



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

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June 2019



TIPS

The Dressing – Summer Palettes – by Marcy Lytle

I recently purchased two pair of pants from Old Navy – summer pants – in a dark gray and a mint green. Next, I took them with me to Charming Charlie and picked out tops to go with both pants, so they could be interchanged into several outfits. It was so much fun that I even did a LIVE video on it and share on Facebook! This made me think about more summer palettes and how to put together outfits, using a few colors. I've done the work for you, just enjoy below! There are two main colors and then an accent. Easy and fun, if you're looking for a new wardrobe for the season!

This time I've chosen the gray (panther) pants, an arugula color (green) and paired them with completely different colors! Gray, red, teal and your own white tee! We've included a pair of earrings, a bag and a pair of red flats! Here we go! All are from Old Navy or Charming Charlies.

Outfit #1 – gray pants, red blouse, teal earrings – your own white sneakers.



<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?vid=1&pid=381910012&searchText=chino+wide+leg+women>

<https://www.charmingcharlie.com/marvelous-medallion-earrings/CHC102952459.html?openedfrom=Search%20Results>

<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?vid=1&pid=412266002&searchText=red+shirt>

Outfit #2 – green pants, teal blouse, red scarf tied around the handle of a gray bag!



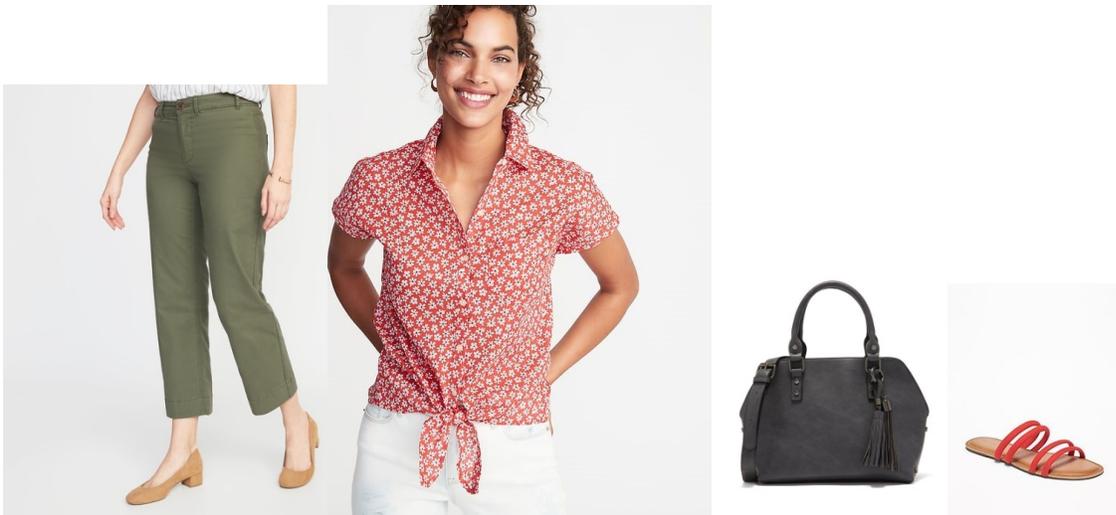
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<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?vid=1&pid=381910012&searchText=chino+wide+leg+women>

Third outfit using the arugula pants, the red top and the gray bag, with the red sandals!



For a fourth option try the gray pants again, this time with the teal top and the red scarf around the neck!



Outfit number five can be the same gray pants and red shirt, but wear it unbuttoned and open, with a white tee underneath – and carry the gray bag!



Outfit number six could be the gray pants with the teal top, the teal earrings and the red sandals!



<https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?vid=1&pid=409646012&searchText=red+sandals>

Outfit #7 could be the green pants with your own white tee, the red scarf around the neck and the teal earrings!



As the summer progresses, keep your eyes open for a few more tops and/or accessories, so that when you head out on your summer vacation, you've got a whole complete wardrobe with just a few key pieces – to make all sorts of outfits for your summer palette! Finally, take a look at the main photo. That jumpsuit is from Marshalls and it was only \$19.99 and it was easy to style adding color and accessories!

Seven for You – Picnic, Anyone? – by Marcy Lytle

We have this new feature in A Bundle of THYME. I have a panel of women that have graciously agreed to give me feedback on one question a month. From their answers, I then put together a story. So fun, right? The question might be about any subject at all, and the story might appear anywhere in the magazine, so be on the lookout for it each month!

This month I asked women of all ages if they picnic, and if not – why not. If they do picnic, I asked them to share their picnic essentials and recipes. From their answers, we're going to look at picnicking in the month of June.

Picnicking happens to be one of my favorite activities. I absolutely enjoy making the food and gathering pretty plates and napkins and anything cute to add to our basket or cooler. However, after reading the panel replies, I'm finding out that not that many picnic! I've taken their answers and my answers, and put them into seven categories that I hope will inspire you all to picnic more! Why? I think it's one of life's most simplest of pleasures!

No bugs, please: Several ladies said they avoid picnics because of the bugs. Here in Central Texas, that can be a real problem. Ants and mosquitoes are unwelcome pests but they show up any way, and they bite! Of course, we can take spray to avoid them, and we that picnic do! We make sure we pick a spot where we see no ant hills, and we bring Nuskín Body Butter (a natural and wonderful product!) to slather on our skin. If that is still a deterrent, why not picnic inside the house? Spread a blanket, put on a movie, and set out the food! Or picnic in the car! We've done that too, with the AC blaring, while we park under a shade tree and enjoy the nature outside our closed windows.

https://www.nuskin.com/content/nuskin/en_US/personal-offer.html?userId=US01067769&pitchId=-LdJs7MlXRk0wUreVnOc&fbclid=IwAR0licl88m-eckF0ehR7zNYhIxdkcErW7C3P4kj2zHlth-64K-m2KSunX8k

Easy food: One theme in all of the answers was to pack up food that's easy and tasty. So here's what was shared as being the faves:

- Fresh smoked salmon
- Trader Joe's summer sausage or dried German sausage
- Cheese (like smoked Gouda) with olives and pickles!
- Fruit, of course – and veggies for dipping, too.
- Chicken or pasta salad
- Sandwiches and chips
- Wing-stop
- Peanut butter/jelly and leftover Easter candy!
- Watermelon

How about picnicking near a place that sells ice cream, so everyone can have that after the lunch? There is a place near Austin called Burg's Corner that offers peach ice cream in the summer! I enjoy browsing the internet for fun recipes to pack and take.

We used to go: Picnics might be one of those things we "think" sounds fun, but the effort and finding the time and other things (those bugs – and the heat!) keep us from going. Picnics are like anything fun, they have to be scheduled. They don't have to be laborious. They can be as simple as picking up items from a grocery store and carrying the bag of goodies to a picnic in the shade. They can be as elaborate as a tablecloth, wine glasses, candles and music, alongside gourmet tastes that you and your guests have prepared. I, for one, think picnics are an essential to life! But many others do not agree...

Where should we set up? I loved one lady's answer that she and her family have their picnics right outside their backdoor under the covered patio, by the grill. What a great option and so fun! Laying out a blanket is not their choice, but gathering around a table with kids is! If they opt for a picnic table in a park, they choose one where there is something to do like disc golf, or a swimming pool for cooling off. Another answer was to picnic in a park, like LBJ State Park near Austin, Texas. There's a farm set-up there and animals for the kids, along with swings and picnic tables. And one more suggestion was to let the kiddos set it all up inside the house – with their own blankets and dishes! Memories will be made, for sure!

<https://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/lyndon-b-johnson>

Basket or Cooler? We use both, when we picnic. If we are going straight to the park when we leave the house, we choose a basket because it's so much prettier! We found one at a vintage store and use it all the time! One lady shared that she got a cute set from IKEA, but rarely uses it (she is now inspired to do so!). I found another cute basket/cooler combo at World Market. Coolers are the best when the destination is far away, so that your food stays fresh and cold. Packing the food in something pretty is half the fun! And check out this cute table we found on line that works like a charm!

https://www.lakeside.com/NFL---Sporting-Goods/Camping---Hunting/Folding+Picnic+Table+with+Shelf/prod2660117.jsp?mrkgcl=888&mrkgadid=3032205031&cid=GooglePLA-575416029&ukwcid=+&product_id=575416029&adpos=1o1&creative=103553497008&device=c&matchtype=&network=g&gclid=EAlaIqobChMI9qS_tOOb4gIVlRrACh3oZg4xEAQYASABEgKmj_D_BwE

https://www.worldmarket.com/category/outdoor/picnic-baskets.do?template=PLA&plfsku=569402&mrkgcl=660&mrkgadid=3172036549&camp=ppc%3AGoogle%3APLA%2BMerkle_Shopping_PLA%7CBrand%2BBrand%7CKitchen&product_id=569402&adpos=1o2&creative=166023957116&device=c&matchtype=&network=g&gclid=EAlaIqobChMI1p6xgeKB4gIVRr7ACh2xgQ-aEAQYAIBEGlzzfD_BwE

<https://www.ikea.com/us/en/catalog/products/40419623/>

Picnicking is for kids – This was the sentiment expressed by a few, and it definitely is fun for kiddos. However, since my kids have grown and moved on, I've found new ways to enjoy picnics with him! We get to choose a spot by the water where there's nothing to do but observe creation, and that's awesome! We can pack what we like to eat and not junky food the kids used to love. And we can bring along a book to read, or a puzzle to complete, in the stillness of the morning (before the heat settles in and sends us home!).

The joy of the picnic: Finally, I hope this story inspires you to picnic more. There's something really special about eating away from the kitchen or dining room table, where the breezes can blow, or the visuals refresh. There are also conversations that arise on a picnic blanket or around a picnic table that don't happen at home. The relaxed atmosphere allows for lingering a bit, instead of getting up to clean and put away. Yes, there are bugs and heat, but there are ways to keep those at bay. In fact, I love it when we succeed in enjoying ourselves against all odds! And picnicking makes memories with him, with our guests, or with the kiddos...and that's the best of all. (You can use those leftover Easter napkins too – see picture above...)

Selah's Style – Leah's Looks

Hi! My name is Leah Lee Irene Webb and I am seven years old. I'm in the first grade and I make straight A's. I love school! It's so fun. I live in the country and stay outside with my daddy a lot. We have three potbelly pigs, lots of ducks, geese, chicken and dogs. I love helping Daddy collect eggs and feed the animals. Oh, and my daddy is a pastor. One of my favorite things to do is dress up for church on Sundays. Mommy sings and Daddy preaches, and we kids get to sing and do hand motions to the songs. After church, two friends and I go eat together and then go to tumbling class! It's a lot of fun, too!

I love clothes, especially heels! I change my clothes several times a day and model for my mommy. I love to play dress-up, and especially like *twirly* dresses! My favorite thing to play with is Barbies, because I love dressing them and fixing their hair. In the summer, I'm always busy playing or swimming.

