



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

June 2026



TIPS

The Dressing – Summer Inspo – by Marcy Lytle

It's summer, already. The year is almost half over. The temps are warm, and the styles are coming in "hot!" I love summer, and all the color, the fun pieces, the creative combos, and all the things. Here's your inspiration for this month's looks:

A denim or chambray dress – They're everywhere. I found this one on vacation a few months ago. It's so versatile, as you can pair it with any color of accessories that you have. And it's a great dress for shopping or traveling or lunch with friends.

Florals in blue – I found a brand recently on Amazon called Uoozee and they have the prettiest dresses. I ordered a couple in a loose fit for summer coolness. That way a belt can be added, or not... And dresses are the most fun choice to wear, literally everywhere!

Summer Hats – I think I have three that are my favorites! Straw, fedora style, floppy, bucket...all the styles are good. Grab a hat clip for your bag and you're good to go. Wear them with tshirts or dresses, any time you need some sun coverage or just a reason to smile.

Denim jumper – I found this denim jumper and it's so fun. It's great for those days when you're hanging with the kids or headed to a picnic. Adjustable straps, pockets, and any tee underneath. What's not to love? Add your sneakers, and go...

Color for sure – Another Uoozee dress and I love it. I wore it out to the movies with friends! It's so pretty and with a new bag, and sandals, I felt so seen if only by me! And the colors made me feel so alive and fresh.

Any Flower – What's your favorite color of flower? Find a dress in that color and wear it! This was what I wore to a Derby Party with friends, where we decorated hats and had all sorts of snacks. This too was a piece from Uoozee. Did I mention I love this fun brand? This was quite yellow, but it gave me all the summer vibes.

Wondering how to put ideas of outfits together? Just hang them up and accessorize, snap pictures and store them on your phone. It's fun. And then you'll have some ideas to work with, next time you need to get dressed and don't know what to wear!

Seven for You – Dad Stories – by The Panel

June is all about fathers, isn't it? Yet, as heartwarming as it is to gather with family to celebrate Dad, there are so many whose dad is missing now, or he's been absent from their life since childhood, or there's hurt between child and Dad. Father's Day can be a mixed bag of emotions, for all of us. We all have memories, painful and heartwarming. And that's what our panel is sharing, so that you can relate, smile, cry...whatever you feel this month of June.

My dad passed away in December 2024, and I watched him deteriorate in the hospital late that year. The last time I had seen him in person before that was back home in Hawaii in 2012. After that, he retired, moved to Thailand, remarried, and embraced a new season of life. One of the things he often reminded me of was that life is too short for negativity and drama, so be happy. That phrase ("be happy") carried a lot of weight. I even tattooed it after his passing. He lived it out with a kind of lightness, an energy, a zest for adventure, and an ability to enjoy the day in front of him. That perspective stuck with me, and even now, I find myself coming back to it and putting it into practice.

At the same time, there were parts of our relationship that were difficult. Because of the distance, he was emotionally, and obviously physically, absent. He missed milestones and life events, and never had the chance to meet my son or some of his other grandchildren. There were moments when that absence felt like rejection, almost like he chose a different life, and I had to wrestle with that over the years. But in the middle of that, I've come to know God as a very different kind of Father, one who is present, who draws near, one who doesn't miss the moments. He invites me into relationship daily and meets me with consistency and care. Where there were gaps in my relationship with my earthly father, God has brought comfort and a steady reminder that I am seen, known, and deeply loved.

I still carry both the joy of what my dad gave me, and the ache of what was missing, along with the loss of him. But I'm learning more and more that God meets me in both places, and that has been a deep source of peace. – Christina

My dad was very wise and had many sayings that have guided me through the years. I would ride with him in our old pickup to feed the cows and I can still hear his gentle voice: *Two wrongs don't make a right; if you don't something nice to say don't say anything at all; do unto others as you would have them do unto you.* He lived up to those words himself. He didn't like the word "hate," saying it was too strong. This has made me careful not to sling it around too much.

My dad was very patient, and never in a hurry. When he drove my brother and me to school he would literally drive 10 miles an hour (quiet country roads where I grew up!) We would fuss and complain that we'd be late and he would always say, *if we go faster we'll only get there two or three minutes later.* He paid no attention to us and drove at his own speed. Now I laugh when people speed up to go around me and end up at the same red light waiting with me. Dad was right.

I'm thankful that I see God as gentle and wise because of my father. He was, however, probably too lax in some areas, which may have contributed to some degree my sometimes too-permissive view of God, meaning I need "spankings" from time to time! - Dina

Growing up, my dad was in ministry. He was an overseer and encourager for several churches and ministers in the South Texas area. Our family traveled around to a different church every weekend. He would preach and we would sing. Even as a child I felt so blessed.

We also had family devotions most nights and I felt very covered by God's hand. I gave my heart to Jesus at a young age and I have continued in faith my whole life. But, as an adult I realize more and more that I have to grow up in my relationship with God. I have to pray and read His Word and hear what He is saying to *me*.

Have you ever heard the statement "God has no grandchildren"? We are so blessed if we are raised knowing about God. But, He wants to know us personally. We have to cultivate our own relationship with Him. And, what a joy it is to know Him. – Gina

All my life, my dad has been a woodworker, building furniture, boats, and various household items. The smell of sawdust is soothing and comforting. He built a three-step staircase for my elderly Golden Retriever, Grace, so she could climb up on my bed and sleep at my feet as she had done her whole life.

Everything he builds has such attention to detail. Every corner is precisely measured, the nails are hidden, and the surfaces are sanded smooth. Unfortunately, this is the only picture I have of just my dad and me. I will have to take a new picture when I visit my folks this summer at their lake house in Michigan.

I try to apply my father's attention to detail in my writing, whether I am building stories or articles. I try to include sights, smells, and emotions in my stories to bring the scenes to life. It's the story that is more engaging for the reader.

My Heavenly Father is also detail-oriented. I was extremely blessed to watch God orchestrate all my needs, as well as those of my fellow writers, at a writers' conference I attended last October. He provided transportation (the conference center was almost an hour away from the airport—not so Uber-friendly!), excellent roommate matches between people who didn't know each other and who became friends, and so many other plans we couldn't have made happen ourselves. God is SO good! - Angela

It was hard for me to think of something positive about my daddy from growing up. He was not around much, and it was not always the happiest when he was. I do have some fond memories of him though, like the weekends when he came home from the Army reserves and brought me stuffed animals. I also loved it when we went to see him at work since he worked on a tugboat.

My dad was the kind of man that believed women had their place and children had theirs. And since I was both, I was told to go help my mom more than having any time with him. And I remember he did sometimes seem glad to see me, but he also seemed just as glad to go. We became estranged when I was a teenager.

Later, having his grandchildren did make an impact on him like I had never seen before. When our first child was about six weeks old, he traveled to our house to meet her. We had seen each other a couple times before, like my graduation and marriage, but this time was different. This time he appeared solemn or broken. He became emotional, crying, and apologized for everything he had put me through. I broke down too. After that day, he became a devoted grandfather, and I saw love in him I had never seen before. Watching him with my kids showed me another side of my daddy, a softer, less stressed, side.

Over the years we shared our lives with him and when my kids were teenagers, my daddy shared with me how he had come to know about Jesus through watching us and accepted Him as his savior. The most important wisdom I received from my daddy was seeing how God does truly work through our lives and our actions that others notice. – Carole

My dad, Spike Beach, married my Mom, Sandy Beach, in 1963 in Las Vegas, Nevada. My mom was a newly-widowed woman with five children, ages 3- 12 years. My “real dad” (that’s how we always described him), Daddy Al, actually introduced Spike to my Mom. Daddy Al was a taxi driver and Union President. Spike was head chef at the Dunes Hotel & Casino; my mom was a waitress. I don’t remember my Daddy Al, but stories I’ve been told was he was a great dad. He loved being around his kids. He would bring all of us shopping with him, take us to Hoover Dam for the day, etc.

When mom married Spike, he had a ranch on the outside of Las Vegas. He had horses and that’s where I learned to ride. (Note: Spike trained horses for actor Walter Brennan.) We moved to the country in Northern California in 1964, bringing the horses with us. My parents immediately joined the Baptist church in town and became active members. My dad was a deacon and substitute teacher for Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting. Dad taught me to ride.

When I was 12, I was given my own horse for my birthday. Pepper was a well-trained, 16-hands Morgan gelding. He was a powerful horse. One of my favorite memories of my dad is when we were riding one day, myself on Pepper, and Dad on Babe, a black mustang mare. Pepper took off on me and I couldn’t control him. Dad raced up alongside me, grabbed Pepper’s reigns and stopped him. I was scared but my dad protected (and saved) me!

Dad always wore a cowboy hat and cowboy boots to church. During communion, he would light the candles by striking the match on the bottom of his boot (isn’t it funny what we remember?) One of my favorite sayings of his, which I say on a regular basis is, “You’re more handy than a pocket in a shirt.” I love it – and it makes people laugh!

Dad always read the Bible every morning. He sat in the recliner, with a cat on his lap, reading his King James Scofield Bible. When he passed away in 2005, I asked for his Bible. He created a trifold tract, Cowboys for Christ, with the plan of salvation, and passed it out when he worked at a logging camp in his later years. Dad always told me he was praying for me, and I truly believe that’s why God kept him alive for 95 years – because he never gave up on me. - Gloria

My Dad served our country for 26 years before he retired. He often had to work three jobs to put food on the table. He believed in honesty and integrity. His superiors often cut corners or behaved dishonorably. One of them promised him a promotion if Dad let him sleep with my Mom. Dad asked for a transfer, and it cost him his promotion. Dad would rather work three jobs than do something dishonorable, especially something that would hurt Mom. I have strived to be like him...honest with integrity.

Dad’s relationship with God was a private one. He left school at 13 to take care of his dying Mom. The Catholic Church would come to their door every week demanding their tithe money. Five kids without shoes or decent clothes to wear, and he became disillusioned with the church. He had a deep personal faith that didn’t need a building to pray in. I have this same personal relationship

with God. I pray daily and have conversations with Him when I need guidance. I may not sit in a pew with others, but I find comfort in this close relationship. – Cathy

This is a tough one for me!

