchen	Lingers under the covers
Quickly eat	Takes his time eating
Start to work	Cheerfully begins work
Make my lists	Mind is calm, a new day is on...
I start to clean	Sometimes he works away
Begin my work	Sometimes he works at home
Tears fall at random thoughts	He steps by my office and offers a kiss
I wonder about life questions	He only asks what the weather is outside
It's time for lunch – thank goodness	It's time for lunch – anytime is good
At the end of the day	At the end of the day
I'm exhausted as I close the blinds	He's exhausted and naps quickly
We either stay in or go out	He holds my hand and sits close, either place.
I'm thrilled we are together	He's thrilled we are together
Don't want the night to end	He's content as we head to bed
Before we sleep	Before we sleep
We read and pray	He says "play one more song" after we read
I brush my teeth while quizzing and wondering	He brushes his teeth and his mind is clear
I fall into bed and scroll	He comes to bed and adjusts our covers
We watch the news	We watch the news
Peace overtakes and we sleep	He says, "I love you" and snuggles in close

All these decades, he offers consistency and faith, contentedness and joy. And I get to be the one who gleans from every single goodness that exudes from this man, for whom I give thanks. Oh sure, he has faults. And so do I. But the longer we've been married, the more we see less and less of those faults and more and more of why we are a gift to one another.

Enjoy your Valentine, if it's your spouse, a friend, your kiddos, or just you and Him. Glean from the good moments, the closeness and the oneness, even the irritating and the frustrating. And give thanks at the end of the day.

Date Night Ideas – Rich and Wonderful – by Marcy Lytle

What's more decadent than something good to eat, a night on the town with color and sound, or a combination of both? It's February, and it's time for the most indulgent ideas you can think of, when it comes to a night out on the town, or in your living room, as well...

A Steakhouse – Find one that's affordable and has ambience and make it a night of indulgence in steak, the trimmings, an appetizer and a dessert, if you can. You can totally share, if the meal and sides are too large for one. Dress up, and stay a while at the restaurant. Then take a walk after, if the area allows. I'm not necessarily a steak lover, but I do love some amazing sides. So we enjoy this idea together!

Wear Red – I know, it's Valentine's month, so this is a no brainer. But what about a red purse for you, and a new red shirt for him? In fact, make it part of your dating experience. Go shopping for both items, then wear them out on your date wherever you go. Stroll a mall, go to the movies, or go out with friends, all wearing red!

Paint or Create together – Craftoria has the coolest paint by number sets you can order on line, there are so many choices. There are also so many cute paint books with brushes that you can purchase as well. Plan a date where you create. That rhymes! You can paint at your dining table, set up a table painting area in the garage or back patio, or even in the car in a pretty setting out your window!

Mexican Food and Color – We love Mexican food, and there's no more colorful places than Mexican restaurants! Choose one of your faves, or a new spot, and enjoy all the rich colors. Be sure stay for churros or sopapillas at the end of your dinner. Then go home and watch *A Day Without a Mexican* – have you seen that movie?

Red Velvet? Why, Yes! – We recently stopped at Nothing Bundt Cake and bought a mini red velvet cake and shared it, in the car. Include some red paper plates and forks. Watch the sunset from the car or atop a hill. Then drive around looking for red things, and see if you can find 10! How fun!

Rich and wonderful time with each other, full of color and brightness, and all things decadent and delicious. What could be better for the month of love?



ENCOURAGEMENT

Firmly Planted - True Beauty, True Peace – by Dina Cavazos

The incredible variety found in nature fascinates me. For one, it reveals a slice of who God is. Some words that come to mind are: *Genius Creator, Designer Extraordinaire, Beauty Lover, Habitation of Peace*. These attributes are manifested visibly on earth, as we see in sunsets, rainbows, oceans, mountains, flora and fauna. This wondrous medley so fills my heart with awe, that I strive to emulate it in my garden with kaleidoscopic color, texture, and diversity. My goal is to evoke a feeling of peace and rest through showcasing a bit of God's beautiful handiwork.

Whether I'm sitting on a bench, walking the paths, or pulling weeds, my garden at its best is calming, bringing me joy and peace; however, the best only lasts a few months. Despite the evergreens and winter-loving pansies and snapdragons that brighten the garden, in the winter it looks quite pitiful. Leaves and twigs cover everything, plants go dormant, and dead brown stems like a multitude of skinny scarecrows replace the lush green of Spring-Fall.

