

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

January 2016

TIPS

The Dressing – Cover the Bulge – by Marcy Lytle

Now that the holidays are over and we're back to our routines of exercise and eating healthy (well, maybe we are), we're also back to fitting into our clothes that maybe feel a bit more snug, now that we've indulged for pleasure the last couple of months since the holidays began. Sometimes, no matter how well we eat and try to exercise, we just all have little places here and there that bulge and bother us when we stand before the mirror, fully dressed, ready to face the world.

So here are a few suggestions on ways and garments to cover the bulge and pull things back into place, at least until we can tighten and firm them again...or not...

Body shaper – This particular one is a favorite, by [Bali](#). The lace fabric keeps you cool and yet the way it's made smooths out all bulges. No panty line, no bra line across your back. The support is great too (remember, your breasts should sit halfway between your shoulders and your elbow – not any lower!)

Jeans with stretchy fabric – Anytime we wear pants that cut into our middle, we're aiming for a spillover that's not pretty. There are too many jeans out there now that are made with stretchy fabric for us to suffer through wearing jeans that cut us in half. Also, wearing jeans that are too tight are not pretty. Take a friend with you, try on jeans that actually fit, and sit down in the dressing room to see how they really make you feel. [Old Navy](#) has a good selection, and the boyfriend fit is one of my favorites. If you get a good fit, select stretchy fabric, and move around in them before you buy, and you'll look great when you leave...

Bras that fit and lift. If you're full-busted and you constantly find bulges out the top of your bra...go get fitted and make sure you're buying the right fit. [Victoria Secrets](#) has customer service ladies who will make sure you're wearing the proper size, and I'm betting there are great sales right now, just after the holidays. Straps should be wide enough and cup sizes large enough, so that bulges are gone. Sometimes a racerback strap is the best for keeping "them" up.

Underwear that smooths. We don't have to go sans underwear or wear "granny" panties to have smooth lines on our bottom halves. We just have to think. If it cuts into our skin, it's going to show a bulge. Go for a higher rise on the sides and for a smooth finish at the waist and around the legs. [Kohls](#) has a great selection of Hanes, which work great. Find one style you love and stick with it.

Flowy tops. Leave the tight sweaters to the young girls, and opt for tops that flow across your body instead of cutting into your skin. However, make sure they fit. Wearing a top that's way too big is not the solution, but rather one that fits well and just skims your body. This light grey blouse from [Charming Charlies](#) is an example. And actually, Charming Charlies has a great selection of beautiful blouses that flow instead of hug, but fit and look fabulous.

Let Cardigan do it. Sometimes we want to feel tucked and sharp, we can't find just the right top OR bottom, and we don't want to worry about bulges or spills. Let a cardigan cover a multitude of sins. [Old Navy](#) has lots of choices, and if we purchase a couple in perhaps a mustard color

and a solid gray or black, we can throw it on in the morning and wear it like a suit jacket – and feel polished all day.

Comfort wins. Maybe it's the weekend and all we want to do is feel good, look good, and run around town in something cute and comfy. However, we don't have to look like we just rolled out of bed. There are some really cute suits at [New York & Company](#) that don't cut or cramp, but rather cover and caress. Right now, they're probably on sale, and they come in matching zip up jackets and pants. In all sorts of styles. Grab two!

Don't beat yourself up for eating that entire plate of cookies at the New Year's eve party. You're still beautiful. You'll get yourself back on track. But why not look great while you're doing that? Take some of that leftover Christmas money, or those gift cards you received, and treat yourself to a few new items that cover the bulge, and win that battle right here at the beginning of a new month and a new year...

Seven for You - Good-bye and So Long... - by Marcy Lytle

There are things in my vocabulary I want to omit, throw out, discard and never use again this year. And there are other phrases I hear often from others that I don't want to become part of my vocabulary this year. These are sentiments, expressions and statements that we all make. But after hearing myself say them and others around me speak them, I've decided I don't like them, they're not the truth, or they're just annoying.

So good-bye to these seven:

"The universe is trying to tell me..." – This first phrase makes me want to cry. It seems we've dumbed down God and his control and good plans for our lives into believing and stating that when the stars misalign we're somehow out of luck, or when a series of mishaps occur that's our signal to respond to the galaxy and go another direction. I think we do ourselves a disservice when we speak about creation and thoughts and vibes as our means of communication with "something" or "someone" out there who might hear us...or not.

"Chick flick" – I realize that it appears that women like romance stories and men like action films, but I've never understood that separation. I don't like the word "chick" and I really don't like it when it's placed in a phrase to rhyme with flick. Romantic movies require two people and if they're done well, what's not to like? I wish a man would explain that to me...or tell me why it's painfully uncomfortable to watch a love story on the big screen, while holding the hand of the one he loves. Is it because she then goes home and wants him to be like that man? Maybe that's it...

"I feel fat." – I'm pretty sure most women have thought this, said this, and felt this, maybe multiple times a day. But when we speak it, what are we really hoping to do? We might hope that our friend responds by saying, "No way, you look great," and we will then feel so much better. In fact, I think that's what we all secretly wish. Feeling fat is sometimes due to overeating, which causes us to feel awful. But more often than not, that feeling comes from looking. And that looking we do is at other women, who are thinner than we are, more fit, and somehow more beautiful. Let's hang up this phrase and train our mouths to say, "I feel fabulous."

"I'm getting too old..." – This is a hard one not to think when joints ache, clothes don't hang just right, or feet scream at night, or...the mirror illuminates the fine lines that are now medium lines. However, I don't think that we're ever "too" old, because that implies failure to achieve, be, and contribute. And we're never too old for all three of those.

"Always" and "Never," when referring to him – We've been told it a dozen times already, but we still do it. We tell him that he *always* does this, or *never* does that, and we mark him for life. He hears it, he starts to believe it, and he never changes. It's like throwing gas on a fire when we use these words in arguments with him, because it attacks his character and nature and it puts him on the defense to prove our accusations wrong. It's hard to eliminate these two words when we're in the heat of a disagreement, but if we start thinking and trying and tipping our tongues the other way towards blessings and not curses...good things will result.

“Nobody loves me” – This is one of those phrases women either say aloud or think when they’re down, lonely, and feeling isolated. It’s one of those self-pitiful proclamations that causes us to retreat into rejection mode, so that if anyone does try to love on us, we’d probably push them away because we really believe we’re unlovable. Nothing could be further from the truth. Not only are we beautifully created, but God loved us so much he sent his Son! And... we are lovable! So if this thought even enters our heads, let’s quickly dismiss it and choose to think on that which is true.

“Did you hear...” This is the beginning of either our disguise of a piece of gossip inside a prayer request, or it’s just plain tattling something we’ve heard about someone else that we think is a juicy piece of news. I’m not sure why we participate in conversations about something horrible that someone else is doing, but we do. And the beginning of a new year is a good time to stop it, unless those three words are followed by a good report.

That’s seven phrases we can clean out from our mouth closet, so that we have shelves left open for blessings, truths, and joyful utterances that can be pulled out any time and spilled out for anyone to hear. After all, we’ve said good-bye to 2015, and we might as well say good-bye to negativity and stereotypes. It’s hard, but we can do it!

Selah's Style – Dresses Dresses Dresses!

This month we're sharing with you toddler-style by Selah's cousin, Ayla Noelle, who will be three in April 2016. She's a firecracker and a funny little girl with a personality all her own, one that will win you over when you spend time listening to her and observing her many faces.

Ayla absolutely loves dresses...and her favorite color is pink! January might not seem like a month to wear dresses, but Ayla finds a way to wear them...and keep warm!

This pink sweater dress is from Old Navy and allows Ayla freedom to move and stretch and reach the sky! She pairs it with gray leggings and she's good to go outside and enjoy the winter sunshine.

Ayla loves skirts, as well as dresses! This cute skirt with giraffes on it came from Market of Hope, a shopping market where proceeds go to help women emerge from poverty all over the world. It was made in Africa and looks so cute paired with a solid black tshirt.

Sometimes Ayla's dresses still fit her body-wise, but as she grows, they become too short. No worries! She just pulls on a pair of black leggings, lies on the ground and pretends to make a snow angel. Dresses that are too short can be worn as shirts!

Finally, this little combo is not something adults might wear...but then...why not? Ayla has a striped dress on with a Hello Kitty sweater on top (Olaf is hidden on the dress underneath). She also has on leggings because it's super cold outside, and her little Minnie Mouse slippers complete the look for so many of her outfits this season! She knows how to mix it up!

Sometimes it's hard to find dresses for little girls in the winter, since most of the time their legs need to be covered. However, with leggings and boots, one can still be dressy and warm even in the middle of January!

The Fearless Kitchen - Ultimate Comfort Food – by Christina Vetter

January is a funny time. The stampede of people hurrying to get back into shape and start crash dieting always amuses me. Everyone is trading in their stretchy holiday pants and delicious treats for spandex and bouquets of kale, seemingly overnight.

Now don't get me wrong, I enjoy working out and eating healthy, but let's be honest, January is still the dead of winter. It's difficult for me to eat a meal of raw vegetables and ice water when it's still 30 degrees outside. Most days I'm still wrapped up in a comfy sweater with my face buried in a mug of green tea. It's still winter, and in my mind, I need meals that are going to keep me full and warm.

That is why this month I am bringing out the heavy guns--the ultimate comfort food. Yes, there is cream, cheese, and other resolution-busting ingredients throughout these recipes, but these are the stick-to-your ribs, comfort food dishes that will leave you plenty satisfied until spring breaks through. And if you have bathing suit season glaring at you, don't worry, one or two comfort meals aren't going to ruin your regiment. Who knows, they may even be the little treat here and there that keeps your resolution going past February.

A very Creamy Pesto Chicken Pasta, satisfying Shepherd's Pie, and Homemade Mac & Cheese made the list this month, and I hope they are able to bring as much comfort to your table as they did mine.

Happy New Year! And as always, happy eating.

Creamy Pesto Chicken Pasta

Serves 4

Difficulty: 

This recipe is delicious, simple, and fast to throw together, making it perfect for any evening meal. It calls for chicken, but shrimp works very well also. I like to serve it with garlic ciabatta bread and a salad.

Ingredients:

¾ lb linguini
3 Tbsp butter
3 Tbsp flour
2 C chicken broth
½ C cream
2 C diced cooked chicken
1/3 C pre-made pesto

Directions:

-Cook linguini according to package directions.

-Meanwhile, melt butter in a large, tall sided skillet. Whisk in flour and stir constantly for two minutes.

-Gradually stir in chicken broth and cream, making sure there are no lumps.

-Cook until sauce is thickened, about 3-5 minutes. Add pesto and stir until incorporated.

-Add cooked chicken and cooked pasta, and mix together until evenly coated. Serve immediately.

Shepherd's Pie

Serves 4-6

Difficulty:



This dish is one of our family favorites-- the ultimate comfort food. It's perfect for staying cozy on those chilly winter nights. It's best to use 80/20 ground beef for this recipe. You'll need the fat content to bind with the flour for the thickening agent.

Ingredients:

1 lb ground beef, 80/20

3 Tbsp flour

2 C beef broth, warmed

1 tsp garlic powder

2 tsp dried parsley

16 oz frozen vegetables, such as peas, carrots, and corn

4 C mashed potatoes

½ C shredded cheddar cheese

Salt and pepper as needed

Directions:

-Preheat oven to 350F.

-In a tall sided sauté pan, cook beef over medium high heat until browned.