One thing you might not know about me is that I was adopted. I didn't come from my mommy's belly but I came from my mommy's and daddy's hearts. God gave us all to each other. I love my big family! Mommy and Daddy always tell me, "God made you just the way you are." I love my life!

Shopping at Walmart is always lots of fun. Today in the plant section, I found this hammock and Mommy let me try it out. I hope she and Daddy buy me one!

There was a contest at church for "best outfit." I didn't win, but it was fun making my hat and dressing up!

I have my heels on and I'm ready to shop!

This is my Easter dress that we bought at Sam's Club, and guess what? My hat and purse came from The Dollar Tree. I decorated both by myself with decorations from Walmart.

This is one of my tumbling outfits! I have three to choose from, and I wear them all to my tumbling class.

This dress came in the mail from the Mercari website. They have all kinds of things to choose from. Some are new, and some are used. And my cute shoes? They're from Ross.

Butter fly dress Sam's.

Burke's outlet is where I got this dress, and my shoes online from Amazon.

I'm with my daddy here at Sutherland's (my jumpsuit is from Ross)

Chase shirt – all Walmart

I love pretending to be a fairy! I got my fairy wings from Party City, my dress is from Sam's and my bottle is from Walmart!

In the Kitchen – Thai Made Easy – by Marni Xuto

Thai Style Lamb Cutlets

Serves:1

Ingredients for marinating:

- 200 gram Lamb Rack -trimmed to 3 small cutlets (1/12 lb)
- 50 gram Red onion-peeled and chunky chopped (1/4 cup)
- 10 gram Red chilli (2 t)
- 10 gram Coriander (2 t)
- 2 clove Garlic
- 2 tablespoon Coconut milk
- 1/2 teaspoon Lemongrass Puree
- 1/2 teaspoon Fish sauce
- 1/2 teaspoon Oyster sauce
- 1/2 teaspoon Honey
- 1/2 teaspoon Salt
- 1/4 teaspoon Sugar
- 1/8 teaspoon Ground cumin
- 1/8 teaspoon Ground nutmeg

Ingredients for the rest:

- 250 ml Frying oil (1 cup)
- 80 gram Tempura Batter (3/4 cup)
- 1/4 teaspoon Dry mixed herbs
- 1/4 teaspoon Salt
- 1/8 teaspoon Paprika powder
- 1/8 teaspoon Lime zest

METHOD

-Put the red onion, garlic, lemongrass puree, red chili, coriander leaves, ground cumin, ground nutmeg, salt and sugar in an electric blender until the components turn into a paste.

-Mix fish sauce, oyster sauce, honey, coconut milk the marinating paste and lamb rack into a medium mixing bowl. Combine well and marinate it for at least 3 hours (or better overnight.)

-Mix Tempura batter according to instruction on the package. Add dried mix herbs, salt, lime zest and paprika.

-Shallow fry the cutlets for approximately 2 minutes on each side. Rest for 5 minutes.

– Heat the oil to 350 degrees. Batter the cutlets then fry for about 1-2 minutes (I like my lambs medium to well done.)

-Enjoy these crispy lamb cutlets with a leafy salad and perhaps steamed Thai Jasmine Rice

Tip:

-Don't like it fry? You can just put the marinated lamb under the grill or it is also great on BBQ.

-You could also pan-fry the cutlets if you do not have a griddle pan.

-The cooking time will always depend on the thickness of the chop and personal preference.

-You can prepare the lamb up to shallow fry process. Then batter and fry closer to the time of serving.

Thai Fish Cake (Gluten free)

Serve:2-3

Ingredients:

- 400 gram Fresh Basa Fillet-Skinned, deboned and cut into chunks (1lb)
- 150 gram Raw king prawn (1/3 lb)
- 100 gram Green bean-finely sliced (1/2 cup)
- 5-8 leaf Fresh Mint
- 2tbs Thai red curry paste
- 2tbs Coconut Oil
- 200ml Vegetable oil (3/4 cup)
- 2tbs Fish sauce
- 1.5tbs Honey
- 1tbs Gluten free Oyster sauce
- 1tbs Gluten free flour
- 1pinch Salt and pepper

-Put the Basa chunks, king prawns, fish sauce, oyster sauce, honey and flour into an electric blender. Blend until all the ingredients combined. You can also use the handheld electric blender.

-Transfer the mixture to the mixing bowl. Then add the green beans. Fold them all together.

-Put the oil in the frying pan. Turn to medium heat. Then rub your fingertips with the extra oil (not the oil in the pan!) and start rolling the mixture into the small bite size balls.

-Put the fish cake ball into the frying pan and keep adding the rest, one by one but quickly. Make sure you adjust the heat level accordingly. Cook about 3-4 minutes on each side.

– Once the fish balls are thoroughly cooked, transfer them on to the kitchen roll to get rid of the excess oil.

-Serve Gluten Free Thai Fish Cake with salad, mint leaves and sweet and chili dipping sauce.

Tip:

-Thai fish cake mixture can be very sticky. To rub your fingertips with oil will make it easier to shape the fish cake without the mixture stuck on your fingers.

-Add 2 finely shredded Kiffir Lime Leaf into the mixture for extra magic and more fragrance.

Garlic and Black Pepper Lobster

Serve:1

Ingredients for seafood:

- 375 gram Whole cooked lobster (1 lb)
- 3-4 clove Garlic-finely chopped
- 3-4 tablespoon Rapeseed Oil
- 1 teaspoon Light soy sauce
- 1 teaspoon Oyster
- 1 pinch Ground black pepper
- 2-3 Coriander roots
- 3-4 Coriander leaf-finely chopped
- 1 wedge Lemon or lime

– Prepare or defrost the cooked lobster according to the package instruction.

- Place topside up on board. Use the sharp knife and cut the lobster lengthways. It can be quite hard to open. Push both sides down with the palm of your hands but be very careful as the shell is sharp. I use the scissors to trim the edge.
- Blend the garlic and coriander roots with an electric blender until combined.
- Heat the oil in a deep frying pan or a wok.
- Add the garlic and coriander roots. Then fry for about 30 seconds
- Put the lobster in the pan, turn the lobster and make sure that oil and paste cover it whole flesh and body.
- Add the light soy sauce, oyster sauce and black pepper.
- Fry further until the lobster is completely well heated.
- Transfer the lobster on the serving plate, pour the cooking sauce on the top. Garnish with fried garlic, chopped coriander and a lemon wedge.
- Enjoy this posh Garlic and Black Pepper with Thai Jasmine rice in the comfort of your own home. Who cares if it gets messy?

Tip:

- This is a quick cook dish. So you better prepare the ingredients in advance.
- Keep an eye on the pan while cooking as the garlic and coriander paste is easily burnt.
- Use a few coriander stems if you can't find the roots.
- I like to pour some of the cooking sauce on the rice as well.

Vegan Thai Salad

Serve:1

Ingredients:

- 225 gram Sweet potatoes-peeled and cut into chunks (1 cup)
- 50gram Avocado-peeled and cut into chunks (1/4 cup)
- 25 gram Red onion-sliced
- 10 gram Coriander-chopped (2 t)
- 1-2tsp Lemon juice
- 1/2tsp Coconut or palm sugar
- 1/4tsp Bird eye chilli-deseeded and finely chopped
- 1/4tsp Salt
- 1/4tsp Vegetarian Bouillon powder

- 75ml Oil (3/4 cup)
- 1pinch Salt and pepper

METHOD

-Mix 25ml (1/4 cup) of oil, lemon juice, salt, coconut sugar and chopped chili in the small bowl. (I put them in the covered jam jar and shake). This is your salad dressing.

-Cook the sweet potatoes chunks in the microwave for 4 minutes.

-Put the rest of the oil into the frying pan. Then add the cooked sweet potatoes, bouillon powder, a pinch of salt and pepper. Keep stirring until the sweet potatoes are caramelized and crispy on the outside.

-Put the crispy sweet potatoes, salad dressing, red onion, avocado and coriander into the big mixing bowl. Fold the ingredients together.

-Serve Vegan Thai Salad immediately if you like a warm salad. Otherwise, it is just as lovely if you serve it cold.

Tip:

-Do not overcook the sweet potatoes in the microwave as it might be too soft to fry.

-Keep an eye on the pan whilst frying the sweet potatoes chunks as they are easily burnt.

-Vegan Thai Salad can be served as a side salad or main course.

Hedgehog Mango (Vegan)

Serve: 1

Ingredient:

- Ripen soft mango
- 1/2tsp. Coconut oil
- 1/2tsp. Coconut sugar
- 1/2tsp. Lime juice
- Pinch of chili flakes

Method:

– Heat the griddle pan.

– Use the sharp knife and cut the mango in two halves.

– Put the coconut oil on the flesh side. Then put the flesh side on the heated griddle pan.

– Leave it for 2-3 minutes or until the chargrill effect shows.

- Remove the mango from the pan, then score the mango into the crisscross pattern. Push the middle of the mango skin inside out to create the curved shape.
- Scatter the coconut sugar and chili flakes on top.
- That is it! The easiest mango dessert on earth is served.

Tips:

- You can replace the honey to the coconut sugar.
- Sprinkle the desiccated coconut on the top for extra natural sweetness.

Marni Xuto

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I met Marni on Instagram, and asked her to be a guest contributor for our food column. Her food looks so delicious as she pictures it in her feed, and I thought it would be fun to share with all of you!

Marni is Mom to one, and she's also the Recipe Developer and Founder of Thai Food Made Easy. There she shares easy Thai recipes made from minimal ingredients and simple cooking methods that can be cooked up in the comfort of your home! Marni is also a consultant for a children's charity where she lives, in Leeds, Yorkshire, UK.

Marni says as a child, her family only owned a rice cooker – that was their only appliance – in the city of Bangkok. However, when she moved to the UK 15 years ago, she realized her eating out habits had to change because it was expensive and often unhealthy! This “survival coincidence” taught her to cook at home and make mouthwatering dishes like the ones we are sharing below.

Tried and True – Summertime Potpourris – by Marcy Lytle

We all love the aromas of the fall and winter, when we have something simmering on the stove or baking in the oven or burning in a jar, to fill our homes with those scents that make us breathe deep and close our eyes... But did you know there are summertime potpourris we can enjoy as well? Why not? Here are a few recipes for you to try, to fill your home with scents of the season that will escort you away...even if vacation isn't happening just yet.

Here are some tips before you put together your own recipe for summer smells:

Cover your ingredients with water and let simmer, BUT don't forget it's there! You'll need to refill with water during the day if you're burning it a long while. These will keep for several days. You can keep the pot on the stove and just reuse the next day by adding more water. Again, it's easy to forget this is on the stove so set a timer on your phone, or some reminder, so your pot doesn't run dry and burn.