Pondering the winter scene, questions began to surface: *If beauty, in a garden or otherwise, doesn't last, if it fades away--does the peace fade too? Must I have beauty to have peace? What kind of beauty doesn't fade?*

Thinking back to my youth, I remember being influenced, like most young people, by magazines and movie stars. I wanted to be thin like "Twiggy", a famous model at the time, and I envied those with long board-straight hair like Cher. Instead, I dieted to lose weight and my fine wavy hair frizzed. Before blow dryers and flat irons, I used orange juice cans as rollers and invented an elaborate wrapping technique using bobby pins to straighten my hair, both mostly futile techniques. I hated the bump on my nose and found other imperfections to complain about. I was a teen who had a lot to learn, with no curves, no calves, no confidence—and the memo sent through the culture grapevine didn't help.

Inordinate emphasis on physical beauty has always bothered me. Even back then, I innately knew it was a false value. It gave me an annoying, uncomfortable feeling--like having a pebble in my shoe. I wish I'd known Jesus back then. I wish I'd known the One who loves me as I am and looks past this outer body, deep into my soul. I might have still struggled with my image, but maybe not so much. With age, maturity, and a realistic perspective on what truly matters, I've come to terms with my imperfections, such as the bump on my nose and the scar on my eyebrow, and I'm now thankful for the positives like good health, olive complexion, and relatively good teeth. Now, as the next stage of life rolls in, flabby skin, mouth wrinkles, and drooping lids mock at the vestiges of vanity that remain. But vanity doesn't rule over me like it once did. I've learned there are far more important attributes than physical appearance.

Now I understand that I am, first and foremost, a spiritual being in a physical body. This body is temporary but the promise of a perfect, resurrected body is a future hope. I can't honestly say I don't care about my looks at all, but it's far more important to grow in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These "fruits of the Spirit" remain forever. This is the kind of beauty that doesn't fade, the kind of beauty I see in people who are faithful to truth, kind to everyone, who take the ups and downs of life with grace. Who

they are on the inside far outweighs physical appearance. This perspective on lasting beauty gives me peace.

My thoughts come back to the garden: *The truth is, it's beautiful certain times of the year, but sometimes it's a mess. Can I enjoy the loveliness without holding on to it as an unrealistic standard? Can I find an aspect of peace and beauty all year? Each season has its particular challenges, but also its allures, if I'm able to appreciate them. The fallen leaves make a lovely collage along the pathway. Dry branches provide shelter for wintering insects—isn't this God's provision for them?* That God provides in this way is comforting, just as he's present and actively working at all times in my life.

Some plants look great all year, like evergreens. Some have winter attributes, such as seed heads, that I enjoy hearing swish in the wind. I love that each plant fits into the garden uniquely, bringing its own color, texture, size, and particulars. Each brings something of God's diversity and creativity, and speaks God's consistent word of truth.

True peace lasts through every season, even when beauty fades. As my true self—the person God made me to be—emerges more and more, I know I'm like a beautiful plant in God's Garden—beautiful in every season because the work he's doing in me will never fade. My peace and stability are not just skin deep, because I'm firmly planted in His love and care—that is where I find lasting peace.

A Day in the Life – A Fan of Love - by Bekah Holland

It's February! My favorite month of the year! (I couldn't even type that with a straight face.) I actually just had to take a brief(ish) break to try to catch my breath because unless this is your first day here (and if it is, welcome to Crazy Town and I'm sorry in advance), you know that Valentine's Day is probably shelved on my list of favorite holidays somewhere in the vicinity of National Mole Day. Yes, this is a real day and has something to do with smart, *chemistry-ey* and *math-ey* kind of people...I literally could not have made this up if I tried. And if you are this kind of brilliant human and understand the words I gave up googling, you're awesome and I celebrate plenty of stuff I don't understand, so I'll totally watch a lot of *Big Bang Theory* re-runs to try to sound smart enough to not be embarrassing if you need a Mole Day party plus one. But, I digress...