-Add flour, one Tbsp at a time, and vigorously mix into meat/fat mixture. Cook, stirring frequently, for three minutes.

-Stirring constantly, gradually mix in warmed beef broth until fully incorporated and no lumps are present.

-Add garlic powder and parsley and simmer, stirring frequently, until broth is thickened, about five-eight minutes.

-Add frozen vegetables and bring back up to a simmer. Adjust seasonings with salt and pepper as needed.

-Pour beef and vegetable mixture into a 9x13 casserole pan. Evenly spread prepared mashed potatoes over top. Sprinkle cheese over potatoes.

-Bake in 350F oven for 15-20 minutes, or until cheese is melted and sauce is bubbly.

-Serve immediately.

Homemade Mac & Cheese

Serves 4-6

Difficulty:



Macaroni and cheese speaks for itself. I don't know anyone who isn't a fan. This recipe is so easy to make and tastes light years better than the boxed version. The nutmeg is technically optional, but I highly recommend it. It gives such a depth of flavor.

Ingredients:

1 lb dried elbow macaroni
4 Tbsp butter
4 Tbsp flour
3 C milk, slightly warm
2 C shredded cheddar cheese
½ tsp nutmeg
Salt and black pepper to taste

Directions:

- Cook macaroni in salted water according to package directions.
- Meanwhile, in a small sauce pan, melt butter over medium high heat. Whisk in flour until incorporated and continue stirring for three minutes, allowing flour taste to cook out.
- Slowly add warmed milk while stirring vigorously not allowing for any lumps.
- Bring milk up to a slow simmer, stirring frequently until thickened.
- Take thickened milk off heat, and stir in cheese until melted.
- Add nutmeg.
- Pour cheese mixture over cooked macaroni noodles and stir to mix.
- Taste, adding salt and pepper as needed.
- Cheese sauce will thicken as it stands.

Tried and True – So You Work at Home – by Marcy Lytle

Whether you're a mom of one or a half dozen, you work. You work full time. And if you've added to that responsibility a job that pays you money, but it's one you work from home, you've added stress and weight to your already full plate, and you might be ready to swipe your arms across your table and send the plates flying!

It's hard to work from home, when you're already working raising a family. But sometimes, families need extra income, or moms need a diversion from washing and folding, and so we opt for jobs that can be done from home, so that we can be with our kids and make extra money. It's a common occurrence. Lots of women are working at home, but lots of women are screaming for help.

I'm hoping to offer the moms who work from home, whether it be family work or paying work, or both, some encouragement on how to manage, how to thrive, and how to survive. I started working from home when my kids were little, out of necessity, and it wasn't an easy transition. I still work from home, now that my kids are grown, and some of the things I've learned have served me well...so here they are:

Discipline is key. If you're not a disciplined person, one who works by the clock, organizes her time, keeps things in order – by nature – you're going to have a difficult time working from home. Having a schedule, a timer, folders, organizers, etc. is paramount to feeling good about your workspace and the time you're spending doing each task. If you're a disciplined person, this doesn't necessarily come easy, but it's easier. If you're not a disciplined person, enlist the help of a friend who is, and let her be your accountability partner.

Say no. I tried to meet up with other moms for play dates too often, tried to keep up with crafts and projects and re-do's so that I could have my house look like *hers*, and I found myself hyperventilating way too often. I finally set into a rhythm all my own. I could maybe have one playdate with another mom and her kids twice a month. I picked a project, one at a time, one I wanted to do, not one I felt compelled to do. And I let go of the guilt of saying no.

Schedules are needed. We all know that schedules are made to be messed up, right? Of course, they are – we have children and things happen! However, without a vision the people perish! You need to work 15 hours a week, your kids have lessons, parties, homework, and all sorts of things that CAN be scheduled in on a calendar. Fill it in and look at it, stare at it, think about it. And if it's overwhelming, cut something out. And don't feel guilty about it one bit. (*Do you see the theme here? Guilt is to be banished from your home...*)

Get away. You're at home with the kids, you're at home with your husband at night, you're at home doing your work, and you're at home – all the time! Yes, as moms we love our homes. But we need sunshine, we need to get out and see the world and get a candy bar and a coke, or sit in a coffee shop alone or with friends. Make time away from home as much a part of your schedule as bath time with the kids. Maybe the family gets in the car and goes for a drive. Maybe you sneak out alone, after they're all in bed just for an hour at a bookstore. Perhaps you

trade sitting services with another mom for two hours twice a week to do nothing except indulge in what you love doing. This will invigorate you and refresh you.

Get dressed. Don't let sweats and t-shirts be your only wardrobe. Get up and get dressed with your children. Comb your hair, fix your face, put on real clothes and feel like you're alive and well, and beautiful. I know, it's the inward woman that counts, but the outward one affects the inward one! I get dressed daily as if I'm going to work and I stayed dressed until the day is over. It empowers me and makes me feel good about myself.

Train your children. You're going to need a nap sometimes, when they nap. And there are going to be times when they won't nap. But they can have a rest time that's scheduled and mandatory. That can be your work time, if needed. They can be told that they can rise at 8am and no sooner. If they do, there's no shame in hugging them and setting them near you to watch a video or play a game for an hour while you finish what you started at 6am.

Let go of guilt. (*I can't say it enough.*) You have to work and there's no getting around it, so why carry guilt along with your work load? Your kids will know you love them when you show it, which you do all the time, even while you're working. Give thanks that you're still home with them and that you only have to work part-time. They can even have "work stations" near you where they color, create, do homework, or help you with folding laundry. Little ones can play at your feet.

Love your husband. Don't constantly berate him because you have to work. Don't expect him to be your savior. Yes, you need his support, but he needs support too. Talk and communicate – both of you – about this transition and about what's expected and needed. Write it down. Honor and love each other. And pray about everything.

Did I say discipline is the key?

Yes, there will be days when all of the scheduling, planning, organizing and training will go completely out the window but the framework you've set up will stand. You'll be back on course quickly. Your job will be done, you will be satisfied, you'll be refreshed, and you'll be smiling because you've done what you had to do – and you've done it well.

And remember this...being a mom is the highest calling there is...and having to work a job while being a mom is like being called to the podium for a gold medal medallion to be hung around your neck. Wear it proudly, share it with your kids, and keep on running...

HOME

Practical Parenting - Field Trips & Sick Days – by Mandy Major

I awoke to the sound of croup-like coughing. I was sick. My husband Blake was up all night with an earache. Now he was coughing.

These are the days we just want to roll over and go back to bed. These are the moments when we learn endurance and build character. These are the moments where we begin to develop the ability to push forward despite what we are feeling.

This particular morning, with Blake sitting at my feet head in hands, Caleb coughing in the bathroom, and my stomach in my throat, I pulled on my husband's strength as the words "Together we will push on" came out of his mouth. We were moving forward despite the obstacles in our path, despite the weakness of our physical bodies, despite the fact that everything in us in that moment wanted to give up.

So I made a call. And I asked for help.

The sun came up and help came. Blake went to work. I faced my day. Caleb stayed home. Eve went off to school with a friend. Caleb and I cuddled on the couch and drank tea as I sent emails and invoiced customers. It turned out to be an amazing day of much needed cuddle time with my son. I was again reminded how much difference one-on-one time makes!

The next day was Eve's field trip day. Now, I will just confess. I hate school field trips! Hundreds of children in small spaces is not my thing at all. Eve, on the other hand, was so excited about her field trip and begged me to come. So again, pushing on despite my feelings, I went. When she saw me, she hugged me for 10 minutes straight! It was such a big deal for her to have me there during her day. We ended up having a great time together and I was so thankful I pushed through my feelings to enter her world.

Parenting is constant.

It is full of so many moments of denying ourselves what we want in order to enter into someone else's world, to be present in their moment.

Parenting reminds me of Jesus.

He denied his needs and wants and died on a cross....so that I can live, present in this moment, with him.

*"Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies,
it remains only a single seed, but if it dies it produces many seeds."
John 12:24*

As we go about our lives as parents, there are so many moments of "learning to die" that it helps to remember what dying produces!

For me this week, I got to enjoy my son throwing his arms around me and smiling into my face, and my daughter's long hug full of love and thankfulness of her mom being present with her.

What will dying bring for you this week?

This month?

This year?

I Don't Do Teens – It Starts with Us – by Marcy Lytle

It's a new year and everyone's made their resolutions and written them down, started on them, and all is well, right? I'm laughing out loud with you, because we often sat down with our teens and we all wrote down things we wanted to do in the new year, things we needed to change about ourselves, and then we tucked the cards away to be pulled out at the end of the year to see how we fared...

Well, needless to say, some of those items are still on our lists, years later! One thing we all said often was that we needed to read the Word and know it better. We're taught that concept from an early age, and when we send our kids to church, hopefully at least on that one day a week they hear a verse or two from the Bible. And if our teens are in a youth group, we hope they hear a few more a little more often.

It's important for our teens to know the word, especially as they start dating, driving, and doing things on their own (those dreaded D's!). But we all know that sitting our family down at night to do Bible drills isn't the best way to instill a love of the Word into our kids. It might work for some, but not most.

So what can we do with and in front of our teenagers to create and stir within them a love for the Word, the Truth, that will sustain them as they mature into adults?

Four things:

We can love the Word ourselves. If they see us reading the word, living it, and sharing it with them in the car, over dinner, or just in conversation, they too will love it. It's not saying, "Here, sit down while I instruct you on the Beatitudes." It's more of sharing, "I had a rough day today because work was hard, but this verse helped me so much." It might look like talking about a truth we've experienced over dinner, in "normal" conversation, not in lesson form where they're required to listen and take a test.

We can train them to use the Word as a reference book. Kids learn early on to look up unknown words in a dictionary, alternative uses of words in a Thesaurus, or to google topics for research papers. Why not train them to use the Bible in this way, as well? Say she's struggling because the boy she likes doesn't like her. Find a verse on the love of God, and read it to and with your girls. Maybe he's scored low on a test he thought he did well on, so encourage him with a verse on how God works all things together [for good](#) – and he will do better next time. Let the Bible be the main reference book on your shelf, for life.

We can encourage them to join a group. Maybe they don't like youth group at your church, or they always isolate themselves in their rooms. Find out why, and encourage them to be a part of a healthy group of kids that prays for each other, reads the word together, and does life together. This might be 2-3 kids in a small setting, or a large youth group, or even just a family night together if that suits their personality together. They need support and the call from others to the power of the Word in their everyday lives.

We can pray that they hunger for it. If we see our kids involved in other things, running to television and relationships for affirmation and identity, we can talk to them and instruct them. But sometimes they just won't listen, because there is no hunger for the truth. Just like God has a way of drawing our attention away from "things" into a deeper relationship with him, we can pray that he does the same with our kids. Pray for God to even stir up dissatisfaction with being the "most popular" or "the best athlete" so that they want to be satisfied with knowing Him.

There's no better advice or direction you can offer your kids once they come into relationship with Jesus, than to fall in love with his Word. It will sustain them, nurture them, comfort them, lead them, and bring life to their future. And it will be the rock on which they stand, when disappointments rock their world.

And it starts with our own love for the Word...

Life as We Know It – Life Happens – by Erica Simmons

Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans - John Lennon

This month's "Life as I know it" moment is simple. Life happens. I have noticed that the first thing I do when something goes "wrong" is look for my mistake. What did or what didn't I do that lead to this situation? It was after such a situation with Jerimiah that I played to form. What could I have done differently that would have prevented the situation he in which he found himself?