Summertime Bliss:

- Sliced citrus fruit like limes, oranges and lemons
- 1 can Pineapple juice
- 1 T coconut extract

Simmer and Smile:

- 2 lemons, quartered
- 3 sprigs fresh rosemary
- 1 vanilla bean

Mint for You:

- 3 limes
- A bunch of fresh mint
- A bunch of fresh thyme
- Finely sliced ginger

Lavender Herb:

- 1 lemon, sliced
- 3-4 oranges, sliced
- ¼ c dried lavender, or ½ c fresh
- Fresh thyme

Fruit Peels:

- Citrus fruit skins (lemons, limes, oranges) – stickers removed
- Spices you like

Place these items in a small crockpot and add water to cover. Simmer and enjoy...



HOME

Practical Parenting – I’m Bored! – by Marcy Lytle

Only a few days into summer vacation and moms everywhere will be hearing “I’m bored,” from their kiddos that are home. Moms still have work to do, houses to clean, meals to make and all of the normal life...and now that the kids are home, do they have to be the entertainer, as well? To some extent, they do. However, there are some ways to try and make peace with bored and bummed kids who have nothing to do and whine about it, too.

I’m a big proponent of schedules. Not rigid, inflexible ones where we run our summer camp at home like a drill sergeant, but a schedule for something to lean on, for moms, dads and the kiddos...so that all mayhem doesn’t break loose!

Here’s a list of things that might go on your summer schedule:

First the necessities:

Daily chores – these are things on everyone’s to-do list, and all kids can be given a chore if they can walk and talk. Older teens can clean bathrooms, while younger ones can fold towels or pick up toys. Pick an hour each day for this activity with all hands on deck! If whining ensues, an extra chore is added!

Meal planning/groceries – This may be one particular day a week, where you plan and shop for groceries or other needs. Keep a running notepad or chalkboard and ask older family members to write down their needs/wants any time during the week, so that on shopping day it’s there. Perhaps keep another list running for meals or snack requests. This way, planning the meals and the lists will hopefully be quicker. And a big idea, if you need the time (and you do sometimes!) is to use Instacart if available in your area!

Quiet time – Families need time and space in a quiet place. Incorporate this into each day. Let each child claim and decorate their own quiet space, the first week of summer vacation. Maybe she wants her bed in a corner, with her favorite pillow, where she can read. Perhaps he wants the sofa where he can lie down and listen to music. The little ones may want the kitchen table to create and draw or color. Make a list of places and allowed activities during this quiet time. And you choose yours, as well! No whining, questions, or talking allowed during quiet time!

Now the funsies:

Outings – Have a family meeting and talk about outings you can afford and do during the summer. This might include the park, shopping, opting for burgers for lunch, friends over to visit, the library, etc. Make a list and the cost of each activity, and schedule them out for the week. Maybe your family can do one costly item a week, and the others need to be local and free. Scour the internet and your local events for free movies in the park, sales, coupons for restaurants, etc. and keep a file with all of the goodies in it, for choosing as you can.

Family time – This is evening time when the family is together, not at games or lessons or church or other places...but where the family either gathers in the yard, in the house, or out for dinner...just parents and kiddos. Think about conversation starter questions, games you can

play (maybe buy a couple of new ones for the summer), water balloons in the yard, or a family picnic on the floor. Make this happen as often as you can on these summer nights! Give older children the responsibility of planning them!

Vacation – Maybe you have a big trip planned, or several small ones, or nothing is on your calendar yet! Planning a vacation can be daunting and expensive. If you can't get away, plan day excursions – at least three – over the summer months. This way, they're on the calendar and everyone can look forward to them. Maybe the entire family could visit a zoo, pack a picnic lunch and see a movie one day. On another weekend, perhaps checking out new parks around town, splash pads, mini golf courses, or jumpy houses could be a day's excursion. And finally, how about an entire day at a state park where balls can be thrown, perhaps swimming and wading can take place, and burgers or hotdogs can go on the grill!

If you take a bit of time at the beginning of the summer and organize and place these things on a schedule and on a calendar where the family can see, you'll breathe easier and they will get excited to know something fun is ahead...when their rooms are clean and the pantry is full. Check out these cute calendars from Target for filling in with fun (and not so fun) necessities and funsies for making memories in Summer 2019!

<https://www.target.com/c/calendars-calendars-planners-school-office-supplies/dry-erase-board/-/N-4yiidZciv6x?type=products&lnk=dryerasecalenda>

I Don't Do Teenagers – Phone Time – by Marcy Lytle

Summer is upon us and our teens are probably on their phones constantly. Maybe we are, too. Many of us live on our phones, and have very little interaction with each other or anything else around us. I wrote about my own confessions over on the FRESH THYME page. It seems that one big form of common punishment with parents of teens is to take away their phones. It's an effective one, for sure, because teens LOVE being connected to their friends over their phones all the time, day and night. However, we know it's not healthy for any of us to stay connected at the hip to this device, so here are some alternatives to incorporate into your teen's daily routine while school is out...and more time is free.

- *Give phones a resting place.* Have a charging station in the house where all phones are to hang out during family time at night. This is true for mom and dad, as well. Especially during dinner, or while the family is watching a movie, phones are out of sight. Engage in conversation and encouragement for each person in the family.
- *Place phones in parents' rooms at night after a certain time.* Teens are too tempted to be on their phones instead of sleeping, into wee hours of the morning. This produces grumpy teens the next day, as well as minds that have been saturated with who knows what... This may sound harsh, but start this routine the day the teens get their phones and keep this routine. They won't like you, but parents aren't liked, sometimes.
- *Insist on reading and quiet time.* Make sure each family member has quiet time where only reading is allowed, and not reading on the phone. Go with your teens to the library or the bookstore and gather up a pile of interesting reads for them to choose from, over the summer. The school may have books they are required to read, as well. Make it a part of each day – reading time – without screen time.
- *Allow phone time at certain times of the day, maybe one hour* in the afternoon, and that's it. Sound impossible? Teens and phones are a combustible combo if that relationship is allowed to blossom unchecked. Phone use becomes addicting and what they see and do gets out of hand. Talking an hour in the afternoon with friends, making plans, and playing games is enough.
- *Insist on family interaction* with siblings, parents, grandparents, neighbors, and friends. Get out board games, have family nights, invite over grandparents or take teens to help out in their yards, be neighborly by letting teens bake cookies and deliver, let them invite a friend over to hang out – in person – not on the phone app.

If rules and parameters are talked about and set before the phone is ever given to our teens, they will know up front what's going to be expected of them. They will know that the phone is a gift from their parents to be used wisely and within guidelines, because it's a privilege not an entitlement to have it. Even if our teens are working a job and paying for their own phones, talk about wisdom and respect in the home with others and stewardship of time.

Above all, we have to put away our phones and the sensation we too get from scrolling and texting and playing too much, and it might be a good idea to limit our phone use as well.

The Family Practice - The Race - By: Brandi Oman

If you read my articles, you have a pretty good understanding that I absolutely love and adore my son more than anything in this world. You have learned that we are constantly making healthy decisions to better our emotional, physical, and spiritual health together. Well, this week Caiden blew my socks off in surprising me yet again.

The past year, we have been working on getting him physically healthier and have seen progress on a weekly basis. He asked me if he could participate in his school's Apex fundraising run. I said, "Sure that is fine!" and donated towards the cause, not really realizing what it was. He came home with pride in his eyes and so excited to share with me what he had done. He had made himself a goal of 36 laps...and he surpassed that by 5! To my amazement, those were not short little laps that the school had created in the gym. They used their outdoor track and 5 laps equals 1 mile. So in two hours he had ran/walked 8.2 miles!!

This news brought back me to the memories of sitting in the doctor's office, scared because Caiden was having issues where his heart/chest was hurting, he had a difficult time going up the stairs without being winded or having body pain, and he had blood pressure levels that would make a grown adult feel like complete crap and be at risk of stroking out. He was 6 years old at the time. Presently, he has shed a bunch of weight, is making conscience decisions to eat better and to be active. His achievement was so much more than physical, it was mental and emotional.

I asked Caiden, "Did you get tired or stop to rest during this workout?"

His answered amazed me as he said, "Mommy I am NOT a quitter. Yes it hurt, and yes I got tired but I wanted to finish this strong. So I did it!"

I think we all go through a rough time and in that moment we are scared. We all have to make the difficult decision of bettering ourselves, knowing there is a risk of failure. We can face the problems that are in our lives with the support of loved ones, and cast our worries on God, and then make the decision that we are not quitters. It will hurt sometimes, but when the race is over and we didn't quit, we will feel so great!

James 1:12, NIV:

"Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

A Night to Remember – Summer Season – by Marcy Lytle

Summer is here, and for some it will be months of long, hot days where all we want to do is sit under the coolness of the AC and read a good book. Others are lucky enough to live where summer weather is perfect for all outdoor things. And still others may be experiencing the worst weather of the year! Seasons are interesting, aren't they? We're happy to see them change, and we welcome the newness, then we're glad to see them go as we prepare for the next one.

Preparation: You'll need bubbles, a few herbs or veggies to plant and a pot of soil, peanut butter and celery and raisins, and summer peaches if you have them. (If not, another summer fruit will do!) Pick a cool summer morning or evening, and head outside for this family devo!

Did you know that the season of summer is mentioned in the Bible a lot?

Genesis 8:22 says "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, **summer** and winter, day and night will never cease." That's a cool promise from God, because when he created the earth he set into motion the changing seasons and no one can stop the cycle.

What do you like most about summer? (Let the kids answer.) Blowing bubbles is fun, right? (Blow bubbles together as you gleefully watch them float away and pop.) As we blow bubbles let's give thanks for the promises of God that never fail.

Psalms 74:17 says, "It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth; you made both **summer** and winter."

Here again, we are told that God created the seasons and he set boundaries. That means that summer cannot take over all of the other seasons and dominate. And neither can winter! If we are patient, change will occur. What is the hardest thing you're having to be patient in waiting for, right now? (Let the kids answer.) Let's plant a few herbs in our pot, and water them, and realize that we will patiently have to wait for the plants to grow and produce fruit...in season.

Proverbs 30:25 says, "Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the **summer...**";

Have you ever observed little ants as they move along, sometimes carrying things that are way bigger than they are? Ants are amazing. An ant can carry 50 times its body weight! The weight of a kangaroo can be about 350 pounds, so that would be like a 70 pound kid toting around a kangaroo! Make your treat of "ants on a log" and enjoy together, as you marvel at God's creation.

Jeremiah 40:12 says, "...And they harvested an abundance of wine and **summer** fruit." What is your favorite fruit? (Kids answer.) Summer fruit is so juicy and tasty – like peaches! Let's cut one open and enjoy the taste and give thanks for summer abundance. Did you know that abundance is more than enough? God gives us more than enough provision, even in the heat of summer.

Mark 13:28 says, "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that **summer** is near." How did we know that summer was near? School was ending, the temperatures were rising, and what else? We are supposed to learn this lesson to notice when changes are coming, so that we can prepare.