Obviously, I have feelings about this "holiday" and have adamantly refused to participate in buying overpriced flowers and chocolates to prove my love festivities since I was way too young to be that cynical. People who don't know me tend to think either I'm jaded with a trail of exes, recently divorced, or some other incorrect assumption. Funny enough, I do have "ex-boyfriends" - the majority of whom I'm actually still friends with - and I have watched them get married to wonderful people and some even raise fantastic smaller humans. So, *jaded* doesn't exactly fit the bill. And better yet, I'm still married to the same man I said, "I do," to almost 20 years ago, while sweating profusely through my dress. That's because my 25-year-old brain thought a beautiful, scenic sunset wedding overlooking rolling green hills and a sparkling river would make up for the 9th ring of hell fire that is Texas heat in July. So right out of the gate, my husband was a saint. And the fact that he hasn't made a run for it due to any number of even worse ideas I've had over the last 7,116 days we've been married is a straight up miracle.

So, do I abhor Valentine's Day? Yep, guilty. But I am a big fan of love. And I love both out loud and quietly. My love for the people in my life doesn't just show up on one day a year, with flowers or fancy meals. It shows up in every single thing I do every single day, sometimes disguised as the coffee maker set up with a favorite coffee mug and an "I love you" sticky note. Sometimes it looks like listening to football stats and recruiting details that make my brain short circuit. Or sending my friends an endless stream of memes and TikTok videos because it's one of our love languages. In full transparency, this happens in between all the times I forget that I only responded to their last text in my head and not in real life, essentially accidentally ghosting them, so there's that.

I'm also head over heels in love with my hubby – I love him more than when I first told him "I love you" and he tortured me for what felt like an hour, regardless of how many times he's "assured" me it was only about 20 seconds, before he said it back (during which time I had already concocted a plan to jump out of the car because I didn't see the giant grin on his face.) He knew I loved him long before I did, but was smart enough to wait for me...so the delay was probably payback, and more than when we said, "I do." But more importantly, I love him differently now, too. Hopefully, better. Because our love isn't all new, bright and shiny anymore. It's been through fire...tested and tried and has the toughened look and feel of armor after battle, a picture of trust in the protection and strength it's given. I think this well-worn love is so much more beautiful now

because we know that it's not timid or fragile and it can do hard things. And I'm so proud of it and us for everything we've done to build this kind of love.

Now, I'll be the first to tell you that it's far from perfect and it's not always pretty.

We get it wrong plenty of times, but we also figure out how
to get back to right again...together.

So this month, on Valentine's Day, instead of fancy dinners, or flowers, or heart shaped boxes of sweets (which, in my unsolicited opinion, taste better on my actual favorite holiday...50% Off Chocolate Day), I'm going to try to be more intentional with each act of love. For my husband, I'll cuddle a little closer a little more often and try to remember the college football recruits' names just to make him smile. For my kids, I'm going to carve out more time to put everything else aside and be present, savoring the moments they still come and snuggle on the couch and show me the most recent Tik Tok videos and silly memes they like. For my friends, I'm going to remember to text back in real life more often and reach out just to remind them how much they mean to me...along with our regular meme dump. And just maybe, I'll find a way to love myself a little better, too.

"Love is a two-way street constantly under construction." Carroll Bryant

Unearthly Thing - Until He Stands – by Angela Dolbear

This past holiday season, I noticed many homes in my neighborhood didn't display their usual brightly lit seasonal decorations. Friends online seemed to lack cheer. Is the world in a sad place right now? Are people overwhelmed with discouragement?

Since my monthly column appears under the "Encouragement" section of this magazine, I want to take time (or THYME) to encourage you: look up, keep your eyes focused on the Lord.

I take encouragement seriously. There have been many times when someone's hope-filled words have made a world of difference in my current outlook. I want to pass that precious gift on to others.

I have the privilege to write a monthly devotion for VinerWords.net. My recent submission looked at the times when Jesus sat down in the Bible.

I love it when I read a Bible verse that says, "Jesus sat..." because I like to envision what it's like to sit there with Him.

Imagine sitting at His feet by the Sea of Galilee listening to His words of life, with the waves cresting on the shore, birds crying out, and the wind carrying the salty scent through the air—all things He created. That would be amazing.

Jesus sat to pray, teach, break bread with people, observe, and finally, He sat down in Heaven at the right hand of the Father when His ministry was finished.

It blows my mind that my Creator and Savior thought it a good thing to sit. I much prefer sitting to standing. It feels more like a posture that prepares me to ponder, pray, and receive, not to mention rest and trust in the Lord.

A few verses from my research caused me to pause and think. Jesus sat down "until" His enemies are made a footstool under His feet (see Hebrews 10:11-14). So, does "until" mean at some point, Jesus will rise and return to earth to get His people?

Another verse not only speaks of Jesus sitting down, but also refers to His place of preeminence and authority, "the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven (see Matthew 26:64)."