When I was a little girl, as is true with all little girls, my dad was larger than life and my biggest hero. But he also had a scary temper, and when he was mad, we were all terrified of him. He pretty much abandoned all of us after his marriage to my mom fell apart, and he found a new wife to make kids with. I chased him my entire life, wanting to know who I was, and I know he was always perplexed by that. But he was the only dad I had, and I stubbornly loved him as well as I could. My dad had a big heart at times, and I know he would have loved me better if he had known how. His other children have asked me if I thought they were better off having stayed in his life. I'm pretty sure the answer to that is no - he wasn't very good at loving anyone, unfortunately.

I have had to work hard on my abandonment issues, partly because of him. I know that God would never abandon me, but I am still learning what that looks like. Still, I am grateful for many things I got from both of my parents. I would not be the person I am today if it weren't for them. – Pam

Don't take yourself seriously. Don't let every snack size upset or inconvenience grow into a super-sized deal. Like when you're 19 and it's the night before New Year's Eve and the parties and plans don't include you - so you dive into a self-pity pit, convinced all your friends have made extravagant plans without you. Does he let you wallow in the negative or does he pull out the yellow pages (that's how we found phone numbers back in the 1900's), flip to the M's and dial the local McDonald's to request New Year's Eve reservations for two (while I melted from embarrassment because who makes reservations at McDonalds?!)

That's what my stepdad did. My favorite tee I wore every day (and I mean every. single.day.), he kidnapped it and mailed a ransom letter (with photos). The snake that stopped me in my tracks? He picked it up and chased me until I could laugh through the fear.

Growing in my relationship with God, I'm learning to seek humor when fears try to stop me. And giggle through embarrassment. I can laugh at myself, unbothered by what others think. Taking God seriously means not taking myself seriously. I can hold everything else lightly because I know I'm carried by God. – Jennifer

My dad was a pastor, and a banker. How about that combo? I learned from him as a pastor to hold high integrity. He went through a church split and I never heard him speak an unkind word about those that mistreated him (they all apologized over the next decade or so). That part of his character stuck with me forever...

My same dad was also lacking in the area of affection, and grace...so somehow I missed that part of my relationship with God. Until I was 30. I then heard about God the Father and his loving, graceful ways, and how his mercy is new every morning. He was faithful to fill the gap of my relationship with my earthly father. And I'm still growing in His grace, every day. Grateful. - Marcy

I think, as father and mothers, we give from what we have. It ends up being obvious what we are lacking in. My father is generous with his time and talent; he makes repairs on our family vehicles that we could never afford on our own, like replacing whole engines, or actually giving us a whole car one year. He has helped us with projects on our home, and he drives all the way here to spend Thanksgiving with us. I appreciate that as he has grown older, he's learned to share his life with me. He remembers to tell me when he's really sick, or he finds me privately to share an important

detail of his life. He's learned vulnerability, and that means a lot to me. I also struggle to share my life, or so my husband tells me. It doesn't come naturally to me, and I think it's because it's what I learned.

I believe strongly that Papa God wants to reveal himself to us through supernatural encounters with the Holy Spirit. Through these experiences, he heals deep wounds in our hearts and reveals our identities as sons and daughters. I had one of these experiences in a dream many years ago. I dreamed that my mother and I were sitting across from each other on a bed in my bedroom. As I looked, two little girls came skipping down the hallway, one after another, right past the bedroom. The two little girls were also my mother and I, each at about 4 yrs old. A powerful presence of the Holy Spirit came over me and I began to prophesy to my mother: The Father says "We were NEVER alone! We were NEVER orphans! He has ALWAYS been our Father! We have ALWAYS been his daughters. He has ALWAYS taken care of us and watched over us! We will NEVER be alone! We belong to our Father!"

And then I woke up! Talk about a powerful experience. If only I had time to tell you of our childhoods! But God! He is always, always watching over His children. I love His love! - Laura

Cousin Moms – Keeping Your “Cool” – by Charissa and Kamrin

The two words moms get tired of hearing in the summer, once school is out, tend to wear on parents' nerves. And although summer are so short, they can seem so long, if the kids don't have anything to do, and mom feels at a loss of how to keep them occupied, while the life of Mom goes on. There are still meals to plan, rooms to organize and laundry to wash...so how to manage? We asked, and the Cousin Moms answered on how to keep your cool in the summer, when the kids are home.

Kamrin

Summer these days look different, now that my kids are older. They all have their own things that they do, and they all have camps – baseball, football, and theater. We don't really have the “boredom” issues, but rather we have the issue of screen time.

This summer we want to try something new, so that the kids are not on their screens all the time. This will include going to the pool more. We may have fun days where we get snow cones, or we give them some money to shop at the dollar store. I also plan for game nights.

The kids don't have to be entertained all the time, and they also don't want to do arts and crafts all the time. A few video games are okay, in balance, as they call friends to play.

My boys do go outside a lot, to the park, just down the street. My daughter crochets and paints.

We have a plan to re-do the kids' rooms this summer. They also want to learn how to cook – where they pick a recipe to cook dinner – and to spend time with their Ella (grandmother.) They will also have friends over!

If the kids were younger, we would definitely have quiet moments in their rooms to read, or we might have an adventure day to the aquarium or somewhere else cool inside. Or a zoo day, if it's not too hot! An easy weekly project would be fun. Crochet kits are great. Splash pads are fun for the littles. One on one dates might be fun for the older ones – like coffee dates – and movies during the day, etc.

The older kids still get bored, but being intentional to stay off screens and to have friends over is one of my goals.

I will have no more elementary age kids this summer, so some intentional family times with a lunch out, or a day trip, and experiences – this will be fun.

It does help to have a schedule or a routine, so that intention is there. And memories are made!

Charissa

Five things we try and avoid so that the girls don't say, “I'm bored:”

For me, for my sanity we always have a schedule. Each summer looks different depending on what the girls are involved in, or when I work. But we strive for consistency. It helps me and it helps the kids. We have always pick one day as our family fun day. Wednesdays are the day we might hike, go to the zoo or a nature center, or we swim...or do another outing.

Secondly, we use our local camps. There are so many that are free, some do cost, but getting the girls involved in something is important. The camps might be gymnastics and art, or

something outdoors. It doesn't have to be every day, but a few of these during the summer to learn or enhance a skill are great.

We also have a chore list during the summer. We try to refocus and assign each girl a chore, maybe laundry or mopping the floors, watering the plants, cleaning their rooms, vacuuming, etc. We have more time to reset what it means to work as a family to take care of our home. Another activity or project is that we usually declutter. We put everything out and decide what we need, so that we are ready to shop later in the summer for the new school year.

Every summer, I do engage with the kids in a specific bible study. One we did the fruits of the Spirit, another year was on becoming a Christian. We want to draw closer to God, and this helps us to ensure and focus on what is true, loving and pure.

The last thing is that we do try to plan a couple of family trips. We love to plan for these and it might be a cruise (this summer), or we go camping or to the beach. We look so forward to these!

These ideas keep our summers busy, full and loving...(and Mom sane).

In the Kitchen – Tasty June – by Marcy Lytle

I had a Derby Party at my house last month, with three friends. We snacked and ate fun food. I've also been making and sharing food with my kids. Here are some of my favorites that were so tasty...and pretty to eat!

Pesto Chicken Salad Croissants – maybe the easiest sandwich ever to put together. And it tastes so good!

- 2 cups rotisserie shredded chicken
- ½ c prepared pesto (to your taste)
- Fresh basil leaves
- Croissants

Just mix the pesto with the chicken. Spread on the croissants and top with fresh basil.

Bacon Wrapped Dill Pickle Dip – This was just so good, in every way.

- 1 c mayo
- 1 c sour cream
- 1 T pickle juice
- 1 T dried dill
- 1 T granulated garlic
- 1 T onion powder
- 1 t dried parsley
- ½ t dried chives
- 1 t black pepper
- ½ cooked and crumbled bacon
- ½ c shredded Cheddar cheese
- ½ cup sliced dill pickles finely chopped

In a medium bowl combine the mayo, sour cream, pickle juice and dried dill, garlic, onion powder, parsley and chives, and pepper. Stir until smooth and mixed.

Fold in the bacon, the cheese and the pickles, until evenly distributed.

Taste. Adjust salt if needed. Serve with chilled potato chips or tortilla chips or celery sticks.

This will keep 4-5 days in the fridge.

Cilantro and Sunflower Seed Dip – This is so green and pretty, and tasty. The lime juice really gives it a zing. Fresh for summer snacking!

- 2 bunches cilantro (about 4 cups chopped)
- 1/3 c salted roasted sunflower seeds
- ½ shallot roughly chopped
- 1 small clove garlic
- ½ to 1 jalapeno, chopped

- 3 T fresh lime juice
- 1 t finely grated orange zest
- ½ c olive oil
- Kosher salt and ground pepper
- Crackers for serving

Place cilantro, seeds, shallot, garlic and jalapeno in the food processor. Process till finely chopped, about 15 seconds. Add lime juice and orange zest and pulse to combine, 3-4 times. With machine running slowly, add oil. Season with S & P. Serve.

Pear Crumble – A friend sent me a Harry & David box that had six fresh pears in it. What a delight! This crumble was perfect and easy, and used up all six pears!

- 6 ripe pears
- 1 T cornstarch
- 1 T lemon juice
- Topping:
 - ½ c chopped walnuts
 - 1 c all purpose flour
 - ½ c whole rolled oats
 - ½ c brown sugar
 - ½ t salt
 - ½ c cold unsalted butter cut into 1 inch cubes

Preheat oven to 350 and generously line a 9-10 inch baking dish with butter. Peel the pears and cut into quarters, removing core. Make sure the pears are ripe. Roughly chop the pears into pieces about 2/3 inch big.

Place pears in a medium sized bowl and sprinkle lemon juice and cornstarch on top. Mix till well combined. Spoon into prepared dish and set aside.