There is a saying that if you believe something you will find evidence to support it. So I, of course, "found" my evidence, and I set out to rectify the situation. It turns out God used it to rectify some of my wrong thinking.

What I really love about writing this article each month is it provides me an opportunity to reflect over our lives monthly in search of what to share. I thought about Jerimiah and the decision he made, which was a great decision. He had some schoolmates show up at our house at 1:00a.m. who had been drinking and smoking marijuana. He was trying to protect them and get home safely. It was his choice to take them, instead of getting me to take them, that lead to him getting into trouble.

As a parent I needed him to understand, 1) his desire to get them home safely was admirable, 2) his choice not to include me showed his lack of trust in me, 3) people who make the choices they made have no place in his life as a friends.

As I started shaping what my article this month would be about, I thought about Jerimiah's decision and I began to look at my life and some of the decisions I had made and God simply said to me, "Life happens."

When Jerimiah made his choice, he saw it going way differently than it actually did. For him, it was simple. Get them in the car and drive them the short distance to one of their houses, get back home, and mom will never know. It is the same for all of us when we make our decisions. We see clearly how things are going to work out and in many cases they do; but in others, life happens and things don't go as expected. It is in these situations that the enemy comes in and tries to devour us with guilt, shame and regrets.

My own recent decision I made was opening my home to my sister who was in the middle of purchasing a home, and her situation (like so many) was that the process was longer than her lease. So of course when she called, I immediately offered our home. Like Jerimiah, I saw the plan. They move in for a few weeks and then they are out into their new home. Well that was more than three months ago, and guess what? Life happened. It seems my sister chose the most incompetent of people to get through the process and there is always one more thing she needs to do, which often requires her to use her paycheck to get it done. This has impacted my financial situation and has frustrated me to no end.

So here we are in the middle of life happening, and what do we do about it?

As in every aspect of a Christian life, we have two choices: the enemy's way or our heavenly Father's way. The enemy's way is fruitless, with what if's and requires us to spend our time dwelling in the past. Our Heavenly Father's way is full of fruitful possibilities.

In the situation with Jerimiah, after engaging in enemy's way (I am still learning), I turned to my Heavenly Father's way. I used the opportunity to reinforce with both of my boys about trust and how important it to create a strong foundation in our relationship. Together we can get through anything. We also spent time evaluating friendships and making choices about continued association with people who are not making smart choices for their life. Most importantly, we talked about doing what is right and what is correct. Jerimiah's desire to get them home safely was the right; how he tried to do it was not the correct.

As for my situation with my sister, God has used it to show me how I can truly implement the things I learned in the Financial Peace University course I went through a few years ago. I did all the right things when it came to creating a budget, but I just never honored it. That is changing now. I am making the right choices and moving toward financial stability.

Moving forward this New Year, I will continue to make my decisions. But when life happens, I will get through it by turning to my heavenly Father, knowing there is something He can and will teach me through it all.

Everything Home - What's in a Frame? – by Mikaela Cain

The house felt quiet—too quiet.

I watched a few re-runs of *The Office* but needed something to do!

I pulled out some wooden frames. The color didn't match the wall of frames (refer to the gallery wall article I've written about), so they had been closeted—until now. And, a streak of boredom led to their revival. I gathered acrylic paint that my husband Grant kept for worship nights, some brushes, water, and a large cardboard box. Sitting crossed-legged in our game-room, I laid it all out, turned *The Office* back on painted over the frames for a few hours. I painted all of the frames, put second layers on them and let my mind rest. The space was filled, fresh frames ready for future use, and the empty night felt purposeful.

Painting picture frames is a fun and useful way to spend a quiet evening.

Here's how to paint your own frames:

1. Gather the frames. Find old frames hidden in closet corners or look for new-to-you ones at Goodwill or the Salvation Army. If you're purchasing frames, look for ones with interesting textures—those will be more fun to paint!
2. Grab brushes, paints, plastic cup of water, paper towels (just in case) and a disposable plate for a palate. I was surprised that acrylic paint worked as well as it did. I have also heard that chalk paint is amazing.
3. On your palate, mix color to find your perfect shade! It's unlikely that you can find the exact color you're looking for. You will probably need to mix some whites or blacks into your color to get your perfect hue. I had to mix a lot of white into the gold I used to get it to be lighter gold and not so bronzy.
4. Paint in a covered surface.
5. If you're turning a dark frame into a lighter color, you'll need to do a first coat of something to neutralize the color first. I painted a brown frame white, and then put my white-gold mixture on top. That completely covered the brown.
6. When it's dry, paint a second coat.
7. Repeat until it's the exact color you like!

Enjoy your like-new frames that are perfect for your color scheme and carry your own personal touch!

A Night to Remember - Things God Loves – by Marcy Lytle

It's a new year, Christmas is over, maybe we've made resolutions or not, and life is going back to normal with school starting up again, gifts unwrapped and put away, and routines back in order. It's a time we reflect on the past year and look forward to the new one, and it's a great time to reevaluate our priorities and the things we call important. After all, starting off a new year gives us energy to start again, love again, and do good things again...

Preparation: You will need an empty can, strips of paper, a marker and tape.

Did you know that God loves certain things an awful lot, and he wants us to be like him, so that means loving those same things?

Let's look at what God loves.

II Corinthians 9:7 says, "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for **God loves a cheerful giver.**" Look at your savings can, and purpose to stack away your change to give to the needy this year. (Place "Cheerful Giver" on the can).

John 3:16 says, "For **God so loved the world** that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The world includes everyone, so we too should love all people. (Place "All People" on the front door.) When we leave the house we will be reminded to love others.

Psalms 11:7 says, "For the LORD is righteous, **he loves justice**; the upright will see his face." God wants what is right to rule and that includes his peace for all. He has a plan even when we mess it up in the world. (Place "Love Justice" on the television.) When we see and hear of bad things happening, we can pray for God to come riding in and make all things right!

John 5:20 says, "For **the Father loves the Son** and shows him all he does." Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed. He's a good Father and he loves his Son – and so should we! His son is our saviour, and everything the father gives his son is ours too. Isn't that awesome? (Place "Love the Son" on your hearts)

Psalms 45:7 says, "**You love righteousness** and hate wickedness..." When we do things that are right, like hold the door open for others, pick up our trash, help a friend in need, or just smile and wave at a neighbor, God loves that! And when we tell the truth, obey His Word, and walk in His ways, he loves that too! (Place "You love righteousness" near your shoes).

Revelation 1:7 says, "To **him who loves us** and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen." He loves you and me so much that he set us free from sin (the tendency to do wrong). When we believe in Him, he lives in our hearts and we can know and experience his love every day. (Place "He loves us" on the mirror.)

Let's keep these reminders in place around the house at least for the month of January, to remind us of the things God loves, and make it our goal to love them too.

Family prayer for 2016:

Dear Father, we love you. And we know that you love us, too. As we start a new year together, we start by thanking you for loving us so much that you sent your son Jesus to die for our sins and offer us eternal life. We love that! And we ask that you enable us to love the things you love, so that we are pleasing in your sight. – Amen.

The Family Practice - No More Missed Moments – by Rachel Toalson

I am a working mom. And what's more, I work from home while my children are here. I spend six hours of the morning with my six sons, whisking half of them off to school, making sure the ones left don't swallow any LEGOs the older ones left on the floor, and then, after lunch, when it's nap time, I tag team my husband for the kid-watching while I hole up in a room and write.

What's even more than all of that is that I run my own business, which means business has a way of creeping and pulling and asking for time I don't really have to give.

So much of my time when I'm with my children is split between thinking about work and trying not to think about work and just returning this one email and then checking on that one message, and then reading that one article and then writing down that one magazine that might take one of my essays or poems or stories.

Just real quick.

For a minute, or two, or ten-that-turn-into-twenty.

Temporarily, you know.

And before I know it, the whole morning is gone, and I don't even know where it went, and it's become more like a cemented habit than a temporary thing.

Learning, responding, reading, writing, working out, balancing, planning, brainstorming, there's not a whole lot of me left for my children after all that, after all the margins start shifting, after boundaries blur.

So it is that I found myself at the end of the year, feeling so tired. Just so tired of trying to balance it all. So tired of trying to balance a business with kid responsibilities and home responsibilities and emotional responsibilities and my own personal responsibilities.

I was tired of not watching my kids when they were playing so nicely together with the shape blocks, making giant snowflakes that never looked alike, from one to another, triangles and hexagons and circles and squares all arranged in their unique patterns. I was tired of hearing them ask, "Will you build a tower for me?" and my don't-even-have-to-think-about-it answer, "Mama has to do something real quick," knowing "real quick" meant "for as long as I have before lunch."

Every new year I set about making goals for everything. Goals for family, goals for finances, goals for my spiritual life, goals for my health, goals for my marriage, goals for my business.

The biggest goal this new year? Grow my business without sacrificing my family.

Because the truth is, I have been spending far too much time on the growing a business part

and not nearly enough time on the family part. When I was with my children I was constantly thinking about how I could use this time to make a submission that would maybe pay a little money and buy me a little web site traffic, or I could take a picture to post on a blog, or I could spend a little time on social media so people didn't think I'd disappeared. And I was never simply present.

I wanted to be present.

We all have different reasons we pull out phones and laptops and iPads, and some of it is for work and some of it is for entertainment and some of it is for checking out, but the distractions are all the same, really. They all require the same price.

Missed moments.

This year, I want to seize the moments. I want to live them for all they're worth. I want to be there and really BE THERE. And maybe it looks like baby steps for now, seeing that baby fall asleep in his jumper seat and maybe taking a picture but not immediately posting it on any kind of sharing site because I want to watch him breathe for now. Watch him settle into peace. Watch him rest. And maybe, when we're practiced at that discipline, we move to a more drastic one, like not even picking up a phone but leaving it where it sits and...

Simply seeing.

Simply enjoying.

Simply being.

This year, I want to put down the distractions. I want to pick up life.

Three ways to minimize distractions when it's time for family:

1. **Schedule your "distraction" time.** Use only 15 or 20 minutes a day and spend the rest of that time soaking up your children and life and all the things that really matter. Stick as closely to that boundary as you can.
2. **Designate a bowl where phones go after a certain time.** My husband and I try to put all our phones away at 5:30 p.m., when business hours are done. Occasionally we take them out to snap a picture, but email and social media sites are against the rules. We only answer the phone if it's family or good friends calling.
3. **Make regular business hours.** If you're a work-from-home parent like me, it's doubly important. If we were employees going into an office, we would have regular hours, during which time people could get in touch with us. We need those same boundaries to keep us from "work creep" and keeping our family time pure.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - Go Ahead and Hit SEND – by Marcy Lytle

Sitting at her laptop, she crafts the finest of emails, making sure she inserts every comma and quotation mark, each word carefully chosen to convey her heart, and she reads it over three times to catch any errors and then she hits SEND. Only out of the corner of her eye she catches a gross mistake that she missed where she used the word *form* instead of *from* just before she clicked the button. Oh, no! This email was requesting an interview for a teaching job at prestigious school, where they had an opening for an English teacher! She's mortified now, as she awaits a response where she's sure that one mistake will keep her from the job she's been hoping for... (Oops, I just made the same mistake – did you see it?)

Have you ever had a similar experience, where you spent time and effort to make a text or an email “just right” so as not to be misunderstood, or to make a good impression on the recipient, only to realize later you omitted or used an incorrect word? It's maddening, isn't it? If only we could all have an editor who checks over our every form of communication so that we never sound dumb, we never come across with a “tone,” or we never make any mistake at all...