Is His "coming on the clouds of Heaven" referring to His "until"? How awesome that will be?! Can you imagine it? Does it encourage you? It makes my current troubles seem so small and momentary in the light of eternity.

I studied eschatology (a fancy word for the study of end-time events) when I was a student at Biola University, where I graduated with a hefty amount of Biblical studies. Still, I am by no means

an expert on this topic. It was many years ago, so I am going to make a point of refreshing my memory on this topic and learning more about it.

The Bible tells us it's only a short time before Jesus stands up from His throne to bring His people home. This is our future. It's a promise from God. We can count on it happening. Will it be in our lifetime? Only God knows (I hope it does).

When things get hard or seem hopeless, remember to look up. Your Redeemer is near. Soon, He will stand up from His seat on His Heavenly throne. Until then, remember that Jesus is right here, close to us, living in our hearts as our Shepherd and Savior. How great is that!?

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. Her latest release, The Mid-Century Breakfast Club, is the fourth book in The Garden Tales series. Her novels are available on [Amazon](#) in paperback, Kindle, and audiobook formats. Angela writes real, relatable, and reverent fiction. She loves reading, writing prose, and writing and recording music in her studio in Nashville, TN—listen to her latest album [STORMS](#) on your favorite music streaming service. Please drop by and sign up for news, read the latest stories, and hear new original music at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>.

An Adage a Day - I Love You More – by Carole Gilbert

We've all searched for ways to express our deep love to someone. We love from the bottom of our hearts. And sometimes we use the phrase, "I love you more."

This phrase does not have a known origin but does have ties to a French poem from the mid-19th-century and was also made an everyday phrase between adults and children from a 1994 book titled, *Guess How Much I Love You*. It tells the person involved that they are loved, "to the moon and back." It's like stretching our arms as far apart as possible to show the distance as we exclaim "I love you this much!"

This popular quote came to my mind after reading a very sentimental letter my son wrote because of one afternoon with their autistic son, Graham. This is only part of his letter.

It only took one afternoon for our entire world to spin, tumble, and turn inside out — a reminder of why our days feel long, why our energy is stretched thin, and why love sometimes looks like endurance more than anything else.

Dinner became a hunt — chasing him down with a meal we knew he needed but he couldn't slow down long enough to eat.

Our own bed was stripped of sheets and comforter because he loves to wrap himself up in them and burrow underneath like a little caterpillar.

And between every episode was the soundtrack of our home: loud, uninhibited screaming. Not from pain. Not from fear. Simply from being Graham — intensely expressive and always at full volume.

And all of this— every single moment — happened in just one afternoon. In fact, it happened today.

This is why we are exhausted.

This is why holidays feel overwhelming.

Why traveling is hard.

Why friendships can be complicated.

Why it's difficult on his two younger sisters.

But this is also our life — and we love it.

We wouldn't trade any of it, not for a quieter home or an easier path. We love Graham, we love our girls, and we love the beautiful chaos that makes our family ours.

Our life may look different than yours, but we are far from alone. So many families live in these spaces of unpredictability — some with heavier challenges, some with lighter ones — all carrying their own invisible weight and navigating a world that doesn't always understand.

And still, like us, they keep going.

Because love — real love — is loud, messy, exhausting, overwhelming, and absolutely worth it. And we know that long lasting love only comes from Christ. Our cup overflows because Christ keeps filling it. He fills it with his grace, his mercy, and his love. Psalm 23:5.

He ends with...

Our lives are not our own.

“For none of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself.
For if we live, we live to the Lord. And if we die, we die to the Lord.
So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”
Romans 14:7-8.

Graham does say, “I love you.” But even after such a difficult day, I know my son’s thoughts are screaming “I love you more” to his son. These are words we often take for granted. And I have to include here about another who must’ve been doing the same, screaming inside, “I love you more!” We know He was screaming with all His heart, body, soul, and mind. It’s our Jesus. And no matter what we do, or how we act, He shows us again and again, “I love you more.” This is why we should live to the Lord.

This month is about Valentine's Day. As we remember those we love, we can think about others around us that we can show love to, whether they seem to understand it or not, like our Graham. And we can be sure to tell them, “I love you more.” And then tell them about Jesus and how He loves us all more.