Make the crumble: Chop the nuts into bite sized pieces and put into bowl, along with flour, oats, brown sugar and salt. Add the butter and work it in, using a fork, until combined thoroughly.

Using your fingers, spread the crumble evenly over the fruit, breaking up large clumps. Place into oven and bake till edges are bubbly and brown, about 40-45 minutes. Let cool a bit before serving.

Great with ice cream on top!

Pimiento Cheese Dip – This was the hit of the party, for sure. The best tasting dip in so many ways. And great as a pretty presentation.

Ingredients:

- 2 cups shredded extra-sharp cheddar cheese
- 8 oz cream cheese softened
- 1/3 c mayo
- 1 4oz jar diced pimentos drained
- 1 jalapeno pepper seeded and minced

- ¼ t granulated garlic
- ½ red pepper flakes
- ¼ t onion powder
- Kosher salt and black pepper to taste

In a large bowl, combine the shredded cheddar, softened cream cheese, mayonnaise, drained pimentos, minced jalapeño, granulated garlic, red pepper flakes, and onion powder. Mix until thoroughly combined and creamy.

Season generously with salt and freshly cracked black pepper to taste. For best flavor, cover and refrigerate for at least 1 hour before serving to allow the flavors to meld. Bring to cool room temperature before serving. Serve with potato chips, crackers, or crudités for dipping.

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

Learning, learning, ever learning...I hope we all are...every day! Here’s my compilation of fun things I observed and took in, last month.

Mod Podge – Did you know that this “old” glue (one I remember from childhood) has a puzzle version – you paint it on a puzzle to keep it together for framing – it works! You can get it at Michaels.

Have you heard of the “ugly” toy called Fuggler? 11-year old Augie collects them. Have your kids discovered them? They’re available in lots of stores.

There’s this base 3-ingredient salad you can make, and then add any toppings that interest you! It’s 1-2 cups of coleslaw, 1 cup of rotisserie chicken, and a ½ cup of your favorite salsa. Just top with seeds, onions, broken tortilla chips, lime juice, zest, whatever you choose...or even add in a bit of mayo. It’s a great lunch time staple!

It’s a short but deep read, if you’re grieving right now. *On Death*, by Timothy Keller.

Have you seen the film *A Great Awakening*? It’s my favorite, right now. A must-see story, about the friendship between George Whitefield and Benjamin Franklin.

Marshalls has the best selection of matching paper plates and napkins, great for all of your summer picnics in the park...or at home on the floor.

Do you love charcuterie suppers? I do. A friend gave me a sack full of charcuterie goodies and I made a shelf devoted totally to these items. How fun!

I found a gel blush that I’m really enjoying, by Milk. Found it at Target. I like the smoothness, the color, and it stays on – all day! A winner.

It’s amazing sometimes, the things you can find at Dollar Tree. I found these bookmark kits where you just punch in tiny jewels and end up with the cutest corner marker for your books. A great and fun craft for an evening at home, while you watch a show. Or have friends over, and make them together!

Why not try a summer color on your nails? Don’t go to the salon? Neither do I. But I tried this blue nail polish for fun, and it made me smile. Found it at Marshalls...in the checkout line.

A GREAT snack is to crumble cinnamon pretzels in a bowl, top with strawberries and blueberries, then a dollop of Cool Whip. Add anything else you desire. It’s GOOD.

Speaking of good...if you have a Juiceland near you, try their Cacao acai bowl – it’s a go-to for me now!

Need a song for this month? “He Has Me Now” by Anna Kate is a good one. I play it on repeat.

Need a new outdoor cooler? These come in the prettiest colors – and I chose orange. I even put it together by myself. I love it.

I finally found a water hose that doesn’t kink. And a stand for hanging it. Both, I love. Both from Amazon.

Easiest, quickest dessert ever. One box of Angel Food cake mix, stirred together with one 20 oz can of crushed pineapple in juices (don't drain). Bake. Cut into squares and serve with berries and a sprig of mint. Done!

Bookstore Faithful Mommy: Parenting With a Heart of Praise – by Kaelin Scott

I first felt the whispers in my heart to write a devotional for moms back in 2020. My oldest was four at the time, and I found I enjoyed writing encouraging things relating to parenting that also tied in with my faith. I had the title all picked out and everything, and I started compiling the book. But it had no real direction, no plan or overarching theme. It felt discombobulated, more like a bunch of random thoughts copied and pasted together than something cohesive.

So, I set it aside. I moved on to writing other things. I forgot all about the idea, like so many other abandoned files on my computer. I lived my life, not realizing that I was getting more parenting experience and more spiritual wisdom under my belt. For five years, I didn't even know it, but I was being prepared to properly write this devotional.

Fast forward to October 2025. I was at a writing retreat with one of my good friends and a few other Christian authors. We were having writing sprints, where we basically sat down and just wrote without interruption for a set amount of time. Except there was one problem for me – I didn't know what to write. The novel I was working on at the time felt flat and unappealing, and my heart had been drifting away from it for a while. I knew that I wasn't meant to write that story at that time. But what *was* I supposed to write?

During one of the writing sprints, I took time to pray. I asked God what He wanted me to write. I prayed for the story He wanted me to tell. Suddenly, the idea for this devotional came roaring back to life in my heart. Only this time, I knew exactly what it would be centered around, and I immediately began planning it out. I had vision and purpose, and I felt completely inspired to write.

I finished writing the rough draft on New Year's Day. The whole process came so easily and so beautifully. It felt as though God's hands covered my own as I chose the Bible verses for each section and divided the chapters into themes. My fingers flew over the keys as I wrote, and I found myself benefiting in my own life from the very things I was writing about. Needless to say, I couldn't have written this book if it wasn't for God guiding and leading me.

Now *Faithful Mommy* is out in the world, and I pray that it reaches those who need it most. I pray that it's encouraging and edifying to moms of all ages and all walks of life. Motherhood is holy work, but sometimes we need a reminder of how beautiful it can be. My hope for this devotional is that it blesses anyone who wants to make Jesus the center of their home. There is no greater purpose than that.



HOME

Practical Parenting – Those Big Fails – by Marcy Lytle

You know those days.

I'm sure you have them often.

You prepare a fun day for the kids, and everything goes wrong.

I recently joined my daughter-in-law and her two littles for a day at a resort, where there's a toddler area with games and rides. We met there at 9:30 am and planned to leave at noon, because all parents know that toddlers are at their best in the morning, right?

The guy at the counter sold us a card to use for the games and rides for those that were "just their size" only to find out that the ride attendants were not coming until 11am. Seriously? We tried to be patient and do a few games, only some were broken, the ticket machines weren't working, and we had a lot of time to kill before 11am approached.

Would the kids lose it and we'd end up having to leave without all the fun?

We then decided we would eat lunch early and grab the rides last thing, only to find out that the restaurants didn't open until 11am either. Frustrated, I asked for a manager and asked why would toddler activities open so late, since little kids are their best, early. He totally agreed, but that didn't really help us.

We held the kids hands and moved them all around the place, probably gaining all of our steps for the day, and I was so worried we'd have to leave without the most fun of all, the rides!

Finally, we used the few tickets we had gotten from the few games (which only gets you a trinket sized toy, of course) and using the tickets was also a chore! But we had a few minutes and went to the ride attendant and got on...two rides...in the 10 minutes we had left.

Oh, it was fun for 3-year old Camp, and I enjoyed getting to ride one of them with him! 18 month old Corie could care less, as she was more interested in sights and sounds. Camp smiled as he finally pushed the right button to go up in the air before the ride ended. And he was amused that I became dizzy on the second ride.

Could the day have ended up disastrous with no one getting a ticket or a ride? YES. But actually, it ended up being fun, and the toddlers will only remember the fun - not the time restraints (I think.)

The point of this whole article is to chalk up days like this as a win, or just another day in paradise, as a parent.

Resorts are gonna fail.

Kids are gonna get tired...or maybe not...they might surprise you.

Food will be eaten.

Time won't matter, when it's all said and done.

You're not supermom and you can't control chaos, most of the time.

Laughing is good medicine, so do that, instead of crying.

(Or maybe do both, but laugh last...)

I Don't Do Teens - That's Not Fair! – by Marcy Lytle

Haven't you heard this a thousand times from the kids?

"That's not fair!" she exclaims when that girl won the contest, though she cheated.

"That's not fair!" he whines as he stomps off the field, knowing he was safe at first base.

Even adults say this phrase when life doesn't go as planned, or something horrible happens. Life isn't fair, and none of us likes it. After all, isn't God a just father who makes sure things go the way they're supposed to go? Wouldn't a good father make sure his children are treated right?

One of the best verses in the bible for all of us when life isn't fair is found in I Peter where we are told to cast all our anxiety on him because he cares for us. Unfairness in this world causes anxiety because we feel we aren't being treated fairly.

If your teens say this, and they will, sit down and have a talk about God's character. He cares for us in the best way possible and sees things we don't see. And any thoughts that "roar" in our mind about being treated unfairly are just thoughts. They're not true.

Imagine how Jesus felt when he was mocked, beaten and bruised. Surely he felt that life was unfair, because he had done nothing to deserve such treatment. He had only loved others, obeyed his Father, and what did he get? Pain.

There will be times in life where it seems life is unfair. Especially when Mom and Dad say no, and our teens will not understand. They may slam doors, give us the looks of despair, or turn away from our love for a bit.

Help your teens through the unfair times of life by:

- Reminding them that God is good, all the time. It's who he is. We can trust that he has our back, even if it feels like he's unaware. God is so aware and cares, more than even Mom and Dad.
- Reminding them that they are loved by you. If the answer is no, be patient and wait until understanding comes. Or better yet, just trust Mom and Dad that the best is what you want for them.
- Reminding them that bitterness – being angry and staying angry - produces more frustration. Letting go and trusting in God's ways and Mom and Dad's wisdom brings peace.
- Reminding them to continue to do good, practice kindness, and love others – no matter the cost.
- Reminding them that God sees from up there, and we see from down here, and that's two totally different perspectives. His perspective is right, though all we can see down here is wrong.