That's not reality, it's not life, and it's not feasible for most of us. In fact, none of us is perfect. I'm the editor of this magazine, yet my college degree is in Math Education. But here I sit submitting a magazine to women each month, one that I do my best to ensure is written well and in perfect English and grammar, but I'm not an expert in this. I get tired, I succumb to hurriedness at times, and I'm just not well-versed in editing. And yet I hit PUBLISH each month, for you to read our stories, hoping you'll get the message from a well-crafted article, but also hoping you'll overlook it if you come across something we've missed.

And thankfully, there's someone “up there” who isn't looking for perfection or intrigue or wittiness when we communicate with him. In fact, he just enjoys our presence and will even respond if we just cry out, “Help!” just before hitting SEND. He doesn't expect perfection when we plead our cause, seek for comfort, or come to him in need.

God loves it when communicate with him, but he has no requirements on the requests that we make, except they be offered in faith. We're to have faith that when we SEND God a request, a prayer, a praise, or a petition, he hears us and will answer. In fact, look at some of the cool things God responds with when he crafts back a response and then hits SEND:

The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to **send** rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. (Deuteronomy 28:12)

He **sends** from heaven and saves me, rebuking those who hotly pursue me— God **sends** forth his love and his faithfulness. (Psalm 57:3)

He will also **send** you rain for the seed you sow in the ground, and the food that comes from the land will be rich and plentiful. (Isaiah 30:23)

... I will **send** down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing. (Ezekiel 34:26)

There are so many more verses about what God SENDS to us when we communicate with and have faith in his loving hand and heart towards us.

If you're a perfectionist, one who thinks she has to have it all together before a presentation of any kind, a woman who won't attend a party unless she brings the best of the desserts, a girl who's grown up to perform in front of company, and lady who hides her true feelings because she cannot verbalize them in a way to be understood...listen up.

It's okay to sit down at your laptop, with your journal on your lap, on your phone with a note, or just on your back with tears, to hit SEND after you've scribbled your requests of desperation and longing to Him.

It's okay to say it incorrectly without eloquent speech, it's perfectly fine to be blundering through tears as you speak, and it's all right to feel like nothing you're saying makes sense.

He knows you. He knows your heart and your secret thoughts, and he knows your desires and your dreams and hopes.

Go ahead and hit SEND. And don't even give a glance or thought to what you've said or how you said it, just click the button and wait.

God has storehouses of provision and blessings he's just constantly sending your way in response to your cries in faith in him, your Father.

Go ahead.

Hit SEND.

And in a few seconds you'll hear a *ping!* In your heart indicating he's got an email worth reading when all you have to do is click OPEN to read it and receive it.

Under the Influence - Peaceful Trouble – by Marcy Lytle

John 16:33 says,

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

I’m not good at finding peace in the middle of trouble. It’s just too hard to dig down below the rocks that have just fallen and buried me to find that one thing that wasn’t crushed, that one item to wave high and draw attention to, just because it survived “the fall.”

I’m not good at taking heart when trouble comes. I’d rather cower and run and hide, away from others who want to encourage, lift me up, or read me scripture. I know the scripture, but I just want the trouble to go away.

I’m not good at resting in knowing. I’d rather rest in the absence and end of trouble. It’s like telling me to lie down on a blanket you’ve just spread for me in the middle of a cactus patch. I’m afraid I’ll roll off the blanket and find myself screaming with pain.

And yet...in this troubled world in which we live, we are told to have peace, take heart, and rest in knowing that HE has overcome the world.

How can we do this, really?

How can we be peaceful in the trouble on our streets with shootings happening daily, and close to where we live?

How can we be peaceful in the trouble in our homes with marriages that are dying, and kids that are running?

How can we be peaceful in the trouble at work with lay-offs and pay-cuts and too many hours and too many expectations?

How can we be peaceful in the trouble that’s sure to come in 2016 with the unrest among nations and in our government?

Seriously?

The answers lie in reading the entire chapter of John 16.

He says people will be killed in the name of “god” and this is happening today. And it’s happening because these people don’t know the Father (verse 3). So **we can pray** for them.

We may grieve now, but **our grief WILL TURN to joy** (verse 20).

We depend on circumstances now, but our dependence will be on God and **our joy will be complete** (verse 24).

Is that not what you wanted to hear? I'd rather hear that I will never be touched by trouble, grief won't be part of my emotional experience, and everything I do will result in happiness and bliss.

That's not why we were created. We were created to worship Him and experience His presence and his holiness and his goodness.

And we can't do that without entering and exiting this world full of trouble.

Peaceful trouble. Sounds like the title of a song, maybe...

And it definitely sounds like a promise I want to claim as my own for me and mine.

Healthy Habits – Snacking Snafus – by Marcy Lytle

Maybe that sounds like a funny title. But snacking during the day, without thinking or without restraint, can certainly throw us into chaos in our bodies and emotions. Haven't you eaten so well...and then you decide to open a bag of chips and eat just two...only to realize a few minutes later that you've opened the bag 10 times and eaten 100 chips? That's a snacking snafu. And these things happen. They do. To all of us. But if we can recognize a few factors that spark those snafus, we might be able to start the New Year off by snacking healthfully and without guilt...

I'm not a health expert, and I don't have facts about blood sugar levels and calories and all of those statistics, but I do know what works and doesn't work for me...

Eat those meals. "They say" not to do it, but I hear this comment all the time... "I'm going to skip lunch so I can eat a huge meal tonight." However, when we skip meals (including breakfast), we find ourselves sending our stomachs into cramping mode because they're used to being triggered by food. We eye that bag of cookies and determine to only have one to satisfy us until the evening meal, but our stomach wins and squeezes until we've downed a dozen. Don't skip meals.

Grab a water. I've heard and read it, and it does work. If you start to feel the munchies coming on, grab a bottled water and start drinking it. It will fill your stomach and you won't be tempted to overeat when you grab a snack. If you have to get a glass, fill it with ice, and then with water, you might not do it. So keep bottled waters in the fridge on hand, ready to grab when you're in a panic.

Organize and bag it. When you arrive home from the store, right then cut up carrot and celery sticks, portion out fruit in baggies or cups, and make yourself 10 or 12 snacks to have on hand, ones that you will actually eat. Include a few nuts in the mix, because they're heart healthy and just a few can make you feel satisfied.

Schedule it. Maybe you eat lunch at 11:30 and it's 6:30 before you have dinner. That's a lot of hours in between. So put on your schedule, in your timer, on your phone, a reminder to snack. Maybe it's 2:30. This will remind you to stop and grab one of your baggies and enjoy it. This will also keep you from driving home starving and eating it then, ruining your dinner. And it will make you smile when your reminder comes and you realize you have a treat waiting.

Don't buy it. If cookies or chips are your downfall, don't buy them. Don't have them in the house. I know that if I bake homemade chocolate chip cookies I will want one every hour of the day. So when I do bake them, I try to give part of them away. If your family demands the snacks that tempt you wildly, then ask one of your family members to hold you accountable to how many you eat. One of your kids will most certainly enjoy telling you, "No, mom, you've already had two...you'll ruin your dinner."

None at night. I lost several pounds when I changed my lifestyle to no snacks after 5pm. I ate my dinner and that was it. I know some people enjoy a bowl of cereal or even a cup of ice cream before bed, but those are extra calories and sugars that aren't doing us a bit of good. If

we must eat during the TV show we're watching or have "a little something" late in the evening, we can choose air-popped popcorn with seasonings – that's always a fun choice.

It's a New Year. Time for little changes. And if snacking snafus are your downfall, and you always feel guilty after you've indulged, consider making one of the above adjustments in the way you eat. Actually look up the items you snack on and see what's in them, and what it is your body is craving. Take notice of how you eat your meals; how much you eat, and when you eat. Then google and make a list of at least a dozen health snack choices, bag them, up and train your tongue to enjoy them all...in moderation...and without guilt.

Beauty for Ashes - I Got Hurt – by Pam Charro

I got hurt once.

Okay, more than once, but one time in particular really stands out. I gave my heart to someone who didn't give theirs back to me. It was someone I should have been able to trust, and I felt betrayed and rejected. Why wasn't I loved by this person? Was something wrong with me?

I felt very strongly that God should have spared me this pain. Why didn't he, though? Surely he saw how unfair this was and knew it shouldn't have happened to me. And how would I ever move forward from this broken heart? Maybe I was just stupid to have been so vulnerable. Stupid and unlovable.

Sometimes our parents hurt us and we didn't have much say in that type of pain. Sometimes we could have been wiser in choosing who we gave our heart to. Sometimes, life is just plain unfair, no matter how perfectly we try to play it.

It is never completely safe to love another person. Yet even Jesus, in his wisdom and perfection, allowed his heart to be broken. It is impossible to fully experience life without taking such a risk.

It was not a fun time and I thought it would last forever. And I did hurt for a long time. But...I didn't die. Sometimes I wanted to, but I didn't.

What I did do was **lean in to God**. I was desperate to find out what he said was true about me, as opposed to my own life-choking thoughts. And, while the suffering was intensely unpleasant, I got to know the lover of my soul so much more. I found out that he can only bring his supernatural comfort in the midst of pain, and his truth can only be absorbed once the lies are unearthed. There was a surprise blessing hidden in that pain.

I feel so sad for those who refuse to love with depth and vulnerability. I think of C. S. Lewis' quote:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one ... Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

I would not like to suffer another broken heart, but I would rather feel devastated a thousand times than have a heart that is afraid to love.

I got hurt, but I didn't die.

**God gave me something beautiful in exchange for my vulnerability,
and it made me more like him.**

It was so very worth it.

Created for Life - A New Day Coming- by Ginny Hurley

Anticipation is rising!

I can feel it in the air.

Something is just around the corner!

Like a child looking out the window at all the possibilities, that is my hope right now. There is an inexpressible joy coming to the forefront in believers everywhere. I've seen it in the eyes of preachers and teachers. I've watched crowds of people catching the vision and allowing themselves to be equipped for the coming harvest, days where a multitude of seekers come into the Kingdom. The promises of long ago are being laid hold of by a group of forgiven saints all over the globe.

Just as darkness covered the earth in Jesus' day, it is making its presence known today. But in that darkness, Jesus turned the world upside down. The same was said of His followers. The same can be said of the rising stars today. No one has heard their names before, or seen them in the media. They are scattered throughout the earth, from persecuted churches, to beautiful cathedrals; from poverty-stricken countries, to upscale beauty salons and wealthy high-rise buildings. The call to love has been heard and the forgotten, the orphan, the addict, the wounded, the abused, and every hopeless soul that hears the sound of love coming through these saints will pause and listen. They will come to the sound of forgiveness and freedom. They will hope against hope and see the goodness of God. **They won't be called to church or to attend a sermon series, but will be called by the Son Himself to a life of communion and purpose, to a relationship that changes the world.**

Evil will not triumph over good because our God has already defeated that foe. The enemy's lies and half-truths have been uncovered, replaced by truths from Heaven itself. We are not hurtling toward catastrophe, but releasing life and victory in Christ Jesus. Since Jesus disarmed the enemy, our place is to release the truth of His finished work. Jesus made a public display of the enemy's defeat, triumphing over him in victory. Jesus cast light in the darkness. Everywhere He went, life followed. Nothing was impossible for Him and He hasn't changed. All things are possible for those who believe!

I saw the sunrise this morning and I have complete confidence that it will set on this same day.