Unprepared – Menopause, Seriously? – by Marcy Lytle

I decided to embark on a series this year, all on the same topic, for women of all ages. For the younger women, it will be informational about what is to come. For the middle aged women and older, some of you will relate now, and others later. And some will smile, because you will remember with me. But this series is to target specific areas of life that not many talk about, but I wish they had. Because I was totally unprepared. And my hope is that you'll be encouraged in the hard parts of life, whatever stage you're in, to look up and see that he really is with you and for you and beside you and near, to hold you every single step of the way...

I'm way past menopause, but I'm starting with that part of aging because I began that phase at age 40. My youngest was six years old when I exited the doctor's office where I was told that the menopause years were beginning in my body. I seriously cried. I was still so young and menopause was for old ladies!

What then began was nine arduous years of my body and hair and emotions and thoughts changing like the weather here in Texas, where I live. Unpredictable, pleasant one day and unbearable the next. Of course, the first symptom was that my periods were off. I first panicked that I was pregnant (even though my husband had been snipped). But I was told that it was just menopause.

I wasn't about to enter this part of life without my husband being informed (along with myself), so I marched to the library and found a book with a list of "possible" menopause symptoms. Wow, the list was so long it surprised me! I asked (made) my husband sit down and read all of them with me, so he could know what to look for.

What I found out over the following years was that it was lonely, I had some symptoms other women didn't have, and didn't have symptoms that were high on the list. I never had a hot flash. Before you that have been through it gasp with envy, I had plenty of other symptoms. I lost a lot of hair, in the shower, and it alarmed me! I became so irritable that even when my children sat next to me and barely rubbed my arm, I wanted to scream. *Who was I?* I often asked that question. *What is happening to me?* I asked that one, too. And it felt like these long years of belly bloat, losing elasticity in my skin and just having a moment when I saw that my arms looked so old from behind. (Yes, I looked at myself from behind to see...)

What was the hardest is that I felt alone and weird and odd, and it was scary. And now that I look back, I do remember a couple of things that did help me survive through the part of life that sneaks up on you before you're ever ready:

I retreated often. I ran to my room and shut the door and knelt by the bed and cried. I asked God to be with me, to help me not hate everyone around me, and give me grace. Usually, it wasn't long before relief was mine and I entered the world of my family again.

I talked to my husband. I ranted and raved, and was mad that he wasn't going through it. But it felt better to make him well aware that I was. Not sure if this was healthy or not, but it was for me. It also made him realize how painful it was and how I was feeling on days when I wanted to push him away.

I never took hormone pills or used lotions. Not saying that's a bad thing, I just didn't use them. I tried to start exercising and eating better, and mostly did lots of praying. I cried so many times to God and I'm pretty sure it involved some screaming, on days when I felt crazy. And that release helped. Thank goodness He listens...

Menopause is different for every woman, and the experience can last for a couple years or a decade, and it leaves its mark. You're no longer the woman you were when it began and it will feel as if it took the very life out of you, physically and emotionally. But then...there are no more periods. And that's a happy dance if there ever was one. That may be the only good thing about menopause.

However, on the other side of the years when you can have babies, there is sometimes a sadness to the finality of giving birth. And that's where God steps in as our father, our husband, our Lord and our Savior to start birthing other things in our spirits, our minds and our hearts. He's faithful like that.

So be of good cheer. Menopause is not the end all. It's just a phase, like the moon. And for sure, the fullness and brightness will emerge again, once the waning and the sliver disappears...

Moving Forward – Ridiculous Praise – by Pam Charro

I've recently come to grips with how disadvantaged I am in certain areas, and it can really make some situations appear hopeless. One of those areas is an ability to feel a satisfying emotional connection with an authority figure. It wasn't instilled (or even remotely available) at an early age when I desperately needed it. And now, even though my head understands that I can have it with God, I just don't know how. I have practiced for years, but I keep realizing that having this connection remains such a weak area for me.

How I long to be like John and just rest my head on Jesus' chest, able to consider myself "the disciple Jesus loves" -- as though I were the only one -- but it's so unnatural and awkward for me to feel that degree of ease with him (even though it would be so wonderful!) Sometimes, I feel so sad. Will I ever feel loved and cared for the way that I know I am? Will I ever feel seen and heard and enjoyed by the one who died for me? It seems the answer is no.

But our sermon today was from Luke 4, where Jesus was explaining to the crowd that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah 61. However, many were unable to accept this truth because they knew him as Joseph's son. And Jesus offended the religious people by telling them that God is often able to more greatly bless those who appear to be disqualified, as they aren't even God's people, but they have greater faith and are able to receive the blessing. It helped me to realize that my setbacks from my earlier life won't necessarily stop me from being blessed. But it also challenges me to press on and continue in what I already know.