Let's talk about the summer, as a family, and let's make a list of things we'd like to enjoy and accomplish this season. Maybe we can volunteer and give, vacation and play, and relax and worship. And then when we see the calendar flip to August, we can notice that fall is nearing and prepare for the next season...

Family prayer:

God, thank you for setting the seasons in place, summer, fall, winter and spring. We pray that this season we will be thankful, aware, patient and ready to enjoy the fruit that comes to us in the month of June. Thank you for provision and care over all of your creation, including us!

(Remember to water the herbs and watch them grow this family, and enjoy their aroma and flavor in the dishes you enjoy together!)

Tiny Living – No Plans – by Leyanne Enterline

April showers brought May flowers...We experienced the beauty of this! There has been lots of rain here in Spicewood, Texas...and lots of flowers. Having all of this beautiful, raw land around us has been amazing! It's been so pretty!

Even the kiddos have enjoyed picking me a variety of all the different wildflowers on our property. With all the flowers, there was also an influx a ton of butterflies and birds. We still enjoy our bird watching out our tiny window to see what new bird comes along. They've all been a variety of colors.

However, one day a crow-type bird came up to the feeder and I said, "Ewww, what an ugly bird."

Eli responded, "Hey, that's not nice, that bird is awesome! Look at how iridescent his feathers are! And how cool is that? His head is brown and his body is black!"

Okay, well I didn't win the mom-of-the-year award, and my kid totally taught me a lesson!

That conversation made me start to think that, of course, everything that God created is beautiful. How dare I say something negative about a poor little bird! And then my kiddo busted me on it! Oh, to see the world through a child's eyes!

Again, this really made me think. Sometimes, I get anxious about not knowing what's next with our lives. Is this tiny living forever? At the moment, we have no plan for the future of building an actual house. We have the physical plans for our house, but no plans on when to start or when to move forward with building. It's so hard to wait and be still in His presence when we want to go, go, go!

I'm so thankful to spend this time with my kiddos, bird watching out our tiny window, looking at the brown/black bird and his iridescent feathers that I otherwise would have never taken the time to notice. And because I have no plans, I suppose I keep trying to slow down and notice the little things.

Psalm 37:7 says,

"Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him..."

Matthew 6:34 reminds us,

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself..."

Remember...Love Grows Best in Tiny Spaces



YOU

Strengthening Your Core – The Crater’s Song – by Marcy Lytle

You know what a crater is. It’s a huge hole left in the ground, usually after a big explosion. We even have those in our hearts, after a huge loss or disappointment in life. We end up with a big deep crater and we start asking questions about how and why that explosion happened. I know that I have done this, and I bet you have, as well.

“Why did my dad treat me that way?”

“What happened to cause my entire family to disown me?”

“Who does that? I can’t even...”

“When am I ever going to recover from this loss?”

“Why can’t I live in peace?”

The who, what, when and why start surrounding the crater and crying out with their questions until they echo so loud in our hearts and minds that we cannot hear anything else. We stop and listen to them daily, and they soon become the mourner’s song that we sing.

However, I just heard a songwriter, Sarah Groves, on her Instagram recently ask a question like this, “Why do spend all of our time asking about why the crater happened instead of building again inside of it?”

I can imagine that building inside of a crater in the ground would be quite difficult and impossible to do alone. Equipment would be necessary, and that would require helping hands. There would need to be a time of talking, settling, vision-making...all of which would take hours, weeks and months. And of course there’s the clean-up from the explosion that would be necessary before any kind of building could begin.

Craters happen in life, all around us, not just in our own backyard. They happen across the globe when terrible things happen to hundreds of people just because of anger and vengeance on the part of someone evil. They occur across town when we hear that a friend suddenly died from a freak accident. That’s a crater of mass proportions! And we all have friends that seemingly never recover from the craters in their yards, as they stay down at the bottom with their ears covered as they try to block out the crater’s song from the who, what, when, and why quartet.

I’ve been guilty of listening to that haunting song instead of building again. My faith has wavered and I’ve been knocked down from disappointments and unanswered questions in life. Instead of rebuilding my faith, I’ve wanted answers to why the crater happened. Where was God standing, and why didn’t he keep everything from exploding? I’ve sat, not budging, in the very bottom, demanding explanations before I would look up.

There’s a time to mourn, for sure. And grief will always show up against the shore like waves, from time to time. However, the rebuilding has to occur in order to see the light once again and to realize that life is still happening above ground, away from the crater. We have this choice to

stay in the echo chamber of why, or to grab the hands of those around us and let them help us rebuild.

Time and time again, God's people fell into the crater of doubt and unbelief when He didn't come through fast enough or as they imagined he would. And time and time again, his patience and mercy pursued them until they turned again to their faithful God.

I don't want to live in the crater and listen to the crater's song, once the time of mourning is past. I don't want waves of grief to consume me, but only to lap at my feet and recede back into the ocean. I do want my faith to be strong, not in understanding, but in accepting and loving His ways in my life. I cannot do that alone.

That kind of rebuilding is the only kind that will change the lyrics of the song from one of questions and demands to one of praise and adoration. And the reverberating sound will rise along with the joy that comes with knowing I'm his...and He is mine...even when explosions occur.

Under the Influence - Nothing to Prove – by Marcy Lytle

Okay, so you're a stay-at-home mom. I remember when I made that choice to quit my full-time job teaching and to stay at home with my kids. Oh, I had many part-time jobs I did while I stayed at home, but I still felt like I had "given up" my career in order to parent, and somehow I felt "less than" when I did. I showed up at play dates with moms or visited with other women that still held jobs outside the home, and I found myself saying things like, "I used to be a teacher," or "I taught for 10 years," so that my worth as a woman would be known.

How wrong and silly I was, but sometimes the world in which we live presses us in to thinking we need to impress others with our wit and smarts. And in our minds, we don't see that changing diapers, washing clothes and cleaning yet another spill is any sort of job to share with anyone – except other moms who smell like spoiled milk, as well!

The point of this story is that we, as women, have nothing to prove to anyone at all. We need to be proud of our choices and satisfied with who we are in the season in which we live. Think about the garden in your own yard. How silly it would be for the evergreen or perennials to shout out to the annuals (that have to be replanted each year) that they are better than their neighbors! It takes both kinds of plants to fill a garden bed with beauty! And what if the berries, which only appear in the winter months, felt ashamed and shriveled up and fell off, instead of shined during their prime?

Being a stay-at-home mom is a hard decision, as is the decision to work outside the home. And either choice stirs up comments and looks from other people...it just does. There are those who do think less of us for whatever choices we make in life, because they're judgmental people. And that's their problem. Making a choice as a woman to be with our children 24/7, to work part-time and tend to our kids as well, or to work full time and place our children in daycare is personal. It's as personal as choosing that array of blooms to put in your own vase, to display on your table.

Some women like profuse blooms to fill a large vase, and others prefer baby's breath and neutral hues in a tiny slender vase. Some ladies enjoy a bouquet of roses to set out for all to see, and other love a single stemmed rose for personal pleasure only. It's all personal, sweet, delicate and beautiful, because we are uniquely made to govern and run our households as we see what's best for our children and our home. Our children are like these beautiful blooms, given to us to arrange in our families as we see and feel that which best suits our needs and purposes.

I personally feel it's a wise choice to stay home with kiddos, and it's not always the mom – it might be the dad or a grandparent. There are those who beg to differ, as they choose the best daycare for their children and attend to their careers because that's what their family needs and desires. Still others have no choice but to stay at home, because of children with special needs. And others have no choice but to work because they're a single parent with a single income.

Trying to prove to others that our choice was the best, or that we defend our decision, or give a long list of the whys of what we have chosen is just simply exhausting and a waste of time.

Enjoy your life and your kiddos, with every ounce of time and strength you have. Work hard at what you do, inside the home and out, with your kids around and gone. Tune out negative and critical words from those around you, and stand up tall in the season in which you and your kiddos are blooming. There's nothing more breathtaking than stumbling upon a field of wildflowers, or walking past a finely manicured neighborhood garden. Both are equally stunning and beautiful in their own petals and stems...with nothing to prove to those who pass by except to say, "Look at me, I'm alive and well!"

Healthy Habits – Almost Out – by Marcy Lytle

Don't you hate it when you go to grab your lotion and realize the pump will not work anymore, because there's barely anything left in the bottom of the bottle? Or what about when you get in the car, running late, and the indicator catches your eye and you hear that "ding" which warns you that you're almost out of gas. That's the worst! And I've been cooking before when I needed 2 cups of flour, only to realize my bag is almost out and there's only one cup! Bummer!

We all know the indicators of being almost out, but we forget to note them or remember them. We can usually see in the bottle that the liquid is running low, and we obviously look at the car indicators from time to time, but fail to stop because we're busy! And flour in the pantry? Well, if we don't bake much, we forget to look and see if the bag is full before we start that new recipe when we need that white powdery stuff!

What about the indicators that we're almost out of patience, energy, steam, etc. at home in our emotions and life with our kids and families? Here are a few of my indicators that I have to observe, or I'll find myself rubbing everyone in my path the wrong way...

When I'm almost out of patience, it's usually because I've run too much during the day, without ever slowing down enough to breathe. So when he just barely starts to speak, my sharp tongue slices him to the core.

Note to self: Take breaks during the day.

When I'm almost out of kindness and am asked to volunteer at an event, I realize that perhaps I've carried an offense for the last time I gave of my time. The event lasted too long and ruined my day.

Note to self: Let past events be past events and let it go.

When I'm almost out of joy and realize that I'm quite tearful and a bit depressed, I often see that I've been listening to negativism all around me all day long.

Note to self: I can turn off the radio, the phone, and the television and think on good things...like the truth.

When I'm almost out of faith when I hear of yet another friend with a diagnosis that starts with the letter C, I know that it's because I'm judging God by whether or not he answers like I tell him to.

Note to self: Ask a friend when faith is nil, to pray with me and hold my hands from hanging low.

When I'm almost out of energy and my stomach is churning or hurting, I can think about what I ate today and know exactly why I'm sluggish.

Note to self: Eat well. Drink water. Repeat.

We all have indicators that rise up and reveal themselves right in front of our faces, or we have friends or family that will gladly quiz us, "Hey, what's wrong with you, and why are you acting

that way?" Sometimes we don't know, and we need a helping hand. But other times, we know exactly why we're almost out of _____. It's because we didn't see the indicators and restock or refill that which we used up over time.

Did you know that a raised red flag means danger is looming? When red flags are flying at the beach, it's a warning to swimmers. Raise your own red flag in front of your own line of vision and heed the warning that you're swimming in dangerous waters and need to refill, relax, rethink and rehydrate. Then lower that flag and invite your friends and family around once again to splash and play with you when those dark clouds have passed.

Life Right Now – Dream Big – by Bethany Gomez

And just like that, summer break is here again and it has officially been a year since I wrote my first article. I honestly can't believe it. I will miss my sweet, adorable students. Most of them are moving on to kindergarten or moving in general, but this teacher of little humans is ready for a break.