Deep darkness will cover the earth, but the Lord will arise over you and His glory will be seen on you. Pre-believers will come to your light and kings will come to the brightness of your rising. You will be radiant, and your heart will swell with joy because of abundance. When things get darker, watch the light grow brighter! It's In You!

Righteousness and praise will spring forth before all the nations. His Words are true and He keeps His promises. He will not withhold His goodness from you, but will instead pour out His spirit over you. All the earth will sing His praises!

You are sons and daughters of the Morning Star!

Keep dancing!

You will see a display of splendor that catapults our world into a new day!

MARRIAGE

In This Together – The State of Our Union – by Sarah Stennett

So here we are.

2016.

It's a new year, a new chance to tweak our lives, or better yet, modify our ways to living a better life. While many are naysayers regarding goals and resolutions, I personally enjoy taking the time to reevaluate and set my sights on where I am going. And it's not just where I have been and the current realities I'm facing. Since we made a commitment 12 ½ years ago that the two shall become one, we are now in this life together, meaning that reflection and intentionality in the new year cannot be done solo (although I try to soul search in my quiet time to ensure that my heart and actions are in check as well).

Most years, my husband and I make a date to take inventory of what is and isn't most effective in our marriage and our family, sort of a State of Our Union Address. We don't do this on New Year's Eve, or even New Year's Day because let's admit it: to truly reflect and process and set our sights on things above, we need space and time. So after the kids return to school and our post holiday routines settle back in a bit, we make a date for reflecting, planning, and vision casting. What's on the docket? There are of course the usual practical things such as financial goals, family vacation plans, house needs, etc.

But most importantly we ask: What's the present state of our marriage? Of our children's hearts? Of our obedience to what God is calling our family to do? In all actuality, we communicate these things far more often than once a year. In fact, about ever other week, we either make brunch or go out to brunch when three of our four are in school and we discuss these very things. Yet, what makes the State of Our Union Address unique is that it looks at our life over the span of 2015 and reconfigures the trajectory for 2016.

Some things that have come out of said meetings in the past have been:

- 1. Community building.** It takes a village to raise a child, so not only are girlfriends helpful for me and guy friends for Rob, but we also need other families with whom we can share experiences, for our children's sake as much as our own. We recently moved to a new state, so although our 2014 & 2015 really saw great fruit in this area of our labor, we have pushed one giant reset button. The benefit of laying foundations for friendships in order to walk out relationship in a raw and vulnerable way is worth every moment of time and energy it requires. I personally feel that food is the window to our soul so I like to break bread with people as my go to for connecting on a deeper level with acquaintances. Opening my home is a big step toward opening my heart.
- 2. Chasing after our child's heart.** This can be done in several ways, really. We try to do "mommy dates" or "daddy dates" with our girls to steal each one away for special alone time. Yet, now that we have four children and work on staff at a bustling church, our schedules are pretty full and our finances are not so much. So our new version of this mostly involves regularly looping a kid or two in on an errand that needs to be run while although much less "special," the one on one

time to check in on what brings her joy, perplexes her, or causes her to be anxious or sad. It's a focused effort to engage her and simply listen. This has been especially valuable during our transition to a new state, new church, new school, etc. It's critical to chase after them at every age so the distance doesn't ever seem too great, the older they become. And of course, report back to one another so both parents can pray for that child and love her the way she needs it most.

- 3. Doing ministry together.** My husband has worked on staff at a church for our entire relationship, and yet this is constantly something we have to set forth as a goal, intentionally pursuing with our time and attention. It's easy for his work to be his ministry and my work or time with our children to be mine. But serving the local church or community together is rewarding in many ways for our marriage, our family, and God's kingdom. When we were first married, we were on the leadership team for a young marrieds community at our church. It was an amazing way to serve the leaders and the ministry of that community while spending time together. One year we co-lead a small group for the Financial Peace University class at our church. Our particular group was aimed at young families like ourselves, which made the experience that much more enjoyable for us. I have friends who have found more simple ways to incorporate ministry into their marriage such as being greeters together one Sunday morning a month or volunteering to set up the coffee stations before Sunday services.

I am excited to see what God has in store for our marriage and our family this year. I'm already praying for God to guide our hearts going into our State of Our Union Address so that He will guide our steps forward. I highly recommend the process! We are given this one life to live together, so let's CARPE DIEM in 2016 by being intentional with where our marriage and family is headed.

Date Night Fun – White Rendezvous – by Marcy Lytle

The only thing I really like about January is that it's the month that we "might" get a chance of snow in our forecast here in central Texas. I love that white stuff, and we just don't get enough of it here for playing in, building on, or gazing at... at least to my satisfaction. So if there's a slight hint of a small percentage of snow that shows up in the 10-day forecast, I wait for it, I stay up for it, and I go outside and squeal with delight in it, if it indeed shows up.

Since white is the color of January in places where it snows, this month all of our date ideas have to do with that color. After all, you might be surprised at how romantic you can be when all you see is that beautiful hue of a fresh blanket of snow...or not...with your date in hand.

White tees and whipped cream – There's always talk of Christmas in July when we turn the AC up and we pretend it's cold outside...so why not pretend it's warm outside on an evening in January? Lay out a beach blanket and prepare strawberry shortcakes to enjoy, packing them in a picnic basket for later. Dress in white tees with jeans or lounge pants, and watch a summertime movie favorite by Hitchcock [Rear Window](#) that takes place during a summer heatwave. Oh, and show your white winter feet by donning flip flops for this date night in.

Peppermint patties and Ivory soap – This is a romantic evening idea for husband/wife after the kids are in bed, and you're still awake enough for some much needed time together. Nothing is whiter and more refreshing than the inside of a York peppermint patty, and served alongside a burning white scented candle, on the side of the tub is so inviting! Ivory soap is a classic, and include a bar for each of you as you soak together if there's room, or one at a time if there's not, and listen or dance to [Rhapsody in White!](#)

Egg Shells and Sour Cream – Go out for breakfast on a cold morning and order lots of white items – including eggs, maybe migas with sour cream on top, a glass of cold milk, or coffee with cream stirred in. Then play ["Don't Tap the White Tiles"](#) on line – it's a fun game including music! Talk over the things you love about each other, including how you don't have to walk on white egg shells because you can totally be you...

Mayonnaise and Butcher paper – Have you ever eaten BBQ on butcher paper? You're missing out, if you haven't. Head out to your nearest BBQ place and get brisket sandwiches on bread spread with a little white mayo, and eat it on butcher paper, instead of a plate. If you don't live in a place where you can find this, then make it happen in your car or at home. Use all white utensils, white bread, and make it a BBQ date for two! Finally, make a trip to your local butcher and pick out some cool cuts of meat for the week, and take it home wrapped in white butcher paper for your next date night in. If you're feeling extra adventurous check out this recipe for [making your own BBQ](#) wrapped in paper!

Popcorn and White Yarn – This requires bundling up for a walk in the woods. Pack some popcorn and [flavored salts](#), along with a thermos of hot apple cider. Take a walk on a path you've not been before and tie a piece of white yarn along the path every few steps, on branches. Then use the white yard to find your way back to your starting point. Talk about the future of 2016 and how it may be unknown but His word will light your path...then read the word

– black on white – aloud together. End the date by throwing popcorn at each other and making pinky rings from your leftover yarn.

Date night or date day or date morning, whenever you make the time to be together, doesn't have to be the same old "dinner and a movie." You can always shake things up by thinking outside the box, or outside the window, where the snow is falling or the sun is shining, and the date ideas are endless...

After 30 Years - Let Him Operate – by Marcy Lytle

Imagine if you were married to a farmer and you had never operated a farm machine, yet you showed up day after day out in the field asking your husband to stop operating the machinery he was so adept and skilled at operating, so that he could come help you do whatever you fancy. If he does this enough, and gives into your wishes, abandoning the fields that need to be plowed, planted, and harvested...well you can imagine. Your entire homestead would no longer be the prosperous place it was...if you had just let him operate.

My husband operates differently than I do. He's a server to the max. At a recent gathering with a large crowd of people waiting to eat, he saw that the servers were shorthanded, so he positioned himself behind the drink station and started filling cups. I had gotten in line and became irritated that he was nowhere to be found. As the line moved along, I caught him pouring drinks instead of standing in line to eat...with me. I picked up two plates and loaded them both, his with mashed potatoes and meat, and mine with veggies and salad, and proceeded on through to the station where he stood, still serving.

"Here's your plate. You need to come eat." I snapped as I handed it to him.

A couple of the other servers heard my strong directive and I'm sure they noticed my look of disapproval as well, as I demanded that he leave his post and come sit with me and eat...now.

The other servers dismissed him and told him to go eat, and he sat with me, but he was upset. I had embarrassed him. He was doing what he felt he needed to do, and I had reprimanded him like a child.

In other words, I showed up on his field where he was planting good seed and told him to turn the motor off, leave the seed to itself to die, and come sit with me because I didn't want to sit with anyone else but him.

I could see that I was wrong, and I even heard a little voice (you know the One, the guy who nudges and whispers ever so softly and gently in correction) say,

"Let him operate."

It wouldn't have hurt me one bit to let my husband finish serving and then wait on him to come sit by me. It wouldn't have been more than a few more minutes. It wouldn't have hurt me to admire instead of admonish those strong hands that always reach out to serve instead of take, like I was doing. It wouldn't have hurt my husband if I had said nothing, and it would have blessed him if I had commended him on how he was operating so skillfully, in the gift that defined him.

There was a time early in our marriage when that servant's heart got in the way and he served others at the expense of the family. But that was long ago, and times and he had changed. He had matured and now knew when to serve, how long to serve, and who to serve. But I didn't rest in that fact. I panicked and selfishly demanded that my desires be met.

Thankfully, I quickly responded with a response of asking his forgiveness, and I went to the two servers who heard me and apologized, as well. I felt small and silly that I had tried to pull him away from giving drink to those who were thirsty.

The rest of the afternoon was great, and my husband and I fell back into sync in our relationship. He forgave me, I learned a lesson (for the millionth time), and all was well.

If your husband is skillfully adept in an area that blesses others, consider admiring him and freeing him to be. If he abuses that freedom, pray for him. And if you feel compelled to pull him away because of your own selfishness, consider stopping yourself to...

...let him operate.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – My New Year’s Wish – by Rachel Critz

Christmas has come and gone, and the New Year has finally arrived!

The question I ask myself at the beginning of each year is, “What can I do better this year?”

I am asking myself that question now, and I receive the word *boldness*.

Romans 8:31 says,

“What, then, shall we say in response to these things?
If God is for us, who can stand against us?”

Since I am homeschooled, I attend a co-op where a group of over a hundred homeschoolers gather together and take different classes. I joined PE, Chemistry, and Apologetics this past semester. I was excited to join Apologetics class, but (I’m going to be real with you) I did not enjoy it. You might be asking, “Exactly what is apologetics?” Apologetics is reasoned arguments or writings that prove something to be true or right.

We watched a 30-minute video every week listening to an Australian preacher named Ken Ham teach us on how to approach nonbelievers and convince them of the truth. In the beginning I was *okay* with what he was teaching. I admit I did fall asleep a couple times in class. Aside from that, I took notes for the first half of the semester. But after a few weeks, I was too frustrated to even write his teachings down in my journal. I am not putting this preacher in the wrong; I just strongly disagree with him, as his teaching was very *different*. Also, I have a close relationship with the teacher who put this class together and I have nothing against her in this situation, either.