What does that look like?

It's obedience. No matter what. In fact, I am convinced that my sacrifice of praise is more appreciated by God when it sounds ridiculous to everyone else. When it makes no sense whatsoever to have even a shred of faith. I will only get so many opportunities to give him that kind of trust and glory while completely helpless to change my situation.

It's proclaiming that he is always good when my difficult circumstances haven't changed.

It's to speak that he sees me, hears me, and cares about how I feel even in the middle of suffering.

It's to insist that I am aware he is always working, even when I don't see it or feel it.

And it's all because his ways and thoughts are higher than mine. He is good at being God when I am not. And he knows the perfect gifts that I need, or may not really yet need, despite my opinion. The bigger picture for my highest possible good.

The woman I am becoming in all of the discomfort
will be so very worth all of the temporary pain

as I cling to him.

Giving him praise in the middle of the storm is warfare. It's the highest praise when it seems most ridiculous. And I don't want to miss a single chance to do it.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Love Quotes – by Marcy Lytle

They're everywhere this month. They're on candy, the words are painted on little signs, folks wear love sayings on their t-shirts...it's just the month of vocalizing our love for our sweethearts! On the flip side of that, it's the month where mush just becomes too much, and those that aren't "in love" can hardly tolerate the quotes they don't feel from anyone at the moment! I get it. I find all the hearts a bit of an overload by the time February 14 arrives on the calendar. However, love quotes from one particular lover are something we all could stand to be reminded of...because He's always speaking. And we're usually looking for love in all the wrong places...

"For God so loved the world"...you know the rest. His love prompted him to give. His only Son. For us.

That's perfect love.

"...I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That's sustaining love.

"I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you."

That's amazing love.

"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

That's unmerited love.

"God is love."

That's the definition of love.

We hear often that *love is love*, when advocating for rights about who to love and when. And we fall in and out of love on a whim, when the one on whom we placed our love fails us. We love our kids forever, but we also feel hate sometimes when they try us and defy us. We love the best we can when we're married, but we still fall short, every single day. We desire to be perfectly loved by those in our circle of family and friends, but truly no one ever gets us. And that makes us sad.

I don't know why we all wander and grope and continue looking for love that doesn't satisfy. But eventually, when we slow down and grasp the great love of God, how marvelous it is that our Creator loves us enough to shape us, go with us, carry us, and keep us next to him forever...all the while forgiving us and covering us and cleansing us...we find rest.

Who's the lover of your soul? It's not your soul mate in the flesh. Although he/she is a wonderful blessing when discovered on this earth. But human love? It's at best a shadow of the light of love from above. And those words up above about God's great love are worth reading, believing, writing, and reading again...until they seep into the recesses of our heart where darkness lies.

Love quotes. Maybe you hate them or love them. Maybe you wear them or wouldn't dare. Maybe you sing them and dance to them. But do you know the lover of all lovers?

His name is Jesus. Lover of our souls. Friend that sticks closer than a brother. Savior of the world. Giver of life.

Happy 14th.

FRESH THYME – The Whole Body – by Marcy Lytle

I read or heard that one thing to try when little kids won't settle down and go to sleep for a nap or at night is to try calming them from the top of their heads all the way down to the bottom of their feet. I thought I was an amazing idea, and I even tried it on 3-year old Camp. He seemed to love it, but he also squirmed. It's hard for a toddler to rest. It's hard for an adult to rest! And sometimes, I think we too need to focus on each part of our body as we settle down to find moments of peace with Him...in this busy, busy world in which we live:

The hairs of our head are numbered. Wow, that immediately speaks of the care and attentiveness of someone higher than ourselves.

We have the mind of Christ, which means His thoughts can supersede those thoughts that cause us unrest. Think on these things – whatever is pure, lovely, true, and of a good report.

Our eyes have seen his goodness, so we can recall goodness from this day alone, all the ways He was with us and for us. And then we can speak them out loud, as we smile with our lips.

Our ears have heard a lot of noise today, and some of that noise seeped into our hearts to stay. However, Jesus calms the noises of storms and speaks to waves to be still, and offers us a place to sleep by him in the worst turbulence in the sea...

Our neck reaches and yearns for Him, and as we do, He's nodding and gazing into our eyes with acceptance and love.