What will this summer hold for me? I can't say for certain, but I can say it will most definitely include change, tears of sadness, and tears of joy; quite a bit of all three, but it will most assuredly include times of laughter and fun as well. Like the verse in Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens." I'm so thankful God is never changing. It brings me so much comfort and peace. He is the same, yesterday, today, and forever, my "anchor" in the storm, my provider. I'm going to have to keep these truths, and countless others, very close to my heart this summer.

Last month, I had mentioned that my roommates and I are moving out of our current rental home in Round Rock, Texas. I also shared that one of my roommates, my BFF, Abby, is getting married and moving to the Dallas area. But what I failed to mention was where my sister and I would be moving to, partly because I think I was in denial of having to move out in the first place, even though I've been talking about it for a while now. I think I was simply trying to mentally prepare myself for this inevitable, gut-wrenching move. The moving date is drawing oh so near. More than likely, as you are reading this we are in the process if not already in our "new," "not so new to us" home. Okay, I won't leave you in suspense much longer, but I feel like I should prepare you for this revelation.

Without any doubt, God definitely had a hand in it.

Before my sister and I could even begin actively looking for another living arrangement, God flew open a door, a door that was very familiar to us both. It was the door to our childhood home, our parents' current house, for the time being, located in town on the outskirts of Round Rock.

I shook the moment my parents told us they were saying yes to something God was calling them to do which was, firstly, to move to Brenham, Texas. Secondly, they asked my sister and I if we would be willing to move into their home for the next year at the very least. I'm going to be honest. My selfish nature tried to rear its ugly head upon first receiving this news. On the outside I was calm, nearly expressionless, but on the inside I was screaming in my head,

"No God, they can't leave; I need them! I need them nearby to help me if ever I have a problem I can't easily solve on my own."

Then I heard a still, small voice say,

"There are others that need them more than you; I am with you always."

After that, and clearly after finding out that financially we could take over the bills, and especially after hearing about the very reason for why they were moving to Brenham, how could I not be more than willing?

What's in Brenham, you may ask? A non-profit ministry called Hope Rising, that has an inspiring mission to bring restoration to young girls that have been rescued out of human sex trafficking and exploitation. Among other things, they seek people that love the Lord, have a heart for these girls and are willing to become house parents while the girls go through healing.

My parents were not willing when they were first presented with this opportunity about a year ago. They were full of doubt, to say the least, but then God began preparing their hearts and finally they couldn't deny that this was indeed what God was calling them to do. Lo and behold, this happened at about the same time my sister and I would need another place to live. Isn't God amazing? He provided a place for us even before we knew we would have to move and need another place to live.

Brenham is about 1 hour 40 minutes away from Austin. It is basically smack dab in the middle between Austin and Houston. I've driven through Brenham my entire life; every time we visit our extended family in and around the Houston area. Now, instead of just passing through and only stopping for a quick bathroom break and snack, I will be stopping and staying for a while to visit my parents and the girls that will be in their care.

God is such a good father, a perfect provider. He provides, sometimes even before we ask for provision. God is faithful. God's timing is perfect. How can I not continue to trust Him with everything? And how can I not be praying that the girls that my parents will be taking care of will discover these truths for themselves? I will be praying that God will use my parents and even me, to minister to these girls.

So this summer, I will be moving into the home I watched my dad build, on a 3-acre plot of land 25 years ago. It has definitely seen better days, and once my head finally began to wrap around this fact, a number of ideas to improve my beloved family home began to churn in my head. I not only want to make improvements, but at the same time I want to make it feel like my home instead of the home of my parents.

I suppose my summer will not only consist of many changes and fun times, but it will also consist of maybe a few DIY projects. Right now, my home improvement dreams are oblivious to my bank account, but I believe God has been telling me to dream big with a number of things, so why not this, too?

Created for Life - FALLING FEAR – by Ginny Hurley

Fear backs away and even disappears in the presence of love. Everything that Jesus did was based on love. When we say yes to the love of God, He sends His Holy Spirit to live inside of us, and He responds by remaining with us no matter what! It's a promise that cannot be revoked! In the 15th chapter of John, Jesus tells us that our love for Him empowers us to obey and show the world what He is like.

Sometimes in this journey, we partner with a belief system that enhances the power of the enemy. God has never been intimidated by the darkness, nor has He been focused on the tactics of the enemy. We, on the other hand, live in a fallen place where circumstances feel overwhelming and scary. We begin to overemphasize warfare and make it our first priority when we awaken and when we go to bed. A sense of foreboding grips us like a vice when we hear bad news or envision disaster, so our vulnerable hours are those quiet moments when busyness slows down. If we begin to agree with these negative thoughts that frighten us, we empower the darkness ourselves. Then we begin a warfare based on our feelings and not necessarily on what God is doing in these circumstances.

The Father has given us various tools and has equipped us in our battle for truth, but the most important aspect of any battle is keeping our gaze on Jesus and what the Father is doing right this moment in heaven. Plans and strategies are great and useful, yet in this season our most vital weapon is to know and carry His love. For love casts out fear, and fear wants to break in and challenge love with terror and hopelessness. Right this minute, even as you read this little statement, our Father is releasing unconditional love and pouring out His presence. It never goes away and it never criticizes. He can only give life! We fall for fear's lies when we remove ourselves from God's love.

*"I leave the gift of Peace with you, My Peace.
Not the kind of fragile peace given by the world,
but My perfect Peace.
Don't yield to fear or be troubled in your hearts,
instead be courageous!"
John 14:27*

Jesus says in verse 30 of chapter 14, that the ruler of darkness has no power over Him! That means he has no power over us either! In truth, darkness has been disarmed and we are filled with the One who has conquered every foe!

In the garden, God didn't teach Adam and Eve warfare. He taught them by relationship while walking and talking to them every day.

I want to live focused on His finished work on the cross, not in reaction and response to darkness. I want to focus on my fear falling in the Presence of the Person of Peace. Putting on my armor everyday is wisdom and an honor; yet if I don't, His love and protection of me does not change. He changes the way I think about the darkness. He shows me the LIGHT of His LOVE. There I am safe and free!



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Carry On – by Bekah Holland

Have you ever been lost? I don't mean taking a wrong turn down a dark road without cell reception while sitting in your car playing "What If" for 20 minutes, trying not to picture your family getting a call that you've been eaten by a bear. Is it just me? Fine. But I'm talking about a different kind of lost. I got married in my mid-twenties, naively in love, with no idea what kind of ride I was about to embark on. But career changes, financial blows, health problems, death and loss (oh, and add in a couple of kids and a decade or so) and one day, I woke up, utterly and completely lost. I no longer had my nights filled with feedings or diaper changes. Cheerios weren't (usually) crushed in my carpet. I wasn't surviving as only moms can, on love, coffee and desperation. I had a new career. And my husband was healthy. And things were going well. There wasn't a reason in the world for me to feel like my world was crashing.

However, I've never been one for being reasonable.

Now I'll start this whole story by telling you, I am a huge proponent of therapy: couples, individual, group, family....whatever. I've done all of it. Try it. Seriously. And I regularly see a therapist now, not because of any big issues currently, but let's be honest, how often do you get to sit on a comfortable couch, drink a cup of hot coffee without reheating it and talk about nothing but how you feel and why? Not often in my world.

I thought because I was talking about stuff, I had things pretty well figured out. So it was a big surprise to all of a sudden feel like I had completely lost my identity. I was a wife. A mother. A daughter. Friend. But I no longer remembered what brought me joy or what my dream was. I'm not going to lie. I was scared to death to deal with it, too. My husband is not used to seeing me unsure and anything other than ready to take on the world with all the sunshine I can bring and didn't know how to help, other than to send me to my room for a nap and a bath (which was more helpful than he knew, by the way), and to push me to *take care of me*.

But how did I get here and how do I find my way out?

Maybe I had become so consumed with what my husband needed to be happy. What I could do to make his life better. What my kids needed to feel safe. Consumed with the needs of everyone around me. I'm a people pleaser by nature, which can be great, or it can cause damage to the last person on that list that I cared about pleasing. Me. I realized (a complete breakdown still counts, thank you) that I had to take a step back. And my husband had to take some steps forward. And my kids did, too. I needed to use my voice and ask for some dang help, and some dang quiet. I needed to remember the dreams that God had created in my heart so that I could fill my own cup. I cringe every time I hear the "Put on your own oxygen mask before you put on anyone else's." *Blah, blah blah*. As gross and cliché as it is, it's true, albeit annoying.

Being raised in a Christian home, selflessness and serving was somewhere on the list next to breathing and eating. And those things are very important. I'm not trying to diminish that. But somewhere along the line, I forgot that God wants His best for me as well. And while I need to allow Him to fill me every day, He also expects me to do the things that I need to do to take care of my own wellbeing. I used to think that I needed to wait for my husband to pour into me, filling in the gaps. And sometimes he does. Sometimes he doesn't. And I tend to try to be everything for him. But it's not enough. Not even close. Not because my partner isn't enough. But because only I can pause and quiet myself long enough to know what's missing. Only I can

take the time to make sure that my heart is resting safe where it needs to be and that I am walking toward the direction of my dreams. Only I know when things are too hard, the asking is too much and the weight too heavy.

When I stop to breathe, walk in the sun, read a book, chat with a friend, or even hide in the bathroom with a jar of Nutella...those things don't seem quite so hard. And the asking seems almost doable, and the weight feels bearable again. I can't depend on others to do that work for me. Those are things that I was created to do. But I wasn't created to do them alone or without a second thought for myself. I remember how I felt when I stopped to think about what Jesus did on the brink of the most horrific and monumental event in His life (or history for that matter). He took some friends. Then He went to sit in a garden. BY. HIM. SELF. I don't think anyone reads that account of Jesus's actions before His arrest and death and thinks, *that guy was such a selfish jerk...leaving all his friends worrying*. I mean, His mom might have wanted one last hug. Or his buddy might have needed one last heart to heart, but all He cared about was taking some time for Himself to sit and cry and pray.

Sweet relief!

How beautiful to see a perfect picture of a perfect life, under enormous stress and heartbreak, taking time to be alone, to talk to the One closest to Him, and to release the weight of the task, so that He can carry on and carry through. That gives me reason to believe, with all my heart, that I don't have to be last place, or bottom priority on anyone's list, including my own. And that alone, gives me a light to shine when I start to feel the dark crowding in. It helps guide me back where I belong, reaching for the stars that God designed me to reach and know that I'm not really lost at all. In Him I am found.

Date Night Fun – Freebies! – by Marcy Lytle

Freebies are hard to come by these days. Hardly anything is free anymore, so planning a date night without going broke is hard for so many! Especially if paying a babysitter is involved! Sometimes, young parents have no choice but to include the kiddos on date nights, as best they can. And still others just give up, because the cost is too great, and bills have to be paid. That's why this month...we're offering freebie date night ideas for you and yours!