Maybe once a month, sit down with your teens and ask them if anything in their life seems unfair by their standards. Talk about it, pray about it, release it together, and give thanks for the good God that governs the lives of those who love him and serve him. (While you're at it, remind yourself of the same thing...)

Homesteading – So Many Verses – by Leyanne Enterline

This month has been the month of travel!

As mentioned before, some friends offered to take us on a ten day trip to Costa Rica! Then as soon as we got back we had about ten days to work, clean and pack up again for a baseball trip to Florida for another week. Brian and I were going as chaperones, so we would be busy all week cooking, cleaning, and driving kids all over the place.

As I sit writing this on the sandy beach area overlooking a beautiful lake, “chaperoning” while kids are kayaking, I can’t help but think how blessed we are. I haven’t had much time to even think about the overwhelming bills and how will we pay those. I literally have been so focused on others and how can I serve them well that my mind has not been able to wander. This reminds me of the first two commandments to love God and to love others. Matthew 22:37.

“Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all the things shall be added up to you.” Matthew 6:33.

“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” Matthew 6:26

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” Proverbs 3:5-6

So why do we worry? There’s so many verses in the Bible that tell us not to worry! He will provide and take care of us. Easier said than done, I know.

A friend got the call that her husband lost his job while she and the kids were on this baseball trip. She was so upset and all the thoughts came in! *How will we survive, how will we keep this house, how will my kids meds get paid for, how will we eat, how will we pay for college?* I get it! I was there and am still in it with all the questions. And through my trials, I was able to share my testimony and bible verse with her! It’s still hard and I don’t understand why, but I can love on her and share the gospel.

Right before we left for the Florida trip, I went to pay our house payment and I couldn’t find the paper bill. I went back to where I file paperwork and looked through, and I still couldn’t find it. I did find a statement from last month that was in black and white and not in color like usual, so it made me start to really look through that because it looked *different*. On the second page, I found a check that we had over paid our escrow by \$1100! Just “random” money in the mail? Praise the Lord that he spoke to me to look through the statements! I would have never found that money. I couldn’t even believe it!

I truly believe the Lord supplied our needs in that moment. We had been on a trip and headed on another and we were missing so much work but lo, and behold! We were given completely unexpected money!

“And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.”
Philippians 4:19.

Our needs were met! And to top that off, in that same statement I found that they were lowering our monthly payment! I’m so grateful to God.

Sometimes we don't get to understand why we go through the trials, and sometimes we do get to find out. But both are a part of God's plan. Trust and obey and He will guide us.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

James 1:2-4 NIV

In Each Room – A Bench Trio – by Marcy Lytle

I have a bench in my bedroom that sits under a large piece of art from Alaska, when we visited there a few years ago with the kids. The bench is really not for sitting, although I have sat there to put on my shoes. But rather, the bench is a part of the décor. And I've had so much fun placing little trios on it, just for viewing and enjoying.

I found the padded bench at Target and I decorate with all sorts of things:

A tote, a hat, and a scarf -

Bring out one of your summer totes and make it the focal point of the trio. It can be a farmer's market bag (Marshalls has the cutest) or a beach tote, or any tote you love. Look through your scarves and find one that you'd like to tie on a handle, just because it's cute to do so! And finally, add one of your summer hats leaning on its side up against the tote. Don't have a summer hat! Grab one! You need it...to shield your face from the sun.

Books, a hat and a purse –

Do you have a few books you want to read this summer? Stack them accordion-like and then add the rest of your trio. Find your largest purse. I have this navy one I got at Old Navy! You can even place another bag inside, for filler, so the purse stands up and looks full. Finally, consider a hat of color. All the discount stores carry hats. Look at Amazon. And find a hat in any color you love, to compliment all your summer neutrals.

A runner, a vase and bag –

I have a few table runners I rarely use any more, and I'm so glad I didn't get rid of them. Fold a table runner in half and place it over the middle of the bench, with part of it hanging almost to the floor. That's your focal point. Maybe a summer burlap bag with pretty handles might be nice to the side. And a vase of flowers sitting in the middle. This might be my favorite trio for summer.

Two pillows and a plant –

I have a couple of ways I make my bed, and it also involves changing out the throw pillows. So the two extra pillows I can sit on the bench, right next to each other for a great pop of color. I just looked through my house and found a faux plant in a pot that looks great snuggled up against those pillows. Before you shop the stores, shop your house for the perfect trio for your bench.

Make the trio something that brings you joy and makes you smile.

You can switch out the trio whenever you like, for each season, or each mood.

I found a bench similar to mine on Amazon, if you'd like to grab one for your space. I think you'll enjoy it for years to come, as you style it, look at it, change it up, and love it so much.

Rooted in Love - Battle of the Mind – by Kaelin Scott

As someone who suffers from OCD, I struggle a lot to take my thoughts captive. I get into negative thought cycles easily, and then they spiral out of control in the blink of an eye. It's an ongoing battle I face, one that I will probably continue to face for the rest of my life, like a thorn in my flesh to torment me.

Although I will probably never fully escape this particular struggle, I've come a long way in controlling my mind. I'll have to keep working and progressing as long as I live, but I've found certain habits that make the battle easier. So I thought I'd share those tactics with you this month, because I know there are many others out there whose thoughts can be all-consuming.

If that sounds like you, then you're not alone, and you're not broken. Your brain is simply wired differently than others and takes more effort to tame. The good news is that God doesn't cast you off because of your struggles. He loves you, and He's fighting alongside you in the battle every day.

With that being said, here are three simple ways to combat intrusive thoughts:

1) *Open your Bible.* Read a Psalm or two. Take time to focus on God's goodness and His unfathomable love for you. Maintain a Christ-centered mindset rather than a me-centered one. Keeping your eyes on Jesus makes the thoughts feel less overwhelming, and that gives them less power over you.

2) *Get your body moving.* It's easier to redirect your thinking when you're doing something productive or exercising. Even going for a walk can reset your mind and help you breathe easier. An idle mind is a dangerous place, so give yours something to focus on.

3) *Go outside.* Calm your heart by sitting in the sunshine or watching the birds fly by. Immerse yourself in the beauty of the world around you rather than focusing inwardly. Remind yourself that the thoughts in your mind are so small compared to the vastness of God's creation. It's easier to have the right perspective when you're surrounded by nature.

I hope these tools are helpful in the battle for your mind, and I hope you know beyond all else that you are a beloved creation. Rest in the fact that your Savior loves you and has a plan for you – a plan that goes far beyond your life upon this earth.

Cast your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. *1 Peter 5:7*

A Night to Remember – Say Something Nice – by Marcy Lytle

Did you know that June 1 is Say Something Nice Day? It started 20 years ago! Maybe we like to think that we always say nice things, but do we? Maybe we could learn practical ways of how to be kind with our words, and how it starts with our thoughts...

Preparation: Ask each one to bring a stuffed animal or character to the living room, even the parents. Parents can borrow a stuffie from the kids!

Let's practice saying compliments to each other. A compliment is something nice you say to another person about how they look, how nice they are, or anything you appreciate about them! Here are some examples:

I love your new shoes. They're so cute.

I noticed you put away your dishes. Thank you.

Now, let's practice saying kind words to each other. (Let each one go around and say something nice.)

Was that hard to do? If it was, maybe it's because we don't look for the nice things about others, enough!

The reason we want to say something nice is that we want to be a lifter, not a downer. The bible says God is the glory and the lifter of our heads! Psalm 3:3. God tells us nice things throughout his word! In fact, if we think bad thoughts about ourselves, that is not God's voice. So we have to remember that He loves us so much, and that will help us love others and lift their heads!

Another way we can practice saying something nice is to stop and think before we speak. Maybe we start to say something mean or that would hurt our sibling or a friend, and we pray and ask God to help us stop and think about the word LIFT. Does what we're about to say lift them up?

L – is it LOVING? Say it.

I - is it ICKY? Don't say it.

F – is it FRIENDLY? Then say it.

T – is it tacky? Keep quiet.

Let's take our stuffed animals and think of them as a friend. Take a look at your animal and stop and think about what you love about it. Now say it out loud. (practice this).

We can then do this with our friends and family. Sometimes, family can be the worst place where we say mean things, when our siblings or parents annoy us. However, remember that He is the lifter of our heads, and we are the lifters of each other!

Finally, think about how fun it is when Mom or Dad lifts you up and swings you around, or lifts you up high in the sky, or raises you up above a crowd so that you can see better. (Let the kids share). That's what nice words do for others. They lift them up so they can enjoy life better!

(See if Mom or Dad will lift one of the kids and watch them squeal!)

Pass the stuffies around the circle and give them each a hug, and then hug each other. And pray together this prayer:

Family prayer:

Dear Lord,

Forgive us for all the unkind words we have said to friends and family. Help us as we communicate to stop and think about the word LIFT before we speak. Then help us to say words that lift up the ones we're talking to, so they can see this beautiful world you made a little better, and know that they are loved.

Amen



YOU

Inner Strength - Wired Differently – by Michelle Wyatt

Have you ever heard someone say, “They are wired differently?” I often describe my boys as being wired differently. Then I usually say, “But they have similarities. too.” Why is it that I do that? Is it because people get this look on their face like I don’t know what I mean, so I have a feel the need to balance out my answer? It’s hard enough being a single parent; much less one who struggles to find single moms that understand what parenting a child with special needs is like.

I admit, when I’m having one of those exhausting single mom days and mindset and I think about the phrase *wired differently*, part of me is saddened and my heart is heavy-laden. Do I agree with the rationale behind the feeling? No. In fact, neurological differences I find interesting. And being open to learning more about the science, I understand my boys on a different level.

What do I mean, being wired differently? Being wired differently carries both formal and informal meanings. My son’s ABA counselor is who first shed light on the neurological term neurodivergent. It’s important to know that it’s a category, not a character trait. The commonality amongst that type of wiring is that they are navigating a world the best they can, given that their minds aren’t cookie cutter pieces.

Formal Definition: An umbrella term used to describe people whose brain function, structure, and neurological development diverge from what is considered “typical.” It encompasses a broad range of conditions including (but not limited to) Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, and Dyspraxia.