Are you feeling a bit calmer yet, as you settle down and focus on the top third of your body?

Shoulders carry a lot and they become tired and weary. Remember, he invited us to come when we're weary and let him shoulder the load. Imagine that.

Arms grow heavy when they're lifted all day for others. Let them down while you rest. And just lift up praise as you gaze...

That core. The part you forgot to strengthen today or exercise that fat away. Another fail, you say. Not so, He says. He is the strength of your life.

Knees bending and needing a little boost? He says that he will confirm the knees that are bending and strengthen the arms that are weak. In fact, he causes blooms to appear in the desert...can you see them?

We're down to the lower parts now...and we're seeing that we can indeed find rest...

What about those ankles? That might be my weakest link, as I've always turned my ankles way too easily. Falling brings fear. Have you fallen lately? He is your support.

Feet. The body part that hurts on every one of us, every single night, when they've been walked on, shoved into tight shoes, stepped on something like a rock or a sticker, or the skin has calluses and all we want to do is have someone rub these tired feet for an hour.

Remember when Jesus washed his disciples' feet? Let him wash yours too, as you visualize him stooping before you with warm water and a towel. Linger there. Receive that washing.

And rest...



FEATURE STORY

FRESH THYME - The Gray – by Marcy Lytle

February is a gray month, isn't it? All the colors of the year from the other seasons are now gone for the most part, except the evergreens. Lots of gray skies and hazy atmospheres settle in, with the overcasting shades of gray everywhere that have been with us since January.

It's not just gray in our outside world, but things are often so gray in our thoughts and decision and beliefs, as well. There aren't a lot of well-defined lines we choose to live behind anymore, as they too have become blurred into this gray smudge. And we're not sure where to hang our hat...on this side of the smudge or on that side...or maybe just let it fall in the middle.

I remember as a child that I liked well-defined lines, and I stayed within them. I didn't like disobeying my dad and receiving his look of disapproval, so I followed his rules the best I knew how...until I began dating. Those rules were so hard and fast, that I felt I had to lie about where I went because there was no trust given to me. I might say, "We went by the skating rink" because that was an activity within their lines, but in reality I went elsewhere. And this behavior occurred because of fear and not understanding the lines.

I recall as a young adult putting into practice the colored lines I thought made for a good life, and I even remember using colored markers to define our young family's chores, so that things got done and life was perfect. We paid our money to the church, showed up with a smile, and judged those that did not. And then our lines of good living were so blurred through loss and tragedy that I didn't know what to do, because all the lines were jumbled, broken and now gray as could be. What really constituted a good life? I wasn't sure.

We can learn so much from observing the grayness of winter and applying that to our own lives, spiritually. There are four seasons that come and go every year, and they will until the end of time, according to the Good Book. There are seasons of growth and color where everything is outlined in beauty – and that's called spring. There's a season every year of being outside near water and finding shade because the heat is on but the fun is here – and that's called summer. It's lean in rainfall but bountiful in sunshine, and on some days it's way too hot. Then there's fall – my favorite season of all – when all of the best holidays arrive and preparations are made for Christmas and fall colors emerge if we're lucky – and life is just a breath of fresh pumpkin air everywhere.

And here we are now, still in the season of winter. All of the busyness has ended, we have the clean up to begin, a new year to look ahead to, and it's cold and gray. Where did the beauty and the color and the definition of life go?

When life gets gray spiritually, I have found that it's the time to sit by the fire, soak in the Word, be still and reset myself. Just like we do in the colder months, as the fireplaces are flickering and we're called to the stillness of winter. It's not bad that it's gray, inside and out, and even inside our hearts and minds. It's a season that beckons us to dig deep.

All of the blurred lines I encountered as I matured as a person soon became lines that didn't bother me, because I began to see the lines more clearly that were beneath the gray all the times...the lines I'd missed. Lines that defined who I was in Christ – accepted and forgiven. Bold lines that declared my identity – one who is loved by Him always and forever. And lines of living in a giving posture and a heart of gratitude that emerged every day, even in the gray.

If you're sitting in a bleak place with grayed lines, where you once could define them and mark them your own, no worries. It's already February, one month before March. Enjoy the gray, embrace the stillness, and sit quietly and let Him talk to you through the mist of his love that endures forever, his kindness and mercy that is new every morning and his purpose that is yours, one that no one can rub out.

The gray. Not such a bad hue, after all...