- Go on a hike (early morning so it's not so hot.) Pack a few breakfast treats and drinks, head out for a hike in your neighborhood or nearest park, and enjoy time and conversation, and nature! Take photos and share them on social media! <http://www.whatsgoodattraderjoes.com/2013/07/trader-joes-chocolate-chip-brownie-oat.html>
- Game night is fun. Set out several board games and invite over other couples, or include the family. Set a time and allow players a certain time on each game, and then shift to the next one. Provide a different snack at each table – simple and easy ones you've put together yourselves. <https://www.tasteofhome.com/course/appetizers/appetizer-snack-recipes/>
- Gather at a coffeehouse where live music is being played. This won't be totally free, if you opt for coffee, but it's basically a free concert with just him, holding hands and sipping cups.
- Grow in your knowledge together by visiting a museum. Check their websites, because there are often free admissions at special times, or some are free all the time! Linger at each exhibit and talk about them all as you take the long way home (not the ordinary path.)
- Get inspired by driving through lush neighborhoods, eclectic neighborhoods, or established ones, and write down yard ideas you could try at your own house! Pack a few snacks, stop for a walk if you wish, and enjoy!
- Graze by the water. Pack up a picnic and head to the nearest pond, lake or beach and hang out with no money needed – just sun and a good read and an outdoor game. Can't stand the heat? Go early or late...when the temps are not high. <https://www.womansday.com/food-recipes/food-drinks/g2196/picnic-food-ideas/?slide=33>
- Glide together on a slipnslide! Why let the kids have all the fun? If they're home, they can join. But if you're alone, go for it! Include water guns and water balloons, and laugh and play. It might be the best thing you've done for your marriage all year! <https://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Long-Slip-and-Slide>
- Give to others by volunteering together. Peruse the internet for volunteer opportunities to serve, just the two of you. Serve meals, sort donations, or clean a yard for someone else. It might not "sound" romantic, but watching your spouse serve – it's definitely heartwarming!
- Generate tunes and enjoy a night of karaoke. There are apps you can download on your phone, and then you can sing away! Invite another couple. Each couple provides a snack. And your date night is on! <https://www.gihosoft.com/iphone-tips/best-karaoke-apps-for-iphone.html>

- Grill in the park. When's the last time you did this, just the two of you? Check out some new items to grill, or opt for the standard burger or dog, and take your cooler. Play cards at the table. Take bug spray so that you're not pestered by pests. Make memories together.

Will you try one of these, this month? I think we will!

After 30 Years – Must-Have-a-Nap – by Marcy Lytle

I'm not sure when it started, both of us needing to rest or nap, but it's been going on a while. In fact, I hear young couples stating they need naps as well, and young moms for sure need naps! However, naps are hard to come by...at any age. I have found that taking a nap can do wonders for a marriage, and without them – well sometimes – all hell breaks loose!

Almost every weekend we end up going out for a fun excursion into downtown, on a road trip, taking care of errands, etc. and we are in the car for hours and hours. Sunday afternoons find us out walking or at the movies. And on weekday evenings, we are both tired from our jobs where one of us sits at a laptop (that would be me) and one of us is out across town or also in front of a screen. We don't have a set schedule for bed at night, but try to get enough hours to feel rested. After all, we don't have little kids or teenagers in the house to stay up for or with!

Here's what happens...when hell breaks loose! He arrives home from work super tired from his strenuous, long day. I've just finished hours of reading on line, working and writing, placing orders and printing out documents for my paying job, and my eyes are tired – but I'm ready to go – physically! If I start in on him about leaving, or hand him a list to do right away, or begin my exhortation about how my day went and all that I had to deal with – it sends him over the edge. It's the same with me. I don't want to think or be asked too many questions, or my answers will be short and rude – getting a rise out of him that I do not want! *Can you relate?*

*We've both learned to compromise and be considerate
of the other one and our differences in our jobs.*

I know he needs to lie down for 20-30 minutes when he arrives home from work, and he will then be a different man, soft spoken, ready to roll. We both know on the weekends that we need to pull over when our conversations become sarcastic and full of “tones” so that we can rest our eyes, even if just for 15 minutes. We awake ready to go again, and somehow that rest is like a shot in the arm of all the good things! Sometimes, I don't actually sleep, but I read. And that relaxes and calms me, and makes me a more pleasant person to be around.

They say married couples should never argue or discuss tough issues before bed, and it's so true. Losing sleep because of arguing and then trying to function the next day is just impossible, and creates all sorts of havoc in the home. It's the same for days that are too full, life is just crazy, and scheduled squares on the calendar are all blocked off. During those days, there's no point in letting arguments and tempers flare and rise, just because we're both tired and worn out.

Finding ways to shut our eyes and give each other that space, communicating the need for that space, and then making it happen is one of those 10 commandments for marriage! There are days I say, “Don't ask me any questions. I'm super tired and I'm going to shut my eyes a few minutes.” I've told him and warned him about my current state, and he nods his head in understanding. He sometimes walks in the door and states, “I'm so tired,” and I can see it on his face. Although I have stories to tell and places to go, I know to wait another 30 minutes so that he can rest before we head out.

Just like we can't push tired children to sit up and behave, if they haven't had their rest, we can't push tired spouses to sit up and perform at our every request and whim...

Oh sure, there are days when we push on through our tiredness, ignoring the symptoms, and fall into bed mad and frustrated. There will be days like that. But there are more and more days where a good book and a shade tree are all we need to grab each other's hand and skip through a parking lot, after the rest time is over...



ENCOURAGEMENT

Bless This Mess – All that Chaos – by Ashley Zanella

Have you ever lived in a state of constant chaos? Has your day to day ever been so unpredictable to where the unpredictable is what you came to expect every day? Has your chaos become so constant that it's not chaos anymore, because it's normal?

Nearly three years ago, my husband and I conceived our first son. In yearning to provide for our family, my husband began the long process of becoming an officer of the law. If you've ever had a close relation with a police officer, you know what I mean when I say that there is no consistency in their schedule. I'm talking rotating between working an early morning shift, a mid-day shift and an extremely late shift every few months. I'm talking about expecting him to be home at 1 a.m., waking up to go to the bathroom and realizing it's 3:30 and he still isn't home. I tossed and turned, making myself crazy with stress over what might be happening to him on duty.

We live in a world where a lot of people do not like and do not respect police. That puts a lot of stress on not only an officer, but their spouses, their kids, parents and loved ones. So a year after he began the police academy, and a week before I gave birth to our second son, my husband stepped out of the force and into the unknown.

After a few months of searching and praying, he became a restaurant manager. It would be better for the family, we told ourselves. And in some ways, it definitely was. No longer did he have to work past 1 o'clock in the morning. No longer was I staying up all night worrying about whether I'd ever see my husband again. However, if you know a restaurant manager, you know that role also comes with its fair share of chaos. 10-12 hour days were normal. Working until midnight and then having to be up by 6 a.m. to go back to work again was normal. There was a stretch of 10 days every single month where my husband would not have a single day off. Going from the police force to this environment meant that, as a family, for a solid two years we have been those friends that could never commit to any plans. Our friends usually started an invitation with, "I understand if you can't make it, but....." We've missed church, bible study, birthday parties, dinners, and the list goes on and on. That was normal for us.

I mentioned before that we've been praying for a while to get clarity on what we both should do going forward, because what we've been doing was not working anymore. This past Monday, my husband started a new trade as an electrician apprentice. I knew it was the right step. I'd been praying and felt in my heart that this was the direction to go. I had no idea what God was leading us into. Without even knowing what the schedule was going to look like going into this, it turned out to be exactly what our family needed. For the first time since we've been married, since we had not just one, but two children, my husband is working a regular Monday through Friday job. He's home by 4 p.m. every day. He has the weekends off. And if he does have the opportunity to work more hours, he will be compensated fairly for that time.

I can't express how much of a pleasant shock this is to our system. Our normal system has been chaos. Instead of dreading most days, every day now feels like such a blessing. We get to enjoy such simple things like putting our kids to bed together, ending our days together and making plans together every weekend. If we want to, we can commit to weekly or monthly plans

to serve or spend time with friends. It feels like these are such simple pleasures, but knowing that we now get to experience them brings us so much joy.

The last two years have been so hard. So much so, that we got so used to it being hard until we didn't even realize just how hard it was anymore. I feel like we've been given a new beginning to our marriage and family. We weren't fully satisfied with where we were in life, so we refused to become complacent, and this pushed us to make dramatic, scary changes. Looking back now, I don't know why we didn't do it sooner, but I'm so grateful for the journey we've taken to get here because it makes this new found freedom so much sweeter.

It's just a reminder that if you aren't happy with the circumstances of your life, keep pushing for change and keep searching for that joy because you will find it as long as you persist through all that chaos.

Firmly Planted – The Call of Prayer – by Dina Cavazos

Do you enjoy quiet or do you prefer to have some kind of sound going on? Me, I prefer quiet. Solitude and silence are as important to my well-being as air and water. Hopelessly introverted, I think often of having friends over to sit around a fire, but it rarely happens. In my imagination, a small group is chatting, enjoying the peace and beauty, baring our souls and bonding in brotherly/sisterly love. The reality is, I do better one on one, and, more often than not, the *one* is not a human.

This prayer garden I so often write about was conceived through a vision of people gathering together on a yet-to-be-poured patio, singing, praying and worshipping the **One Who Sustains Visible and Invisible Worlds with a Word** (a name deserving of bold-faced type). This gathering, I've realized, must be orchestrated by God. The vision moved me with forcible energy to create the space, but now that it's done it's usually me and the garden critters who gather. I wonder if the real purpose was to test my obedience. I wonder if God was creating a meeting place for *us*. I've offered it up over and over, asking him to have his way and give me clear signs—a kick in the rear, if needed. I've learned to wait, to trust more, and to pray—to be instead of *do*.

Sometimes feel like I'm not doing enough to make it happen, but, the truth is, I can't make anything happen without God. That's why spending time with him is so important and why I'm drawn to prayer—our means of communion and communication. I've collected many thought-provoking quotes from the books I've accumulated on prayer. Here is just a sampling:

Prayer is the living interactive relationship we have with God about what He and I are working on together. (Richard Foster)

Prayer is not a means of removing the unknown and unpredictable elements in life, but rather a way of including the unknown and unpredictable in the outworking of God's grace in our lives. (Ray Anderson)

Prayer is keeping company with God. (Philip Yancey)

A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer is listening. (Soren Kierkegaard)

That was just an appetizer. Chew slowly and savor. The nutrients of truth the Lord has ordained for you will become a part of your being... and so it is for me; even so, it often feels like I'm not praying "right," or "enough," or I'm not fully attentive and engaged. I'm distracted by trivialities, my thoughts wander, I start a prayer and then my mind goes somewhere else. God's Holy Word and music help me focus for a time, but often I have a lot of "white space" to fill between the things I do—time to pray. My life circumstances allow this and it's a true blessing, but it's also a responsibility. One of my favorite theologian/writers says there is no prayer in heaven. There, we'll be in his presence always—here, the Kingdom of Heaven is present, yet hidden, and so we must pray.