Informal Definition: They process information, sensory input, and emotions in a way that is unique to their own internal “blueprint.”

In doing my own research, I’ve come to discover that there are subcategories to neurodivergent. When I tell people my kids are wired differently, that’s not the accurate picture.

For example, let’s look at what it’s like for my boys to play a Roblox game together. Brendan, who has autism, is hyper focused on the goal of the game. He is pretty quiet most of the time. Every now and then he will react to what happens – his affect changes - he may even smile if it’s going well.

My other son with ADHD like symptoms and dyslexia will address his brother, tell him where to go, how to stay with him, etc. He will get upset if his character is killed. His brother doesn’t respond to his requests. It’s like he’s being ignored which just makes things worse. According to how Brendan’s version of neuro divergent works, getting that additional feedback is too much for him to respond to; and yet the other version doesn’t know how to work the game, without conversing with the other player.

So the lesson here is that while I can say that they both like to play video games, the way they make sense of that “play” is very different.

When my boys play sports, such as tennis and kicking the soccer ball, one wouldn’t think any differently about how their brains are wired. It’s crucial after learning about neurodivergent versus

neurotypical, to keep away from labeling kids as one way or another. Utilize it as a tool to understanding. Understanding leads to appreciation, which is a beautiful thing.

It takes inner strength to absorb all this, but if I can do it, so can you!

Life Right Now - Strike a Pose - By Jennifer Stephens

Do you remember that 80's movie, *Mannequin*? It was about a mannequin that comes to life because the guy falls in love with her. And it started a huge trend of mannequin modeling at the local mall (and in the 80's all we did was hang out at the mall). We'd be walking around window shopping when all of a sudden one of the mannequins in the window made the slightest movement. Or did it? Maybe? We'd stand and stare. And wait...wondering *is it a real person?*

Then one day while shopping at the mall with my mom, the manager of Paul Harris clothing store approached me. She asked if I'd be interested in mannequin modeling for the store. I reluctantly agreed (sure she'd made a terrible mistake because I wasn't one of the cool, pretty girls at school). Now I was one of the girls in the window! There were five of us. We were dressed in the latest spring fashion (think soft pastels), we struck a pose, and stayed in place with neutral expressions for 20-30 minutes before changing position. Mannequin modeling required exceptional posture, endurance, and the ability to remain perfectly still. Mall shoppers passing by would stop, studying our fixed stance. Some tried to make us laugh. Some danced around in front of us. But we each remained frozen. We ignored them, determined to keep focus. We didn't allow them to distract us. We were perfectly still.

Stillness. It can be challenging in the hustle and bustle of the world to maintain stillness. Busyness interferes. Responsibilities. Neverending to-do lists. It all interrupts our ability to be still. In our small group recently, we were challenged to be still for one minute. Living in a fast-paced world where we become impatient waiting for the microwave to warm our food, did we have the ability to stay in place for one minute? The clock began and for sixty seconds we weren't supposed to move. Some people giggled. Legs bounced. Necks swiveled. At the end of one minute, we discussed the struggle to remain still. Physical stillness can be a challenge.

When we're in a constant state of frenzied movement we don't wait for God to answer our prayers. We push forward and create our own path, wanting an answer now! But in Psalm 37:7 we read,

"Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;
do not fret when people succeed in their ways,
when they carry out their wicked schemes."

Be still. Wait patiently.

In our one-minute challenge, I called on my former mannequin model skills to conquer the stillness challenge. I sat like a frozen popsicle. But what if God seeks more than our physical stillness? What if it's our mind on the move? How often do we struggle to filter the distractions in our mind? Reading the Bible and our mind drifts to the grocery list. Prayer time always interrupted by an overthinking brain.

This is when we need inner stillness. This is when we give our worries to God. With Him our internal fears and troubles are calmed. He will fight for us. If only we are still. Just like a mannequin

model ignoring the distractors at the mall, we must ignore the dancing thoughts in our head. We must harness the determination to maintain focus. We don't allow our thoughts to distract us. And we strike a pose of stillness.

“The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

Exodus 14:14

Healthy Habits – For Others – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever considered that doing things for others is actually healthy for you? There's something about giving to others, not contrived or out of obligation, and no matter how big or small, that just feels good to the body, mind and spirit.

For example, when I walk out of a store and cars stop in both directions to allow me to cross, I feel good. But I think they feel good, as well, because it's the polite thing to do – let someone cross – instead of zooming by.

For example, when my daughter asked me to help her put together baskets for four little girls who had just lost their mother, I went and gladly helped. It helped me too, in my own grief, to give to others...and spend time with my daughter doing so.

For example, when you send a card to someone via text or email or snail mail, your giving time and thought to put pen or words together to bless someone else is heartfelt. It's good for them, but it's good for you, as well.

For example, when you compliment a stranger's outfit, or take time to notice a friend's new shoes, and just say so out loud...of course it makes them feel good. But you too are releasing a blessing and that's so good for the spirit!

For example, when you make food for your family and deliver it to their doorstep, just because, it blesses them. But you feel good that you can be a part of filling their home and family with joy.

For example, when you get up and make your kids' breakfast, or prepare their lunches, and send them on their way, of course, that's your duty as a parent. But it's also an honor and a privilege to have what you need to pack them each day. And that satisfies and brings joy to your own heart, as well.

For example, when you add a little extra tip on a restaurant bill because you feel prompted to do so, what a great treat it is for that waiter. But you too receive a blessing that comes from giving and obeying, and it settles your soul.

For example, when all you have to offer someone is a hug and no words, that's usually the best thing they need. You may feel like you should have said more, but a hug IS worth a thousand words as it makes them feel held, and you offer that truth that God is holding them, too. Well, it's just gold in your bank.

Think about all the ways you give, the thoughts you have about giving, and the joy that comes from giving. And take time to breathe in that joy that comes from serving others, even when you stop that car and wave to someone to come on by. Doesn't that feel good, when they wave back and say thanks? Or even if they don't...you've been blessed by stopping and offering space for another.

A Hopeful Heart - An Unhurried Morning – by Christina Oberon

There is something that happens to me every year when June arrives. The school drop-offs disappear from my morning routine. The alarm clocks go quiet. The calendar, so crammed for nine straight months, suddenly exhales. And I exhale with it. Summer is here. And for the first time in what feels like forever, neither my son nor I have to be anywhere in the very early morning.

I'll be honest, it takes me a few days to actually believe it. That first week of June, I still wake up braced for something. My body hasn't gotten the memo yet. I lie there in the early light, waiting for the rush to begin, and then slowly, like remembering a gift I'd forgotten I'd been given, it settles over me.

So I stay. I pull the covers up a little higher and I listen to the birds doing their elaborate, unbothered thing outside. I watch the light move across the ceiling. I don't reach for my phone. Not yet. I just let the morning be long and slow and mine in a way it simply hasn't been since last summer. And my son is doing the very same thing. He has been counting down to this, the glorious, kid-sized freedom of sleeping in, of waking up with nowhere to rush to, no backpack to find, no shoes to hunt down in those last frantic minutes. On school mornings he drags himself out of bed like it costs him something. But on a slow June morning? He surfaces gradually, happily, on his own terms. There is something about watching my child rest, like really rest, that feels like its own kind of answered prayer.

Eventually we both find our way to the living room. He settles into whatever adventure is calling to him that morning, and I ease into my day, still including work, but the morning belongs to us a little longer before the world calls me back. I find myself pausing by my hibiscus plant, checking for new blooms. Then I drift toward the window to see if the hummingbirds have found the feeder yet. They usually have. There is something about those tiny, fierce, flickering little creatures that never gets old. They show up every morning like a small reminder that beautiful things are still happening, right outside the window, whether I stop to notice or not.

This is what I've come to think of as my summer reset. It's not a vacation or some grand wellness plan, just the ordinary miracle of a morning with a little more breathing room in it.

During the school year, hope feels like something I have to chase, something waiting on the other side of the next thing I finish. But on a slow June morning, hope just shows up. It hums quietly alongside the soft sounds of summer and the way the light comes through the window like it has all the time in the world.

June is the best kind of beginning. A sleeping-in, no-alarm, what-do-you-want-to-do-today kind of beginning.

And this year, just like every year, I am so glad it's here.



MARRIAGE

In Unison – The Excursion – by Terri Barnes

Taking excursions together can be very beneficial for couples. An excursion refers to a short journey or outing that helps break up daily routines. Making time for these activities can strengthen relationships and enhance marital connection.

Personally, Chris and I notice marital growth when doing so. Such outings don't happen often, but we appreciate them greatly when they do. Here's an example from one Chris and I took.

We had arrived at Texas Roadhouse, always a favorite spot. Their signature rolls are the best. We enjoy the relaxed atmosphere most because the casual dining creates a laid-back vibe.

Then, we arrived at the Omni Hotel, conveniently located in the heart of downtown Austin. Watching the city's nightlights from the balcony is an experience not to be missed, it's an iconic sight that can create a romantic mood.

Later, we walked to the Vulcan Gas Company, which hosts well-known comedians. David Nihill, "A unique comedic wit and hilarious storytelling talent", performed that night. We were interested in him because he's from Dublin. The venue had blue lighting, candlelit tables, and we enjoyed drinks, laughter, and a great time together. On our walk back to the hotel, we purchased street pizza at a local place and enjoyed it in the comfort of our hotel room.

The following morning, we had breakfast at the Omni restaurant and completed our hotel checkout at a relaxed pace.

Before heading back home, our final stop was the movies; we always enjoy the theater atmosphere.

Are you considering planning an excursion with your spouse? It is an aim of mine to inspire couples to strengthen their relationship through shared experiences.

What I like about an excursion is that it can be simple, provide easy local access, reduce stress, and enable quick fun. So, it's useful for relational building.

Maybe you're like us and generally enjoy staying at home together, which is meaningful of course. Though going out on excursions adds a refreshing sense of novelty that is essential in relationships. We're looking forward to many more excursions as a couple!

Go pack your bag, hit the road, and let your own excursion begin!