Ham explained to us why the seven days of creation were not actually 1,000 days in one day. He very thoroughly shared how Cane’s wife was definitely his wife. But honestly, I still do not understand how apologetics works. (Or how a poodle’s DNA formed from a wolf.)

After the video was over, we had a discussion time that involved all of the students. I love discussion and listening to everyone’s thoughts and hearing what they believe.

It was the, “You should only believe this” statements that rubbed me wrong.

I kept my mouth shut, most of the time. I do wish I would have spoken up more and put the truth in the midst of the conversation but something held me back.

When the teacher would call on me to speak, I had so many responses but I simply said, “I don’t know.”

Do I regret my responses? Every day.

I wish I could have gotten deeper into it and put my whole heart into it, but the thought of embarrassment or someone judging what I believed, held me back. I wish I could have remembered that there is power in the name of Jesus. I wish I could have been **bold**.

When you get the chance to stand up for what you believe you, take it. Be absolutely bold in your faith. I am not afraid to stand up to adults or any other teen when they question honestly the way I am. Trust me, I have run into people like that in my life. But I do not want to force someone to believe when I stand bold. I want to let them allow the Holy Spirit to fill them up and show them truth.

I challenge you this year to take the chance in stepping out in your faith no matter what someone may think. And remember, with your boldness, you can only plant the seed. God grows the person.

Acts 4:31 says,

“After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness.”

Bush Bean Blessings – Change Happens – by Marcy Lytle

Sometimes I look forward to change and others times, not so much. If you'll notice, there's a change in the author of this column this month. I'm filling in until our new writer starts next month, because our previous writer needs to attend to family. Therefore, a change is taking place. This column is under transition as we change to something new. I'm so sad to lose an excellent writer but excited to welcome in a new one...

Isn't that the way change *should* be? If something's going to be different, it might as well be a good difference. If we lose a job, we certainly hope the change will be that we move up in a new position, a better paying one, and one with more perks. After all, why change if something good doesn't occur with the transition? If we move to a new house, it might as well be a bigger, newer house with more amenities, right? After all, why move if we're not gaining? And if one of our children moves out of the house, the change is hopefully because he/she is getting married, or going off to college, to some new adventure with amazing experiences!

However, we all know that life changes aren't always up, into bigger and better things, and transformations of beauty and wonder...

What about the change to learning to live on no income at all, while we wait and wait and wait...after the loss of a job? Or what if we've lost a home and we're downsizing because we can no longer afford those fine amenities, or maybe the home was destroyed by flood. That sort of change is not pleasant at all. And if one of our children is taken from us unexpectedly, and we're left with a hole in our heart that is unfillable, what then? How can that change in our life be something good?

There is really nothing to say to a person in transition, one that is painful, laborious, and long, to make the pain lessen. Imagine telling a mom in the middle of childbirth any sort of consoling phrase and she might just bite your head off and kick you out of the delivery room. She needs to squeeze something hard, she needs to scream to release the pain, and she needs to press down hard and push to relieve the pressure. There's really no birth that takes place without all of that change and transition and pain.

But any mom will tell you it's worth it, when the baby arrives and her life indeed is changed forever, as is her heart...and her body. She doesn't like the stretch marks, the skin that is no longer taut, and the rips that have scarred her for life. But she envelops the baby and the love and the growing and the giving. And that is good.

It's a new year, and change is coming for all of us. We can stand on the precipice of change and be afraid, or we can stand and look forward, determined to do all things in His strength, and come out standing, in dignity and honor.

How are your blessings changing this year? Are they shifting and causing your house to lean to one side, or have they completely slid down into the dark cellar, alongside the critters in the dark? Have you experienced an increase that's left a permanent smile on your face, or has your bucket been turned upside down on top of your head and caused you to fall in a heap to the floor?

Thankfully, we have a Father who doesn't change, when everything else does. He never fails. He is always faithful. He is ever good. So we can KNOW with assurance that even if change is wrecking our body, soul and spirit, some sort of new birth is taking place – one that will amazingly transform us.

James 1:17 says,

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not **change** like shifting shadows.”

And what will that transformation look like? Psalm 30 says weeping may last for a night, but joy comes in the morning light...

I wanted to cry when we lost a writer, because I liked how she had settled into her space, her passion, her writing niche in our magazine. I did cry when we lost our house years ago, due to an economic downturn that affected our jobs. I wailed when my brother lost his first son. I screamed when my husband suffered electrical shock, as I wondered if he would live or die. And I thought my heart would burst when my last child married and left empty rooms in our house.

But here we stand.

THYME is gaining a new writer, and her new column – guess what it's called? “Firmly Planted.”

We have a cozy home that suits us nicely and provides all that we need. My brother has two daughters and four grandchildren and his heart is full. My husband has scars on his hand but he's alive and well, and thriving. And our children are married and our family has grown, and we are laughing together.

Change happens.

And it often causes unbearable pain.

But pain produces inexpressible joy... when we know the One who never changes.

Saddle Up – White as Snow – by Melissa Critz

It was either feast or famine in Texas last year, in terms of the rain.

We're in the 'feast' time right now. With the rain comes pools of water and with that comes mud and with mud comes one messy horse. Domingo searches and finds the muddiest pool. He paws making sure it's what he likes and then gets down on his front knees, falls on his side, and rolls back and forth on his back to his greatest delight. I learned years ago that horses of light coats do this because of the instinct given to them by the Lord in order to blend in with their environment. I know this is proven over and over again by my mostly white paint horse that chooses to be as dirty as possible. Once again, Domingo is a mud ball from ear to hoof.

After several days of allowing him to be a *horse*, I feel the need to pull out the grooming equipment and go to work on my messy equine. After a good time with the curry comb, much of the mud clods are on the ground along with the loose fur. On warmer days, I also bathe him. Once all the grooming and bathing is complete, Domingo shines as white as snow. I relish it, for I know that it won't last long. It will rain; mud will result; Domingo will roll; grooming will commence.

During one of the cleanings, I started listening as my Saddle Partner gave me a picture of how He sees us – white as snow.

Did you know that?

God does not see you as a sinner once you have accepted Christ as your Savior.
He sees you as a new creation, a saint – white as snow!

Dr. Ken Matto, in his article entitled "How Does God View the Believer?" wrote this quote that sums it up so succinctly:

"We are no longer a sinner under Satan's authority but a Saint under God's authority."

I wrestle with this when I have to get that grooming equipment out and use elbow grease to remove the mud clods over and over – because they keep coming back – and it seems that sin keeps coming back as well. I have to fight it sometimes – actually a lot – more than I desire. It is like these mud clods are always returning and always needing to be removed.

Sometimes, we as Christians fall into the mode of sinner – believing that God sees us as sinners, and that we cannot shake off sin. It's all around us and we do sometimes succumb to it.

We need to be reminded that our Father, the King of Kings, sees us NOT as that at all. "...it is important to know the difference between being a sinner and one who has the ability to sin" (Matto).

Ephesians 1:1 states,

"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus..."

Dr. Matto uses this scripture in his article to point out the word “saints,” which means set apart, sacred, and holy. God views his children this way – set apart, sacred, and holy.

Yes, we do sin (“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” Romans 3:23.) However, we should not call ourselves sinners. Jesus died on the cross and took ALL of our sins with Him. Once we give ourselves to Christ Jesus, God’s view of us is one of saints. This doesn’t mean that we aren’t tempted, as sin is all around us.

BUT don’t give in to the feeling that you are a sinner. Renew your mind with the knowledge that God sees you as you are when you accepted Jesus as your Savior – a saint, faithful one, a believer, holy, cleansed from sin, as white as snow.

Jesus paid for our sins by his death on the cross. Daily we come to Him and give it all to Him. Sin is around us, but we as the family of God are not viewed by our heavenly Father as sinners.

We are saints and covered by the blood of Jesus.

If you need to know Jesus personally, please contact me. I would love to share with you more about my Saddle Partner.

Moving Forward - Smile through the Delays – by Pam Charro

I never cease to be amazed at how quickly I can get aggravated by feeling inconvenienced. It's usually on a day that I start to feel I'm making progress in my walk with God and growing in patience. Impatience seems to rise up in me like a great leviathan, roaring out of nowhere. I am surprised at the suddenness and intensity of my frustration and ugly thoughts.

Thankfully, God is not finished with me yet and he keeps allowing me lessons for awareness and growth.

Last week, I was in the grocery store, in my usual hurried state, and with a headache for good measure. All I wanted was to get in and out, but literally everything seemed to be slowing me down. When I finally got to the checkout, wouldn't you know I ended up behind a sweet little old lady who was digging through her change purse.

I started to feel annoyed and then realized, "Okay, Pam, you have a choice here. You can get aggravated and feel justified about it, or you can just calm yourself down and let this situation be what it is. This world is not here to get out of your way."

So I decided to slow down and watch. I realized the little old lady was wearing a bright pink blazer and she was actually quite adorable.

She told the cashier, "I wouldn't want your job," and I said, "But she's doing it so brilliantly, isn't she?" and lots of other people around us smiled.

I started smiling and trying to enjoy the situation instead of barely surviving it, and by the time I left, I had complimented how adorable the little old lady was and also made a point to tell someone at the store what a great job Lorraine, the cashier, was doing. I forgot all about my headache and ended up enjoying the situation, and I promised myself I would remember this lesson (we'll see how I do).

A couple of weeks ago, my husband accidentally rear-ended the driver in front of him. Normally not something most of us would consider pleasant, for sure! The other driver was not only gracious to my husband, but also asked him what he did for a living and told him he would pray for my husband to have increased sales at his job. What a blessing he turned out to be! I was so impressed at how this young man made a point to turn an unplanned inconvenience into an opportunity to do something good for another person.

I want to go into 2016 taking advantage of all of the chances to turn something unexpectedly negative into a sudden and powerful positive.

May God be glorified as I learn to keep smiling when it doesn't feel natural to do so.

And may I bless others, too.

REAL STORY – My Wandering Prayer – by Dina Cavazos

7 am I begin in my room, cup of coffee in hand, settled in my reading chair with Richard Foster's *Prayer – Finding the Heart's True Home*. Heart repentance "is not something that we cause to come about by creating a certain kind of mood with a certain kind of atmosphere..." It grabs me and my mind starts running...

I need to write this down to share!

In which journal does it belong?

No, not a journal, maybe the flip postcard book I use to jot down thoughts of the day. No, those postcards are too small.

Where are those larger postcards I use?

I end up looking through my various papers in the other room until I finally choose a sheet of nicer quality printer paper. Efficiently using the time, I discover forgotten labels, reorganize my papers, and throw away some trash. I re-heat my cold coffee, return to my chair, write down the quote and go on.

7:50 am I continue reading on entering the "Prayer of Tears: Ask, Confess, Receive, and Obey."

This is great—so simple, clear and concise! Wouldn't it be great to have a little tract to give to those needing help with entering into repentance and receiving God's mercy? I should write it down, make my own tract.

What size could it be, what paper should I use?

I can add a few things I've read in other books...

As a picture of me handing it out to the homeless comes to mind, I come to reality.

Most likely such a tract already exists. I'll need to check...

Oh well, it's still worth writing down, so I spend another five minutes looking for the perfect repository for this piece of intelligence.

Here's a postcard leftover from last summer's VBS.

I'll use the back. I can always transfer it to a more permanent place later.