There is no perfect way to pray, no right way to pray, and many have responsibilities that limit free time. Here is a God-fact: he's understanding, compassionate, and just. So "pray how you can, not how you can't." As I move about the garden working, wondering, or just gazing, things come to mind and I hold them up before Jesus. Names and situations are spoken out from the depths. Sometimes I don't have the words; I let the Spirit pray. Sometimes I don't say anything at all but my heart cries out in joy, thanksgiving, concern, lament...whatever it is, my attention is turned outside myself toward the Light of the World, who alone can make things happen.

Simple Truths - In the Silence – Erica Simmons

A little over a year ago, through my job, I received the opportunity to learn how to write reports using cognos code. I had absolutely no prior experience writing in this language, but it was an opportunity for me to automate the data reports I was manually creating throughout the year. Because doing the reports manually was a VERY time consuming process, I was eager to learn and jumped right in, working to figure out how it all worked. My support system was the company that provided the product and co-workers in our business information systems with experience in cognos. One of the things I continued to hear as I progressed in report writing was the phrase, "You can't do that in cognos." Being the stubborn type, I started Googling and found "work-arounds" for the things I wanted to do. I started thinking about my Christian walk and how this behavior, if I am honest, reflects how I handle some of the life situations I have faced.

I was still stuck two weeks after my article was due this month, and I didn't know what to write. I wrote my opening paragraph a week ago and then many failed attempts to finish became an act of futility. So here's what I was feeling - FRUSTRATED. My usual routine was NOT working.

I was then up early on Sunday morning, music on, connecting with God and the words began to flow. Why? To get past this, I tried reconnecting with the purpose of this column, sharing the simple truths I felt God speak to my heart over the years. I went back to where I had written them down and looked over them to see if anything spoke to me.

October 10, 2013: *If who you are is getting in the way of who want to be, it is time to change who you are.*

There it was! This is the truth written 5 1/2 years ago that jumped out at me. Then silence again. Nothing else came, time ran out, and I had to go to church. I sent a message to the magazine editor and honestly let her know that I was struggling with the column this month.

During worship I begin to fight through the noise of everything that is going on and zoom in on why I am frustrated. The truth simply stated is I am having a hard time watching my boys' transition in their lives. Jordan's struggling with his identity and belief in Christ. Jerimiah's decision to move out resulted in experiencing his first financial crisis. I want better lives for them and I want to fix it all. But I KNOW I have to let them learn to lean and trust in God. I am frustrated because I know God spoke deliverance to me and I want to know why it has not manifested. I want it, and I want it now, and the time has not come. I thought about the men in the Bible and how they handled situations like this. God gave me three men in particular: Job, Abraham and Jacob. As ideas came, I begin to wonder "Could this be my story?" I sat to type out my ideas on my phone just in case. Then God gave me confirmation. As I was on my phone, for whatever reason, I checked my email and my editor had emailed me back:

What about writing about not hearing. Silence? Void? And how frustrating that is but it's part of growing fruit. The silence beneath the surface of the dirt where we see nothing above ground. But for sure seeds are sprouting. And so we wait.

The word that stuck out to me was "frustrating," as that is what I was feeling. What if the silence IS the story and not the problem? It is in the waiting that we see what we are made of. For me, it has been in the silence that the "work-arounds" voice is loudest. There are two very important things that needs to be pointed out.

1. I need to celebrate. The reason I am frustrated is because I know I can't do a work-around in the situations with my boys. Not can't in "I can't do it," but can't in "I know I shouldn't and I will not," because my boys learning to lean and trust in God is a process. It is one we all had to go through and there are no shortcuts or work-arounds.
2. I have three examples of what to and/or not to do in the silence. What not to do try to help God. Abraham and Sarah tried to use Sarah's servant to fulfill God's promise. Job held steadfast in the face of adversity. Joseph simply continued to live his life in a way that honored God.

Somewhere along this journey I have learned not to react to the silence but to trust God in the silence. We often mistake the silence for lack of work. That was my way of thinking, and then God showed me the error of my ways. During my Tuesday night discipleship class lesson we read 2 Peter 3:9:

The Lord isn't really being slow about His promise as some people think. No, He is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent (NLT).

Even though this verse is talking about His promise to return, it spoke to me directly as I had the very thought that He was being slow to fulfil the promise He made to me. He encouraged me in what I perceived to be His silence. I learned that it is less about the silence and more about the still quiet voice. I could not hear it until I centered and focused on Him and quieted the mind storm around me.

I know this article is not finished, but it represents my journey in the struggle to write it. I'm learning what to do in the perceived silence and how to hear God when the storms are raging louder than His voice.

Part 2 next month...

Moving Forward – Temporary Pain – by Pam Charros

I don't know all that much about gardening, but I do know that pruning is an essential part of keeping a plant healthy and fruitful.

My understanding is that the process can appear quite brutal at times (I picture an old elementary school photo after a bad haircut), but all of the apparently random chopping away is exactly what the plant needs.

I am in a season of pruning in my life and it isn't always a fun thing to go through. One of the areas I'm being pruned in is finances. I haven't had to live on bare bones in many years and it's going to be quite an adjustment. But I'm also kind of looking forward to it. I didn't always feel I was on top of things when I had more money; now I will know exactly where every penny is going. It will feel good, in some ways, to be strict again, kind of like a healthy cleanse.

And I know that my generous Father will give me abundance again when the time is right.

While God has the right to do anything he wants with my life, I know that his heart is always to be good to me. I want my life story to be a testimony of his faithfulness to me even when it temporarily hurts. So I will remember when a particularly large branch is painfully lopped off that he knows exactly what he is doing. He is bringing more good in the long run, often in areas I haven't even considered. He will surprise me and those around me by showing up in ways I could have never foreseen.

As the perfect gardener, he is doing what he always does...

producing more life and more beauty.

Real Stories – Pretty Neat – by Marcy Lytle

I have a friend, a lady I've known for many years, that exudes living life well as a mature woman, because she carries with her something that is extremely attractive. That something is grace, peace and love for everyone she meets. I asked her if I could interview her and she kindly acquiesced. I think you will be encouraged by her answers to my questions.

What are the biggest challenges as you age, and what are the biggest blessings? Do you deal with fear and if so, how do you deal with it?

There certainly are challenges in aging, **but even more blessings**. I suppose the biggest challenge is that my body is not as strong as it once was and my stamina is not as great. There is also the dread of developing dementia. No one wants to face that possibility, but it does exist. All I can do is pray that God will spare me from that nightmare. Another challenge is losing loved ones. All my life, there have been big losses but as I age, loss has come more often. There are no more parents, aunts and uncles living. That "older" generation is now me. I miss my family members who have died but I don't grieve them anymore.

Aging parents...what wisdom and encouragement can you offer to those who are caring for one?

One of the biggest challenges I've had was having my mother live with me for the last 17 months of her life. She was emotionally dependent and I found that challenging. She wanted me by her side at all times. Each situation is different but I had lived alone for so many years and enjoyed it. I enjoyed my mother but that kind of dependency was hard for me to handle. Everyone has to handle the situation with aging parents as best as they can but should also know that God has given you a life to live as well and to **not feel guilty when you do something for yourself** (easier said than done).

Are you lonely? How do you deal with that?

What has come with age is an even **deeper dependence on the Lord**. I realize that He is the only one who can see me through rough times. I pray almost constantly in the form of just talking to Him about everything that's going on. It's not "formal" prayer, but it's more like conversation with a loved one. Just knowing that **I'm never alone** is such a comfort. Of course, there are times when I need a human touch and to be with friends and family. I have a friend with whom I pray on a "formal" basis, once a week. It is good to be in prayer with someone else. There are prayers of, "Please, give me what I want," (health, healing, etc. for someone else) but also times of praising and worshipping the Lord. I rarely get lonely because **I enjoy spending time with myself**. I've always enjoyed "being alone" but that's not being lonely.

How do you retain joy as you age and keep you relationship with Jesus fresh and alive?

Praise and worship of the Lord is the key to all good things. The sheer joy of praising the Lord for all He is brings peace to my soul. When I learned to praise and worship the Lord over 30 years ago, my life changed. I became a Christian as a child but never had a deep sense of intimacy with the Lord. The intimacy came when He was the only one who could heal my broken

heart. He brought people into my life who taught me to worship and praise Him, to depend on Him and to show me Who He is. I'm still learning how He sees me and about His great love for His children. This is where my joy comes from. I cannot manufacture or fake it.

Beauty is only skin deep, they say. You have retained beauty outside and inside. What are some of your tricks for both?

Looking older is not much of a problem for me. I look in the mirror every morning and see what time has done but **I'm grateful to be alive**. Would I love to have the skin that once brought compliments? Yes, I would, but that's not happening any more. What I do is to keep my skin clean and moisturized and to daily wear protection on my face (foundation). I see so many women, a lot younger than I am who have just let themselves go. Even when I'm home alone, I shower and wash my hair every morning (oily hair) and dress. My dress may be jeans and a t-shirt, but **I'm neat and clean**.

If I have any beauty on the inside it is because of my relationship with the Lord. **I keep on learning** of Him and learning about Him. **I try to keep an open and discerning mind. I stay active in my church** home and enjoy being in relationships with all ages of people. I guess the key to "beauty" on the inside is that **I've asked to be able to see others as God does and to love others as He does**. This is not a one-time request.

Is age really "just a number?" What are your thoughts on that?

Age is physical but most of all it is a mental thing. My age is over 3/4 of a century but I find that to be a "neat" thing. As long as I can come and go and not be dependent on someone else, **I am happy**.

Any final words of wisdom, for the ladies that look up to you and are following just a few years behind?

My advice to anyone is to **maintain a close relationship with family and friends and to be totally dependent on God**. Just know that through hard times (and there will be hard times) that God doesn't ever desert us.

Jo Ann says first and foremost, she is a child of the living God. She is 76 years old but feels so much younger. She is the proud mother of a son and daughter and has two granddaughters and a great granddaughter. Jo Ann enjoys her family and family get-togethers. Church is family to her, and she loves the people.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Is God Arbitrary?

One of the few television shows we watch is called *New Amsterdam*. We love the main actor, who plays a medical director of a city hospital...and he has throat cancer. (No spoiler here, we learn that in the first episode.) In one of the shows, this actor makes a comment about not wanting death to ever be arbitrary, especially that of his own. His comment stuck with me, and I decided to think about death, the word arbitrary, and then I asked myself,

Does God act in an arbitrary manner? Is He arbitrary?

Arbitrary, by definition, means “based on random choice or personal whim, rather than any reason or system.” Arbitrary leaders operate with unrestrained use of authority.