Date Night Fun – Just Chill – by Marcy Lytle

Date night looks different for every couple. Some enjoy staying at home, with a bucket of popcorn and a movie. Others like to have events and planned occasions (my favorite.) Still others rarely get a chance to have a date at all. Over the past 12 years, I've published five date night ideas a month and haven't run out of ideas yet. I think it's because there is so much fun to be had with others...if it's your spouse, or your friend, or a group of friends. Get inspired...and enjoy.

Paint and Sip – Yes, there are places where you can pay to do this. But you can do it at home, or open the back of your car in a country field, and do it there! Take sketch pads and charcoal pencils, and some sort of cool drink. I love frozen cokes from McDonald's. Maybe a hay bale might be fun to sketch, or just a tree and a landscape, as you're still and chill.

Listen and Learn – Is there some skill you've wanted to both learn? Maybe how to grill steaks? Or make a raised garden? Maybe how to speak Spanish? Take a drive and find a pretty overlook, then turn on your video and learn together. Take notes. Then discuss what you learned afterwards, and do something that goes with what you learned. Go shopping for plants, or steaks, or head to the library to rent books in Spanish. Do it. Just a chill and cheap date (sans shopping, that is...)

I Scream, You Scream – Go out for ice cream! It's summer, after all. Make ice cream your dinner, so that your guilt won't keep you from enjoying it. It won't hurt you once in a while to enjoy this cold stuff! Pick a new spot, or visit a couple! Just look at people and enjoy every bite. It could be at a mall, or a food trailer, or at a fancy ice cream shop. Literally...chill.

Farm and Fun – Grab a tote bag and head to your local farmers market, or to several. You can set a budget if you're afraid of overspending. Considering grabbing your breakfast there, too. There might even be live music, if you're lucky. Nuts, coffee, honey and pasta are a few of our faves. Take your time. Be sure to carry a cooler in your car in case you buy something cold. Take your time and make this date last all morning long...the thrill of this chill date.

Munchies and Music – Is there a coffee house that has live music, or music in the park in June? Go shopping for your favorite snacks and pack a cooler if you're headed for music outside. Or...order little snacks or pastries at the coffee shop, as you listen to an aspiring singer. Such a chill date full of promise, of a good time.

Consider making a list for summer of lots of ideas for "chill" dates and go down the list, and enjoy each idea until summer's end!

After 40 Years - Contented – by Marcy Lytle

I thought about not writing this marriage column anymore after April 4, the day Jon went to be with Jesus. It's been the hardest thing I've ever experienced, losing my every day friend I lived with for over 47 years. But honestly, I feel like I could write a lifetime about our marriage, even though there won't be any new experiences to share. So, until I run out of the goodness of the gift of my husband, I will continue to share. I hope you enjoy these articles and they enhance your time with your love...

As I've been going through photos on my phone, I found a lot of photos of me kissing Jon on the cheek. Yes, I asked him to pose for the photo, but he never ever said no, or turned his head away. He always gladly accepted a kiss from me, any time of day, any place. In fact, he never said no to any photo I asked to take of him, whether it was starting out on a road trip, or asking him to pose in his new Skechers, or even when he was doing the twist on the sidewalk, as a musician played on the streets. And...he never asked to see the photo or to touch it up, like I would have done.

In fact, I look at every photo before I post it to make sure I don't look too old, too fat, too odd or too silly. I think a lot of us do this. And I'm sure it's normal. But what I loved about my husband is that he just loved being with me. He truly did. He didn't care what we were doing. He was content. I tried to glean from him all of the years we had, but I never quite acquired that virtue of contentment.

Contented with how I looked

Contented with who I was

Contented with what I was doing

He was all that and more. He was just a contented sort of guy, in every circumstance in life. I rarely saw him get his feathers ruffled, even at work, which I know was stressful at times. And when I was the one ruffling his feathers, he reacted at times, but within minutes after our argument...he was loving and content once more. He never remembered or held an offense against me.

How does someone live like this? All I know is that Jon knew the beauty of the grace of Jesus, and his love for Jon.

When Jon was seven years old, he used to sit on the back row of the church with a very old man, he told me. Jon's parents were singing in the choir, and Jon had no one else to sit with. At the end of one Sunday morning service, the song "Just as I Am" was playing. Jon told me that it just caught his heart that Jesus loved him so much. And 7-year old Jon ran to the front and gave his heart to Jesus.

Jon carried that simple childlike faith with him throughout his life, on into our marriage. And that gift of faith was what carried me, many times. Faith in knowing he was loved by Jesus enabled him to be content in whatever state he was.

When we lost our home and started all over, Jon was content and happy.

When I wanted to shop or grab food and eat in the car or take a walk, Jon said yes.

When he took those walks with me, his mind was uncluttered as he observed nature. Contented.

I've been anything but content since April 4. I've been sorrowful to the depths of sorrow I didn't know were possible to live through. But I've been noticing a lot more in nature myself, as I drive and observe the flowers and the trees, the sunrise and the sunset, and how all of nature teaches us the rhythm of being rooted, swaying in the wind, and leaning into the light. And they don't "toil or spin" we are told in the Good Book. And then we are reminded that our heavenly Father is over all of creation as it sits under his rule.

I suppose that's where contentment starts...and ends. And when we are contented... it's like bringing gold to our marriage, the kind that's worth its weight...forever.



ENCOURAGEMENT

A Day in the Life – Tacos, Anyone? – by Bekah Holland

As I'm pretty sure that everyone on the planet has heard someone talk about *The Five Love Languages*, I'm probably going to add another for you. In case you're one of the four people who've managed to avoid this, I'll break this down into the most relatable terms.

1. Words of Affirmation: Your tacos are delicious
2. Acts of Service: I made you tacos
3. Receiving Gifts: Here's a taco
4. Quality Time: Let's go out for tacos together
5. Physical Touch: Let me hold you like a taco

Now I'll be honest, I was embarrassingly far into adulthood before I figured out what my love language really is. What makes me feel seen and cared for. *Be better, y'all*. Thus, the taco scenario that we can all identify with. I always thought that my love language was of the "Your tacos are delicious" variety. Also maybe "Let's go out for tacos together." I thought I was, as my mother assumed I would be, a bit high maintenance and that I encompassed all of the love languages, both taco and otherwise. It turns out, however, that it was a bit more likely that I just didn't know myself at all.

I was a relatively emotionally aware kid. And I assumed I continued to grow in this area. But after getting married, having kids, epically failing at life, hitting some peaks, and a few more epic failings... I came to realize that life as a grown-up is neatly summed up in the wise words of Nitya Prakash,

"Adulthood is like looking both ways before crossing the street and then getting hit by an airplane."

While the last few years have been unbelievably hard in, well, most ways, they did provide me with a desperation so overwhelming, that I had no choice but to figure out how to better fill my cup...or at least plug the hole that it seemed to be leaking through. After a few (many) complete and utter breakdowns, I realized that while I love gifts and love giving them, what I really needed was "I made you tacos" kind of love. Even more importantly, "I saw you were having a rough day, so I did the dishes, vacuumed, fed the kids and poured you an adult beverage so maybe you can breathe" kind of love.

It turns out, a lot of my inability to manage the chaos of my emotions, and feeling of dread thinking about anything at all, really stemmed from misunderstanding myself and what I needed. I feel seen when my husband sees something that needs to be done and just does it. He's always been great and telling me how much he appreciates me and all I do. And I need that, too. But when we both realized what I was really missing, it was a game changer!

Is it always perfect? No. Some proof being the dishes strike I've been on in an attempt to outwait my teenager, the basket of laundry that's been sitting on the floor waiting to be folded because, well, laundry is straight from the depths of hell and I will claim that until Jesus comes. But because my partner in this crazy life is actively working to see me, and find ways to make me feel safe, loved and appreciated, everything else is just not as big of a deal. I'm more in love with him than any other time in our relationship. Because we are both striving to see each other, fill each other up, give each other attention, and even space when that's what we need. And some days, the dishes don't get done (lots of days). Some days, we (I) forget about the vegetables we (I) bought and they die a slow and smelly death in the crisper. Some days, we get it all done and enjoy it for the seven minutes it lasts before all the teenagers wake up or get home. But we feel lighter,

because we aren't always running on empty anymore. And when we are, we know we aren't alone, that we're more together, and that there is still sunshine peeking through in the form of the little things that matter to us both. And love. Knowing that this love keeps growing, and changing and filling the empty spaces, makes the dirty dishes and astronomical grocery bills and teenage angst a little bit easier to trudge through.

So, lean in. Lean in to find out what version of the taco love language makes you feel like your best self, makes you smile like only tacos can, and then fill your soul as much as your belly.

"Love is a two way street constantly under construction."

Carroll Bryant

An Adage a Day - We Are God's Dirt – by Carole Gilbert

Last month I wrote about my green thumb and my baby plant that's not doing well. Now I have two new babies, and one is having its own baby. So, along with my grand cats and grand dogs, I now have a grand bell pepper. But this column is not about grands and it's not about worms, although I might open a can of worms with it. Instead, it's about dirt, the place where worms are found. And I'm not really talking about dirt. I'm talking about cleanliness. I always heard this saying, "Cleanliness is next to godliness," throughout my whole 65 years of life and I always thought it must be scriptural. Do you know it is not? I'm really sort of glad because raising my children I was known to use the phrase, "A little dirt never hurt anyone." I've even said it to my grands.

For me, getting dirty while weeding in a flower bed or garden, or digging a hole to plant something, can be so therapeutic. And cutting our own firewood is so rewarding. So why do some think dirt, and getting dirty, is a frowned upon activity? And when did worms or opening a can of worms become a dirty topic?

People sometimes disagree about cleanliness versus being dirty. Usually men overlook dirt, or at least a little, whereas women usually prefer cleanliness, especially being completely clean. For example, my son thinks going for a dip in the swimming pool makes him clean enough. My daughter-in-law disagrees. She thinks we need to be cleaned from the swimming pool water also. What do you think? I've learned it's best sometimes to not open a can of worms, so, I'm not going to agree with either.