8:15 am Deeply into the reading of God's mercy and readiness to forgive and cleanse, I begin to thank Him for how merciful He's been to me. Flashes of the years of living my own way are illuminated in the light of His forgiveness, mercy, and grace. God is so good... and it's time for a 2nd cup of coffee. As water heats, I'm looking out the window which has a view to the bird feeders in the prayer garden and the fountain where they bathe. The rain has momentarily subsided and the doves take advantage by crowding around the feeder. I make a mental note of the spots that aren't draining well.

I'll need to raise them up.

I love this Life He's given me. I will raise up the low spots in the garden, as He's raised me up. I was low and broken—sinfulness was like standing water in the shallow ditch of my life—and then He raised me up and my stagnant, sinful life without Him drained away. Just as the rain identified the low spots in the garden, there are things He allows in my life to identify areas He still needs to raise up.

Have your way, Lord, oh please have your way and keep me from mine. Show me the things I do that don't please You... and thank you for doing it. It keeps me clean and close to You.

8:45 am I settle in the big chair in the garden view room with coffee and book so I can look out the window. Near the end of the chapter I read: "The fire of sin is intense, but it is put out by a small amount of tears, for the tear puts out a furnace of faults, and cleans our wounds of sin."

A quote for the prayer garden!

But all the postcards are filled and, as my previous search revealed, no blank postcards.

I must buy some more.

9:00 am I close the book at the end of the chapter and it's time to enter in, just me and God. No book, no postcards, no fountains, gardens, birds, or coffee.

Well, maybe coffee.

I get my homemade prayer book of postcard prayers I've written for various people and causes.

I need to make a cover for this little book. I can see it now....a beautiful picture I'll create in Photoshop and I'll make a postcard of prayers called "Entering In."

I go get my Bible and glance at the clock.

What? It's late, and I haven't even really prayed!

9:30 am *Lord, help me to focus on You when I'm with You. You're always with me and Your mind never wanders. Help me to learn to enter in more deeply, laying aside distractions. Help me to hear You and only You.*

Then I hear his voice, "Use it. Don't let it be wasted."

And so I begin to write the experience of my wandering prayer...

Psalm 5:1-3:
Give ear to my words, O Lord,
Consider my meditation.
Give heed to the voice of my cry,
My King and my God,

For to You I will pray.
My voice You shall hear in the morning, O Lord;
In the morning I will direct it to You,
And I will look up.

Does your prayer time feel like it's full of distractions, stray thoughts, and even fear sometimes?

In all of our wandering...and yes, wondering...he considers our thoughts and our cries and hears every one of them and answers.

Dina Cavazos has four wonderfully unique and interesting adult children and one 6-year-old grandchild. She is a Texas native and considers Jesus her life companion and friend. Dina is passionate about sharing God's goodness with others, and has been working on a prayer garden in her backyard for several years – her favorite place to “hang out” with God. She just completed Master Gardener classes and is working on certification, as she loves growing things, reading, and quiet places. She also enjoys thrift store shopping, good movies, and good food! Dina's life scripture is Ephesians 3:20 which has been made real to her over and over again!

FRESH THYME

Fresh THYME - A Shape All His Own – by Marcy Lytle

You know, those little candy molds that are shaped all the same in rows on a sheet to be filled and baked, so that when the candy is done we can pop out little tiny clones of candies to eat or give away? They're so cute, and one always knows what one will get when using those molds – lots of pieces of the same kinds of tasty treats.

But I've never fit a mold. In fact, I've always been pretty much that piece of candy that forms when the leftover filling gets spilled out onto the baking sheet to take a shape all its own...the piece not plated because it messes up the order of beauty...

I don't like coffee, and almost 100% of my friends and family do.

I hate eggs, and they're a breakfast staple on restaurant menus.

I am not into diamonds. I'd rather go on a trip.

Flowers and lace are for fields and doilies, not for wearing, in my opinion.

And country music should be banned from all radio stations...everywhere.

I can bet you're already thinking that I'm odd. But that's not the half of my oddities.

I'd rather sit at home with my husband at night than attend a "girl's night out" function.

In fact, a room full of noisy women scares me.

I still like to skip, I love to shop in junior departments, and I enjoy getting away...often.

I can't sleep at night unless I've had a bath, and if you go to sleep without one, I think you're nasty.

I love McDonald's small cheeseburger and small fries, and it doesn't bother me that others don't.

I'm turned off by conversations about staying fit, stupid husbands, or getting plastic surgery.

I rather despise pro football and big trucks and men who wear cowboy hats.

I'm energized by lists and full schedules and things to do.

I love meat that is well done with no pink anywhere in sight.

I'm sure most of you have your own list of little *uniquities* (I just made up that word) that make you different than the norm, as well. Or maybe you feel just the opposite; that you are just like every other piece of candy on the tray, and you'd like to be a little different.

It used to bother me that I was different, when I was younger. And sometimes I still get a little upset when others make comments about my differences. And I even used to wonder if God was displeased at some of my *uniquities* and then...

I decided to embrace it all. If my heart was right, and I wasn't being odd or different out of spite or rudeness, then why should I spend my time feeling sad or displaced if I ended up out of the mold and spread flat, or full of bubbles, on the tray?

I'm not sure I'll ever like eggs, get thrilled over a football score, or buy a country music album. But I have friends who think eggs are delicious, they love sports, and they even memorize country lyrics! And guess what? We embrace each other's differences and love each other all the more.

Molds are made for candy, they're made for mass production, and they're made to turn out replicas of the same pieces over and over again.

But God didn't make us in a candy mold. He made us in his image. And his image is so full of creativity, wonder, power, and amazing intricacies of character that it would take a million lifetimes to express them all.

Let's learn to smile at our oddities, love our preferences, and embrace our uniqueness.

And stand unashamed of who we are and how we're made when the molds are filled...and we escape the boundaries to make a design all our own...

FRESH THYME - Observations – by Marcy Lytle

There are a dozen “okays” I’ve observed in my short lifetime, and I’m not that old, yet. I’m not adding in my thoughts for, or against, this list - just stating what’s out there, what I’ve seen, and how it is. And I’m sure you could come up with your own list of 12, if you’ve lived at least three decades or more.

- It’s okay to swear now, because words are just words, at least that’s what I’ve heard.
- It’s okay to live together before marriage, because it’s easier to separate if it doesn’t work out...no messy divorce.
- It’s okay to not quite like the body you’re given, so much that you’d rather be the other gender. We’re just mistakenly created.
- It’s okay to love whomever we please, wherever we are, in whatever manner suits us because love is so freeing.
- It’s okay for both parents to work full time because they’re offering their kids more opportunities, at least ones that cost money.
- It’s okay to miss church more often than not, because activities that we’ve paid for with aforementioned money take lots of time.
- It’s okay to ditch church altogether most of the time, because it’s just old-school to be a member of a congregation.
- It’s okay to send our kids away to college even without scholarships because loans can be paid off...eventually.
- It’s okay to dishonor, disrespect and diss our spouses because that’s empowerment for “self.”
- It’s okay to choose unforgiveness for that one and this one, because wounds run deep and those abusers deserve to suffer.
- It’s okay to enjoy the pleasures of sex before marriage because it’s satisfying and gratifying, and it feels so good.
- It’s okay to allow our children to be “free” to choose, to roam free, to just be...

Change is good, *isn’t it?* Change towards a belief in a more tolerant, more loving, more forgiving God (or no God at all), change towards more self-gratification than self-sacrifice (unless we’re noted for it), and change towards more pleasure and less duty. I get it. Some of that is so enticing.

Becoming different than the norm, from what’s expected of us, from old-school ways – I’ve been a part of all of those changes. I too have made changes from beliefs and actions I had as a child. We all change. And hopefully, the changes we make are exchanges for something else better. After all, if they’re not, why change?

When it comes to matters of the heart, nothing has changed in regards to our relationship with Him. And that means he still requires two things:

- Love him with all of our hearts.
- Love others as ourselves.

What that looks like seems to have changed to:

Love him as best you can, if he really exists, only if he answers your prayers, and oh...who is HE anyway?

Love others by freeing them, allowing no restraints, and giving time and talents but not any lasting treasure...because this life might be all there is.

I'm just thinking and writing this morning, feeling a bit uneasy with some of the changes for the generations to come. And I'm feeling a bit sad that perhaps I haven't represented Christ in a way that makes him shine above all that shines in this world. I'm wondering if the younger ones have ever seen a sick person healed, a person bound by addiction set free, and a lost and undone human being realize that they are indeed loved and have a purpose in life – to worship Him.

Maybe...just maybe...if we start reading again the acts of Christ, start praying again with faith His goodness, and start living again a life that is holy – not religious (there's a difference) – then it might be okay to be called a Christian, and it might be okay to make a few more changes...

Towards good. And not evil.

Towards love. That sets boundaries.

Towards fellowship. And not isolation.

Towards family. That plays together.

Towards acceptance. Of HIS word as the final one.

Towards honor. Of all that's good.

It's okay to change. The butterfly is one of the most amazing transformations in nature, from a caterpillar on its belly to a winged beauty that flies.

That's the kind of change I want to see in my life, in the lives of those around me, and in the lives of my family.

The change that Jesus came to give us...from death because of sin...to life because of Him.

And I think that kind of change might produce a dozen observations not found anywhere in the list above.

FRESH THYME - That Last Hurdle – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever watched a long marathon or race where the runners have to jump hurdles? It's amazing, isn't it? Hurdles must be one track and field event that requires not only strength and speed, but great skill, don't you think?

I'm in the third quarter, most probably, of the human race here on earth – where the finish line is more visible than the starting line. This is especially true of those of us who have aging parents, as we watch them getting closer and closer to the end of their race. And sometimes, when I observe their aches and pains, their limitations, and their inability to jump life's hurdles as well as they used to, I wonder if the last part of the race is the most difficult. It sure seems so, from one who is just looking and not running on that lap of the race.

My heart hurts when I see the elderly hooked to breathing machines, unable to walk and seated in a wheelchair to be pushed around town, and sitting in a crowded room confused or bewildered because they don't hear well or can't remember where they are. And my mind fears. Looking forward to that last lap; that final hurdle, is not so appetizing and I'd rather not partake in that part of the race. I'd rather be pulled to the sidelines and be told that I can skip that part. I'd rather be escorted to the finish line with all limbs and mental faculties intact and be told I've finished well...without the pain of old age.

So I began to wonder...

Is the last hurdle the most difficult? If I were to ask the aged if getting old and feeble and less able creates the highest, hardest hurdles, would their answer be a resounding, "Yes, most certainly?"

I don't think it would, for those who've walked closely with Jesus all of their lives. And here's why:

They've jumped over thousands of hurdles behind them and they've obviously cleared them, fell and got up and got going, or someone removed the hurdle and they kept running. Because here they are at the finish line. And **that sort of history is bound to offer one amazing courage and strength.**

They've stayed on their feet throughout disappointment, loss, and failure and even though their physical feet are sore, callused and bent, they know the final hurdle is one where they are carried across and made completely new on the other side. **That piece of knowledge must offer them hope beyond comparison, to be sure that newness is closer than ever.**

They've avoided being disqualified throughout the race for stumbling, stuttering or missing hurdles, because they've experienced forgiveness and healing over and over again from failures and mishaps. They were only urged to get up and keep running, with the wind at their heels. **That sort of mercy and grace extended to them must be like cool breezes that cover them in the heat of old age woes.**

And finally, they've found a balance and rhythm to life through all of its ups and downs and turns and twists that has enabled them to round each lap and view each hurdle as just another jump of joy because **their endurance has produced great strength**. For sure, they are weary and slow of physical and mental strength but their inward being is beating harder and faster than ever before in anticipation of that last hurdle...