The character in the story is all about saving lives, no matter their social status or illness. He goes beyond reasonable means to save every person that enters his hospital. When one dies, it's unsettling to him, as it should be to anyone! No one wants their friends or family, or themselves, to die arbitrarily. In other words, we want to know that our death, our life, the things that happen to us and for us, happen for a reason. This makes difficult circumstances and events easier to swallow.

Let's think about God and his character as expressed in his Word. I am proposing that He is anything BUT arbitrary, and he NEVER acts arbitrarily when it comes to dealing with mankind.

Look at creation. There is so much order and purpose and beauty and planning and structure in all that he creates, and he gives it purpose and calls it all good. Creation is not arbitrary.

Look at relationship. He sets in order this amazing communion with the people he created in order for them to experience his presence – that presence that has purpose to bring joy, peace, and love – and this couple's expulsion from that garden due to obedience was not arbitrary, at all. They were given an outline for relationship, and they blew it.

Look at the rest of the story. From the moment this disobedience entered the world as they knew it, God had a plan of restoration, not some whim or random reaction to his creation that failed. He always had this plan, to send a savior, a redeemer, an example of goodness embodied in the form of a human. Never, is God arbitrary in his dealings with us.

Look at Jesus' death. He knew from the time he set foot on this earth that his death was imminent, that he was going to die for people that hated him, in order to offer them eternal life with his Father who loved them all. What? That wasn't arbitrary, that was love-driven action in motion.

Look at the facts of life. Jesus conquered death so that we could live, eternally. This means that when death happens to us – in the hospital, on the road, by a random act of violence – our death is never arbitrary in His eyes. He carries across the finish line into eternity with Him.

In fact, there is nothing arbitrary about any of God's words or actions written in his Word. This is what makes Him so trustworthy and worthy of adoration.

People are arbitrary, everywhere we go. People act in random ways that cause hurt and confusion around them. Rulers reign for selfish gain and leave chaos behind them.

The only thing unrestrained about our God is his love. He loves us because we are his creation, not because of something we do or because of any effort on our part. His plans and purposes are set in motion from our first breath, and NOTHING arbitrarily can thwart them just because He has a bad day and decides to leave us in despair.

Job must have been wondering the same thing as the actor on New Amsterdam was wondering, when Job was suffering beyond what any man has ever suffered since. Once he began to observe God and his creation and his power and his great love, he had this response...

Job 42:2

Then Job replied to the Lord,

"I know that You can do all things and that no plan of Yours can be thwarted.

You asked, 'Who is this who conceals My counsel without knowledge?'

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know...

If you're facing hardships, just received a diagnosis that has devastated your soul, or just hurt so badly because of life's circumstances and there no relief in sight, know this. There's a God in heaven that was in the beginning as Creator of all things – things with purpose to bear fruit, teem with life, and shine in the darkness. He created us in His image to bear His kindness and beauty to the world. Nothing is arbitrary about that, and we lay our plans, our diagnoses, our circumstances, and our fears in his open hands and know...that neither life nor death...can separate us from His great love.

FRESH THYME – Just Like Chocolate – by Marcy Lytle

We always, for years, ate Goobers with popcorn at the movies. I stocked up on boxes and boxes, and we packed them up (in a cooler so they wouldn't melt), along with our bottles of water, and headed to the theater. We enjoyed each peanut wrapped in milk chocolate, and the flavor of that taste against the saltiness of the popped kernels was absolutely just as enjoyable as the movie itself! In fact, we ate Goobers at home as well, whenever we got the chance.

However, in the past year or so, things have changed. We tried to start substituting dark chocolate covered nuts for Goobers. At first, I didn't care for the dark chocolate flavor (it can be bitter at first) and I only wanted my Goobers back. After several weeks of taking only dark-chocolate almonds we bought at the store with us to the movies, the switch was final. This was it. The new flavor profile, the new treat of choice, was here and here to stay.

A few months ago, we visited a chocolate factory on vacation. There we learned that yes, dark chocolate is better for us than milk chocolate, but it has to be 72% cacao in order to be good for the heart. And actually, five squares of that intense flavor can be enjoyed daily, for good heart health! What? We had only been eating about 52%! We tasted the intense flavors on the tour and really liked the flavor, so...

Back home, I scoured the store shelves for dark chocolate of the higher percentage. I found it! I started eating that instead of the almonds we had so faithfully enjoyed. He liked the new flavor too, and we both felt better about eating the sweet stuff. We can't even imagine now going back to Goobers! What were we thinking? In fact, milk chocolate has lost its attraction all together!

Isn't that interesting?

A bit of new information, a willingness to try something new, and a desire to be healthier all worked together to change our taste buds. Honestly, I thought there was no greater snack than Goobers. And now I never buy them anymore.

So what's the moral of this experience? Change can be good, just like chocolate.

If you'd told me a few years ago that I'd be eating intense dark chocolate in the theater with my popcorn (which by the way is now popped with no butter and only pink salt) and that I'd actually prefer this combo to the buttery theater popcorn with bites of milk chocolate, I would have said to you, "No way."

Change is easy sometimes, but that's usually only if we're sick of what we've been doing. When we think what we've been doing is A-okay and we find out there's a better way, it's hard to see the light. We like what we like, and we don't want to be bothered with change.

Is the change in your life tasting bitter right now, and you'd rather go back to the sweetness of life before the changes occurred? I think, that just like chocolate, change can eventually be part of our everyday life and actually begin to taste good. We might happen to learn new information about His love for us that we missed all of our life, and actually welcome that intense flavor he's placed before us. And with a few more tastes of it, we might even actually prefer it.

Imagine that.

FRESH THYME – What We're Missing

This little message about what we miss out on when we choose the phone at all times, instead of the life around us, is written mostly for me...as a reminder. I hope it reminds you too, to realize if phone time has become addicting, restrictive, and just like raising the palm of your hand to those around you, it says, "I'm not interested in you right now."

I'm trying to put my phone down and take in the sights and sounds of the world around me, the people beside me, and my own rest inside of me.

- What we're missing when we're on the phone in the car is the beauty of a sunset, the shapes of the clouds, the cars whizzing by, and the story he's telling us in our deaf ears.
- What we're missing when we're on the phone in bed is the down time to give thanks for the day, the rest that comes from no more information download, and the nudge on our neck from him.
- What we're missing when we're on the phone at the table on a date is his eyes to connect with, the candle that's flickering, and the intriguing conversation we could be enjoying.
- What we're missing when we're on the phone in the grocery line is the woman that needs a smile, the cashier that needs a high-five, and the one that might need an extra dollar to pay.
- What we're missing when we're on the phone when our children are with us is their disappointed looks as we don't hear their comments, the chance to join in play, and the opportunity to hear about their day.
- What we're missing when we're on the phone while out on a walk with him is the connection of holding hands, the rhythm of walking in sync, and the birds chirping in the trees.
- What we're missing when we're on our phone while walking down the street is stumbles and falls, the smiles we could give and receive, and cars we can avoid.
- What we're missing when we're on our phone while shopping in a store is the annoyed looks of those that can hear us, the enjoyment of free time to browse, and the angst of what we just heard on the phone.
- What we're missing when we're on our phone browsing Facebook or Instagram is real life before us, real stories on the pages of books, and real Words from psalms and proverbs.
- What we're missing when we're on the phone all the time is all the people, all the beauty, and all the life away from the screen where nothing is as it is seen.

I love looking at my phone, reading Instastories, posting fun inspiration, or reading others' comments and responding. However, there has to be balance, or the ones that aren't on our social media channels, the ones with real faces to study and touch, will feel neglected and unimportant. I don't want anyone in my circle of friends to feel that way...at all.



FEATURE STORY

FEATURE STORY - The Chef's Table – by Marcy Lytle

We had a family dinner one time that I will never forget. We all gathered in the kitchen of the restaurant and were seated at this large table right in front of where the food was being prepared. It was an experience like no other and one we talked about for some time to come. I actually woke up this morning thinking about that dinner at the chef's table and decided to share it with you this month, in honor of Father's Day...and I'll tell you why.

There were some unique features of this dining experience:

It wasn't highly advertised. Mostly, people came to know about by word of mouth. The dining experience was so unique and satisfying that when folks left, they quickly told their friends.

Anyone was welcome. This table wasn't for exclusive high-society visitors. It was open to anyone that asked or wanted to be seated in front of the chef and marvel at his culinary skills.

The aromas were amazing. Unless one dines in the kitchen where the herbs and spices are actually being put together by a kitchen artist, one misses out on the fragrances as they waft through the air from the hot cooking surfaces. It's like nothing else!

There were multiple courses. The chef was so delighted at his company that his guests got extra special attention and little treats, because of their proximity to him. In other words, it was a table where we all wanted to linger, because we never knew what surprise was coming next.

We all felt special. How did we not know about this private dining experience before, and why hadn't someone told us sooner? We were certainly going to tell our friends, because they would love it, too.

The food was satisfying. There was something about watching the chef prepare those ingredients we didn't even recognize that made us willing to try a bite of something we ordinarily would not have ordered off a menu. He was there in the room, so we tasted. And we marveled.

We learned. Watching this master chef at work with his knife skills, artwork, flavor profile and more, we were inspired to go home and try some of that goodness ourselves.

We were grateful. Being invited into the private quarters of where the food was being prepared, being allowed to see a clean pristine kitchen and all of the beauty of each dish as it was plated, and having the privilege of chatting with the one serving us all made us grateful for this wonderful experience. We all thanked the chef over and over again, and all he wanted in return was, "Tell your friends! Bring them with you next time!"

I don't know why I woke up this morning with this experience on my mind, unless it's just to tell all of you this month that our Father is just like this master chef at a restaurant, in many ways. He has this intimate table right up next to his heart that's waiting to be filled by all of us that are hungry and thirsty. We can come as we are, the fragrance is intoxicating, he has so much to share with us, we will be attended to and cared for; we will be completely satisfied and so grateful when the last course is served. He only asks that once we've dined there, our gratefulness will move us to invite someone else to dine with us next time.

I have no idea if you know this Father and his great love for you. But if you can image Him standing in a garden full of every good fruit, vegetable, herb, etc. all ripe for the picking, you can image the love of God. He's good to the core. He exudes kindness because He's kind. He's the definition of love. And with those character qualities, and all good things that surround Him, there's nothing He will offer you that will harm you. In fact, even if it tastes bitter at first bite, as it's chewed and swallowed, it will produce satisfaction like nothing else.

There's this amazing story in the bible about a father's son that went off and squandered his inheritance, finally realizing that he needed to return home to the father he left. Expecting to be treated as a servant because of the disdain he had when he left, the son was amazed when this happened,

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him...

But the father said to his servants, `Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it.

Let's have a feast and celebrate.

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again;

he was lost and is found.”

(Luke 15:20b, 22-24)

That same Father is standing at the door of His kitchen with a table set for you, seats pulled out for two, and the celebration is ready to begin. Come on in and sit a while...and eat. Eat to your heart's content. Give thanks. And tell everyone you know about the amazing chef's table and the Chef that attended you there.