This proverb, "Cleanliness is next to godliness" has been debated and discussed in many sermons and homes. What does it truly mean and how long has it been around? It is in reference to keeping oneself free from being dirty but also being spiritually clean. It began in the 1600's. And although thought to be biblical, this phrase is not said specifically in the Bible. Some verses do give light to virtual cleansing while others refer to dirt or dust.

Genesis 2:7 tells us God made man from dust. And later in Genesis 3:19 we read God says to dust we will return.

But, referring to a different situation, 2 Corinthians 7:1 says, "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God."

It seems to me, being dirty and being clean are both important and understanding both help us get closer to God. So, I don't know which I'd rather be, clean as a whistle or dirty with my grands. What I do know is God made me from dirt and I'm happy about it. And I also know it's only because of Jesus that I was made clean.

Unprepared – Intimacy – by Marcy Lytle

We may as well hit this topic now, because it's one for sure that no one ever prepared me for, or talked about at all. And I don't know if other women talk among themselves about this topic, or if most women have had the same experience as I've had...or not. And that experience is the change in physical intimacy as we age.

First of all, I'm sure that it comes up on our feed or in a post, once we hit a certain age, but we probably all know and realize that our bodies aren't as they were back in our 20's when we hit that middle (to older) age. But neither is his. Age does have its way of slowing things down, in more ways than one.

Obviously, night time might not be the best time for that physical intimacy, because very often we're more tired than we used to be. So that could be a consideration, for sure. And frequency might be less, just because it's a bit harder to maintain and feel all the things. Therefore, these two things alone might require adjustment.

I do recall talking to other friends when I was younger, and a lot of women lost interest in sex after having kids, and just went through the motions after that. So maybe getting older might be a welcome to them, if their husband is less interested. But if both husband and wife have always enjoyed intimacy, then it might be a sadness to find that their bodies are slowing down. It may feel like a terrible loss.

That being said, the cool thing about losing that physical intimacy in the frequency, and the pleasure of it all, is that there are some awesome ways to be intimate without the sexual act that you've enjoyed all those previous years.

There will be a different kind of love that emerges as you approach this new mark that you're so unprepared for, if you look for it, and you yearn for it. And instead of being sad and thinking your marriage closeness is waning, it can actually grow so much more intimate in so many ways.

- Holding hands and each other's arm will be an intimacy all new and special, as you age. Still grabbing each other's hands in a movie and while sitting, or walking, does wonders for the body and the soul.
- Gazing at his now aging face and seeing those lines and marveling at the years you've been together will draw you in, to admire this man that has loved you and been with you and raised your family together.
- There can be dances in the morning, while you're getting ready, and these will excite you and keep you smiling all day, even though no physical union resulted. Your hearts connected.
- You'll watch the news, talk to your kids, discuss life and all of its changes, and you'll learn to be more grateful for what you have, and this will fill you up.
- And...if you choose to...there can be spiritual connections together where you read the Word, pray for others, and listen to music that you both love and enjoy. Every single day.

In other words, the loss of what you're missing physically becomes a gain in what you receive in an intimacy you've been waiting for, for decades.

I realize that some marriages have already waned in lots of ways over the years, in intimacy and respect and even love. And for those marriages that are struggling, I encourage you to seek

counsel, to forgive past hurts and regrets, and to move forward toward a personal relationship with Christ, who is the only One who satisfies. And then see if you don't reconnect again with passion...of a different kind.

It's not easy, aging, at all. But every season of life has its challenges, and He is the ruler of all the seasons, each one beautiful in its own way.

Firmly Planted – Choices and Fathers – by Dina Cavazos

Looking ahead to upcoming Father's Day, I reminisce about my father, and fathers in general. I have to admit I have regrets. I don't like having regrets because the past is the past and there is nothing to be done about it, except learn from it and hope my experiences can help others.

At 18, I didn't realize how important one's choice of a life partner is. When it comes to family and children, the person with whom you are "joined together as one" has a profound effect; however, although this was an area of difficulty and trouble, God used it to humble me and turn me around. What if I had made a different choice? I'm guessing there would've been both good and bad results. One can never know and what ifs are pointless and a waste of time to dwell on.

The fact is, my dad was a wonderful man, no longer on this earth. I shared some details about him in this month's "Seven for You (Tips)", so I won't repeat it. Suffice it to say he was a very good and loving father. I didn't choose someone even remotely like him, as research suggests most women do. I don't know how I got to be so confused, naïve, and rebellious. I made choices that disappointed him, though he never said it. My life was complicated because of these choices. I deeply wish I had been more attentive, appreciative, and expressive of my love for him. He encouraged my very early attempts at writing as a child, and I know he would be delighted that the seed finally sprouted. I don't know if he's watching from one of those rooms in the Mansion, but I trust one day he'll know.

Leaving regrets and melancholy behind, I'm now thinking of a wonderful father who grew up without a good role model because of the reasons I just shared. My son. He's been a single dad since my grandson was two; without the benefit of a good example in his own life, he is loving, dedicated, and everything a wonderful father should be. I'm so very proud of him and the amazing person my grandson has turned out to be.

Choices are so important, but we're human and make mistakes. I'm profoundly grateful for many things, and these are among the top: that God, my spiritual father, snatched me from the path I was on; for my four children who God knew from the beginning; for my son who has chosen a better way than he was shown; and, most of all, for the Eternal Loving Father who saves, heals, restores, and makes wrongs right.

Whatever your father story is—it may be wonderful, it may be painful—God's unseen hand is in the midst, and someday all will be known.

Unearthly Thing - "I'm the Kind of Trouble You Enjoy" – by Angela Dolbear

Sometimes, I feel like I'm trouble for God. Maybe because I struggle with guilt. But after years of Bible study, I know that's not true. When U2's song, "Best Thing About Me," came on my playlist on Apple Music, the lyrics, "I'm the kind of trouble that you enjoy," made me stop and think.

What if I am the kind of trouble that God enjoys? (Also, He is the best thing about me, so those lyrics must have started my mind down this road.)

The song is a sweet love song, maybe meant for a loved one, not necessarily meant for God. But I do know the band U2 is God-honoring, and has been for many years.

It got me thinking about identity, God's as well as mine. His identity involves how He sees me, cares for me, provides for me, speaks to me, and makes sure I see where He has taken me.

Jesus is the Lamb that was slain, so our sins are forgiven. That's a lot of trouble to go to, so I could have a relationship with him.

"No greater love than this, one who lays down His life for His friends." God is love, after all.

"God loves me, this I know, 'cause the Bible tells me so," as the children's worship song says (which I didn't learn until I was an adult!). I think it's time for me to shed my guilt.

I read in a morning devotion, "You Are More Than You've Been Told" by Hosanna Wong, nine points to help with my guilt-be-gone identity overhaul as a child of God. Here's a quick list of truths I need to grab onto:

1. **Friend of God** — Jesus calls us His friends. ([John 15:15](#)) How awesome is that?!
2. **Chosen** — God loves me and chose me to be His own person. ([1 Thessalonians 1:4](#)) Hearts for days...
3. **God's Masterpiece**— "You are the handiwork of the Artist of the heavens and the earth. Your details are important," Wong wrote. I love that so much. ([Ephesians 2:10](#))
4. **Temple**— If we have received Christ, our bodies are a temple, the place where the Holy Spirit dwells. That makes our bodies good and important. I needed this point a lot as someone who feels physically down on herself. ([1 Corinthians 6:19](#))
5. **Messenger**—Since we are witnesses of the love and power of Jesus, God calls us to share the gospel with the people in our proximity. What an honor that is! ([Acts 1:8](#))
6. **Child of God**— I love the Amplified Bible translation of [Galatians 3:26](#) that talks about who we are in God and part of that is the fact that God has a purpose for us with more blessings: "For you [who are born-again have been reborn from above—spiritually transformed, renewed, sanctified and] are all children of God [set apart for His purpose with full rights and privileges] through faith in Christ Jesus."
7. **Greatly Loved**— We may say it often, and hear it a lot in church, but we should never take for granted that God so greatly loves us. Even before we knew Him, Christ died for us. Again, there's that trouble thing that He enjoys! ([Romans 5:8](#))
8. **Free, Indeed**—There may be many things that "chain" or bind us that are lies. For me, it's guilt, as I mentioned before. But it is a lie. Christ has made us free, so we should live as if we were. ([John 8:36](#))
9. **Brand New**—I was blessed to ask Christ into my heart as an adult, after years of searching for a purpose in my life. I remember what it's like to feel brand new. I was baptized as a small child, but I don't really remember it. When I chose to get baptized as an adult, I

remember as I came up out of the water, I heard a voice in my spirit declare “NEW!” I told God I never want to forget what it was like before I was saved, before Jesus made me new. Reborn. Such a blessing. ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#))

There’s so much more in life as one of God’s children. I printed this list out and pinned it to my bulletin board near my desk.

God gives so much. He gave us His only begotten Son out of love for the whole world, so whoever believes in Him would be saved and given an incredible life to discover. That sounds like the kind of trouble He enjoys. God is the best.

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. She just completed the fourth book in The Garden Tales series, “The Mid-Century Breakfast Club,” and is searching for representation for it. 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>.

Moving Forward – Self-Kindness – by Pam Charro

Ephesians 4:32 *Be kind and compassionate...*

Most of us are probably familiar with this Bible verse, but was this command only intended to be our attitude toward others? I suspect not. Am I kind and compassionate toward myself as well? *Ouch.*

Someone I work with said to me,

"If you aren't giving kindness to yourself, you're just faking it with others."

That hit hard! I thought, *What does HE know? I'm always being told that I'm kind! Of course it's normal to be harder on myself than I am on others!* But the more I thought about it, the more I saw the wisdom in his words. Whatever is going on in my inner world is bound to come out. I can't pour kindness from an empty pitcher ... I had better start improving in self-kindness.

But how? I had very little knowledge of how it looks to be compassionate toward myself. Most of the time, I didn't even realize I was bloody and beaten until I had already been self-flagellating for hours. I would show up for time with God, sad and exhausted, and he would kindly remind me of who he says I am so I could cry out my self-inflicted poison. I am now learning how to take those thoughts captive before they have such free reign in ruining my day.

It hasn't been easy or natural, but...

God has graciously led me to a Bible-believing trauma therapist who is giving me amazing tools in self-awareness and growth.

I have found many Bible verses on how greatly valued and enjoyed I am by God, and I speak them out loud no matter how I feel.

I also spend time with God, often without an agenda, just so I can be around healing. He is so patient and faithful as I continue moving forward.

The more I know him and spend time with him, the more I become like him.

What would I say to a dear friend who is suffering? What would God say to me? I know the answer to these questions. May I continue to grow in saying these things to myself.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – Fall Risk – by Marcy Lytle

A year ago, I fell in my bedroom, all because my pants were too long and my shoes were flat and pointed. Down I went, in a flash, and I hurt my shoulder. That fall scared me. And for months after that, I only felt secure holding my husband's hand or arm, while we walked. The fall freaked me out, and I was afraid of falling again.

Fast forward eight months, and Jon landed in the hospital. After only one week in the bed, I saw the nurses put a "fall risk" band on his wrist, and I cried. This meant he was getting weaker, not stronger. My strong, healthy husband just a few days prior was now at risk of falling if he tried to get up. How could this be?

Those two words, "fall risk" haunted me for a long time. I had felt like a fall risk because of my mishap in the bedroom, and needed someone to hold me until my confidence returned. And my husband was now a fall risk, because his life was waning...and that crushed my heart to the core.

I feel like at this present time that I'm a "fall risk" every day. I wake up and open the blinds, and see the sun and I smile as I say, "I feel pretty good at this moment," only to almost faint later at the memories and the pain of my loss. A fall risk. Sometimes my mind wanders to the why's of what happened and did it even really happen, and I feel as though I'm stuck and cannot move. For if I do, I'm going to fall into a deep depression and never rise again. A fall risk.

Maybe you can relate to this, because scary things happen to all of us. I realized through all of my pain that grief is happening to everyone in some way or another, and it all hurts. A sweet friend lost her dog of 14 years. Another friend has lost relationship with one of her children. And still others have been hit with losses of all kinds, none any less grievous than another. And suddenly, this loss takes hold of us and we fear we are going to stumble and go down...hard...on the ground.

After Jon passed, I didn't know how I was going to manage without his hand to hold and his arm to steady. I seriously kissed his shoulder as I exited the room that awful night we said good-bye. I really just wanted to fall into his arms and exit this world with him. I was a giant fall risk!

Going home was the worst, lonely nights and mornings, no one to hold me tight. And though I knew God's arm was even stronger than my husband's, I didn't want God's arm. I wanted Jon's arm back, to hold me and keep me from falling. It was tangible. God's arm was just words on a page.

One morning I was driving to my kids' house and I observed the bright sun, which seemed especially bright because it had been raining for days. I also saw how green everything had become around me, the trees and the grass, and the beauty of the yellow wildflowers in the grass along the highway. And oh, that highway, built on the ground, that was sustaining me while I drove. I felt "hemmed" in all the way around by the world God had created.

The next day I saw the movie *The Story of Everything*. I didn't know what to expect, except I had read it was a look at the origin of the universe and how science is pointing to a higher intelligence. That whole day I had felt like a "fall risk" with the pain of sorrow running deep and causing me to feel unsteady for sure.

I left the film feeling wrapped in the beautiful story of creation from the very beginning, with all the intricate details God has in complete control, including the orbits, the balance, the beauty of the

world...even with all its pain. I really felt the strong arm of God sitting beside me in the theater as I was reminded of the wonder of it all, and the counsel and dominion of the One who sits with his hand hovered over the world, and over my personal life.

I need reminders like this daily. This movie and its message won't sustain me tomorrow. I'll need his strong arm again, and again, and again. And I'll see it in the sunrise at first light...and I'm trusting I'll see it each day in new ways that he reveals to me, detailed and unique and so personal...just for me...and for you.

No more "fall risk" on my arm, or Jon's. Jon is in the arms of God. I'm leaning on them, too, as best I can...

FRESH THYME – Returns and Exchanges – by Marcy Lytle

I do this all the time. I have a return to make, or something to drop off at Goodwill, and it takes me literally...forever.

If it's a return to Amazon, I start out annoyed in the first place that the item I ordered and received didn't fit or work for me, so now I have to send it back. I don't even like taking the time to fill out the information to get the code. You know what I'm talking about. And once I do have the code, I might even carry the item to my car. But here's what happens...it sits there for days, and sometimes weeks. I have even had to look up to see if it's still returnable, because I've had it so long!

Recently, I had a couple bags of clothes to drop off at Goodwill. I carried them to the car and sat them in the very back. They were in the way when I picked up groceries, so I moved those two Goodwill bags to the back seat, where they sat another few days. And when the groceries were put away, I moved those two (very heavy) bags back to the back of the car. And finally, I dropped by the store and let the bags go. I was very annoyed though, because the guy came out and just watched me pick up the heavy bags and didn't help!

I was thinking about this habit I have of taking so long to get rid of that which I no longer need or have space for, or doesn't work or I ordered the wrong thing, and I wondered...

Why is it such a big deal to take it back?

And then...I realized that I have this same habit with other things I hold on to, things I need to get rid of...

Like anxiety, worry, frustration, irritation, and the list goes on.

Some of those things land on my porch daily, and I really don't even have to bring them in the house, but I do.

Some legitimately show up, even though I didn't order them, because life just tosses hard balls right at your window and they land inside, with broken panes resulting. And it takes time to gasp and realign and move forward.

Some we just pick up because we're impulsive, and we're left with a back seat of heavy things....

There have been times when I just kept something and never returned it, and never got my money back! And other times I just threw things in the trash because I didn't feel like the making the drive to donate. True confession, here!

I've been carrying lots of things I'd like to return lately, because of the loss of my husband. (I really can barely type the words). And most days, I'd just rather sit and carry the grief, the sadness, the sorrow and the questions around in my car all day, just shifting them to make room for other things. And the cool thing is...God knows I'm too weak and weary to return these things...even to Him in prayer.

So I get a text from a friend, and she says I'm on her mind. Another friend says she's praying for me. Still another offers a scripture or a song. Some just say, *thinking of you*. And each one of those messages is like a helping hand, as those things that are heavy right now...become lighter. All because they have the faith to return praise and petition to Him, when I can barely speak.

And some days, my load feels a little lighter. I'm sure it's because those friends are making the returns for me.

Still carrying something in your car? Doesn't it feel good to finally have it out of there? People tell me the grief never leaves, it just changes. I'm hoping it's an exchange...over time. My grief for His peace. That's an exchange, and not a return, and I'll gladly take it.

FRESH THYME - It's Not the Same – by Marcy Lytle

Nothing is the same since the other half of me exited this world. Nothing feels right at all, no matter how much I try to fill my days with busyness, no matter how many wonderful friends come to visit, or how many scriptures I read or songs I listen to. Nothing is the same, and it won't ever be, the rest of my life.

That realization is a gut punch, the thought of it suffocates me, and I'm not sure I can do this thing – live without him – and have fun and joy. They say that joy can't be taken from you because of Jesus, and that only happiness can ebb and flow. I don't know about those semantics, but all I do know is that I feel numb to joy or happiness.

Yes, my friends make me happy when they text. Not sure I could even make it without them.

Yes, I feel happy when I am with the kids and they make me smile.

Yes, happiness is there in little spritzes and sprinkles...but then...

I go home.

Every space that was filled with him is now just collecting dust. He stood at the coffee pot every single morning, grinding his beans. I never have liked coffee, but I loved the smell of the grind. He stood at his sink combing his hair and chatting with me about our plans for the day, and now that sink is wiped clean...for good. One drawer is left full with all the soaps we bought at markets, one of his favorite purchases. One day, those too will all be used and gone. He gathered the trash from every can each Tuesday evening, a task I now do alone, and I hate it. Not because it's any huge task, but because I miss being cared for in so many ways.

I cannot put into words the emptiness one feels except to say that some days it presses in and almost causes me to faint, from the weight. Sorrow is the heaviest load, I suppose, that I have ever carried. And it's also the loneliest. No one can carry it for me, feel it with me, or take it from me, even if they too have been sorrowful. Everyone grieves in different ways.

My relationship with God isn't even the same. I leaned on Jon's faith so much, when I was weak or fearful. When thoughts that weren't true circled my head, Jon spoke the truth that I was loved and nothing else needed to be done to secure that love from above. Jon's arm was the strong arm I loved to hold, and his hand was seriously the best one to hold. He always reached for mine.

And here I sit, with no part of my life untouched by the life that is no longer by me, but only a memory. And those memories, while amazingly wonderful and full of joy, now pain me to recall, because I just want him back here, back by me, back with me...forever.

I asked God one day, "Why did you create the institution of marriage, the picture of being united with Christ in a holy union, only to take one of us before the other?" He didn't answer, or I didn't hear the answer, at the time.

Nothing is the same, and it hurts so deeply, because I liked sameness. I liked the assurance of Jon's hand, his faith, his strong arm, and his loving ways. He truly was the picture of Christ to me, and watching him often soothed my always searching soul...

I'm required now to make a choice to try to hang onto what was the same, or let go and surrender to a stronger arm and tighter grip of the Savior I call mine. I don't know how to do it, I'm scared and wonder if I can, and I am sick and sad because I miss Jon.

But maybe...the relationship I saw that Jon had with Christ, the one I envied and longed for, just might be beautiful and not the same at all...as I had with Jesus before. Maybe that which was Jon's, on which I leaned, will now be mine. Kind of like life insurance that is mine, now that Jon is gone.

I don't know how all of this works, and it sure does hurt. But in a world where nothing is the same from day to day, because of death and famine and war and divorce and hatred and hurt, maybe there's a sameness and a nearness and a completeness that awaits us all as we reach out and He reaches over and grabs the weakest part of our body and makes us strong once again. Stronger than ever before.

Dare I believe it? I'm trying...