I asked my mom (age 88) recently if it's hard getting older, and she simply replied, "I really don't think about it." I do think about it, because I'm behind her looking at what's coming around the bend for me in another 30 years. And I dread it, honestly. I have a lot of life I want to live and experience, and becoming old and feeble is not something I look forward to, at all.

However, now that I've stopped and realized that the last hurdle is actually the one that will be the leap with the longest stride, the highest jump of all, and I'll land on my feet and fall into the arms of the one who will then carry my weak and tired body to a place of new beginnings again...

That last hurdle is not so ominous, after all.

In fact, I've got laps and jumps and leaps and lands to experience today, and that's got to be the focus of the race I'm running before me. And I know full well that someone is running behind me, beside me, and in front of me to lead the way to finishing the race in joy and strength like nothing I've ever experienced before.

I just jumped over a hurdle, the hurdle of fear of old age.

What hurdle are you facing?

FRESH THYME - The Happy Ending – by Marcy Lytle

I have several friends who always want to know if a movie ends well, before they will go see it. They don't want to spend money to watch a movie that ends sadly. There are enough sad endings to real stories in the world, so they want movies that escort them to a higher place – of happy endings for all. I do like happy endings, but I don't like it when the movies end with the couple kissing, kids in their laps, and all is "well" after he cheated, she scorned him, and both of them yelled at their kids. That's not reality. Wounds occur, and wounds don't heal with a hug and a smack on the lips.

In fact, wounds sometimes leave scars, and those scars are reminders for a purpose – to not be wounded in that same manner again!

For example, if I burn myself on an iron and it leaves a mark, I'm going to be extra careful every time I take out a wrinkled shirt to press it and make it look good. I'm going to remember what I did last time that caused the burn.

For example, if I require stitches to heal a gaping gash in my leg, and that gash leaves a long mark, I'm going to think next time before I go hiking along dangerous cliffs when it's almost dark outside.

Some wounds are surface wounds and they heal rapidly, without much pain, and there is no scar. These are minor scrapes, unnoticed cuts, and bruises that we don't remember how they appeared and we forget them when they're gone.

But what about those wounds of the heart that cut deep, like the wounds of betrayal, abuse, abandonment, and sorrow? Some of those experiences leave us afraid, mistrusting, on guard, and coiled up, and there is no kiss, no hug, no happy ending to those stories that can be captured on camera.

I know a man whose wife forsook their drunken lifestyle, cleaned up, flew straight and he didn't come along – so she slid back into their old patterns. Later, he did decide to change...but it was too late. She had been wounded, and they eventually divorced.

I know a friend who has been burned one too many times by another friend, so she now avoids her at all costs. It's too painful to be around her, and the trust bond is broken – maybe forever.

I know of a young woman whose dad was disinterested, unaffectionate, and misunderstood her, and though she's tried, she just can't enjoy his company. He hurt her too badly, and she's written him off for good.

Do you fit into any of these categories, or have been wounded beyond a "happy ending?"

When I think back to the movies I mentioned above, I wonder how I would have liked the movie to end? Since I wasn't happy with a kiss and a hug, would the reality of suspicion and hatred have been a better ending?

The [Bible says](#) he was wounded for our sins, bruised for our wrongs, chastised for our wrongdoings, and yet he hasn't stiffened his arm towards us. In fact, he extends his arms in loving grace and compassion. And isn't it interesting that Jesus still had the scars in his hands after he was crucified and rose again? He still bore the reminders of what was done to him out of anger and abuse.

Two things we can note, in looking at Jesus.

It is possible to love those who have hurt us. We don't have to place ourselves back in harm's way, but we can truly forgive and be healed of the hatred and hurt that has left gaping holes in our hearts. He says it's possible to forgive, because He lives in us, and He forgives us.

It's okay to carry scars as reminders. Scars may look ugly to others, but they're gentle reminders to us of the hurt that created the scar – yes – but oh so much more of the healing that covers the wound. Scars occur when cuts run deep, and reminders can be a good thing.

If you're one who only enjoys happy endings to movies, I hear you. It always makes one smile to see the girl get the boy, the family to be restored, or the abused to get vengeance on the abuser. But if you're like me and wonder about the wounds that were left, in the reality of the pain inflicted before the final kiss, I hear you, too.

I'm wounded in many areas, as I'm sure you are, too. I keep up my guard against certain people, I don't let others in too close that I fear might hurt me in the same way I've been hurt, and sometimes I even push God away because of times that I think he ignored my prayers.

However, I'm realizing that the more I release those hurts and wounds to him and allow him to deal with those people, those past hurts, and those scars, the more free I'm becoming to enjoy my own happy ending – smiles and hugs for those I love. And I'm also realizing that some of my wounds just hurt too deeply for me to deal with – and that's okay.

One day...all tears will be wiped away and all things will be made new. That's our happy ending that's coming. But until then, we've got all of the characters in our story to contend with, ones that hurt us, and ones we hurt as well. Thankfully, it's not up to a writer or producer to create our ending.

Our ending has already been written...

Revelation 21:4

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

FEBRUARY 2016

TIPS

Seven for You – Ironing 101 – by Marcy Lytle

Ironing is my favorite chore. It really is. I'd rather iron than clean the bathroom, unload the dishwasher (my least favorite chore), or sweep the floors. There's something soothing, relaxing and rewarding about slowly pressing and moving and observing a wrinkled shirt transform into an article of clothing I can't wait to wear.

However, most of my friends abhor ironing. They'd rather buy clothes that don't have to be ironed or they buy the cotton clothing, wear it once, and leave it hanging in their closets because the wrinkles are too much to bear...or to wear!

So here are some tips that might take the hate out of this chore for some, and make you want to get up early to enjoy some alone time with this pastime...

1. **Plan ahead.** One reason many don't like ironing is because they're in a hurry to get dressed and leave, and there's no time to heat the iron and press. I get that. So plan ahead. My ironing time is early Sunday morning, for at least 30 minutes, and it's actually quite enjoyable and pleasant...when the time is there.
2. **Remove when dry.** Some of our clothing gets terribly wrinkled because we let it sit in the dryer too long, and the wrinkles set in. Set a loud timer, or ask Siri to remind you, but get those clothes out of the dryer pronto when the drying is done. This will make your ironing pile smaller.
3. **Get a cordless iron.** I used to get so annoyed with the cord, as it swept over my clothes when I tried to iron and caused me such pain. So I bought a cordless iron. I love it. Problem solved.
4. **Try a steamer.** I recently received a Jiffy Steamer for Christmas. It's not great for set-in wrinkles in flannel or 100% cotton clothing, but it IS great for that shirt that just has a few creases and for the times you don't want to heat up the iron or pull out the board. The steamer is so easy to use and you can hang your shirt, move up and down with the steam, and you're good to go.
5. **Put on music. Or pray.** I use my ironing time to decompress, think, pray, and listen. Honestly, during my ironing time is some of my best thought processes, where I hear answers to prayers, and sometimes after ironing I feel relaxed and calm.
6. **Set a number.** Sometimes I decide I'm going to iron 8 pieces, no more and no less. This gives me a starting and ending point, and I know going in how much time I'll need. Otherwise, ironing can be overwhelming, if you have 30 items that are wrinkled. Only choose a doable number, iron them, and walk away. You can iron the other 22 another day.
7. **Observe your work.** I absolutely love hanging the piece back in the closet and looking at how smooth it looks, feeling the warmth from the heat of the iron, and thinking about wearing that now freshly ironed piece tomorrow. There's great satisfaction in a job well done, and a job that caused you to slow down for even just a few minutes of your day.

Try some of these seven tips and see if you don't come away with a better attitude towards this chore. Who knows, you might even move this chore to your favorites list, instead of the list of chores you avoid at all costs. Now wouldn't that be something?

The Dressing – Pink Pairings – by Marcy Lytle

I'm not a fan of the color pink, but it's everywhere this month, and it's everywhere lots of the time in the women's section of stores. And when it's paired with red, bold red AND pink, I sort of choke because it's just too much...in my humble opinion! However, it's out there, and pink can be so pretty in subtle ways or when paired with other colors in the clothes that we wear.

If you're looking for something romantic and pretty, but you too aren't a fan of "pink in your face," then we've got a few ideas for you this month, as you plan for your date nights with him...or with your friends...or just to have fun all by yourself! Who says you need a date to dress up and look pretty?

Crossbody purse – This pretty faux-suede crossbody bag from [Old Navy](#) can be the only accent of pink you need to romanticize your outfit! Pink can be paired with gray or black or white and look great as just an accent piece.

Headband – This blush pink stretchy [headband](#) from World Market looks pretty any time on any head. Wear it with a simple white tee, blue jeans, and pretty black flats for a simple yet dressy look. Don't like headbands? Then choose this [pretty bracelet](#), instead.

Hat – Hats aren't for everyone, I suppose. But I think they are just a bit intimidating to wear for most of us, so that's why we avoid them. [This hat](#) from World Market may be a stretch, but it's so romantic, feminine, and demure. And if you don't like this shape, look for another!

Remember...don't dress in pink from head to toe...just add an accent here and there!

Top – This pretty pink sleeveless [dressy blouse](#) looks great just as pictured, with a pair of black pants. It's from New York & Company. It can be dressed up under a cardigan or jacket, and dressed down with jeans. It's so versatile and at a deal of a price!

Shoes – How can you go wrong with a pair of pink Converse [tennis shoes](#)! Maybe you're not the dressy-dressy girl, and you prefer these comfortable shoes with a jean skirt and a long sweater – how cute would that be! Or wear them with an all-black outfit – or all white! Pink on the feet – so sweet!

Scarf – Check out this softly pink hue in the form of a [scarf](#), from Target! February can still be chilly in most places, so a scarf is sure to work for your night out. Pair this with a denim shirt and you'll be warm and pink, all at the same time!

PJ's – Staying in, lounging around, feeling lazy? [Pink PJ's](#) on the bottom with a white tee on the top fit the bill! Add some pink [flip-flops](#) or slippers and you'll be comfy and cozy and cute!

There you have it, pink accents and pieces that will put you in the mood for love and loving and all things sweet this month. If you love pink, then go for it – knock em' out. But if you're like me and pink is okay in moderation, then pick a piece – just one – and wear it with your other favorite pieces. You'll be pretty either way!

And a little pink on your toes is always a good thing...

Selah's Style - Me in Manhattan – by Selah Irwin

I love New York City!

My family took a trip to the heart of Manhattan.

What better way to show my love for fashion than in one of the fashion capitals of the world!

Here I am perched at "Top of the Rock." The crisp air was upon us. My cheeks were frozen to the core so I bundled up with these cozy accessories. My thoughtful Aunt Marcy gave them to me for Christmas. I love her dearly. Anytime you plan a trip to NYC, be sure to pack mittens!

Can you strut your stuff on the runway? You sure can in New York City. We stumbled upon this runway at H & M in Times Square. Fortunately, I happened to be wearing one of my favorite outfits in my whole closet. My grandmother bought this at Gymboree. The sweater dress is fuzzy and cute, and the Penguin makes me feel happy. The leggings match perfectly.

No trip to New York is complete without a night at a Broadway Show. Here I am at *The Lion King*. This was my favorite part of the trip. I love to dress up and get fancy. This was a brilliant opportunity. I chose to wear my beautiful Christmas dress from H & M. It was cold outside, so I paired my dress with sparkly leggings and a sequined crop sweater.

The day we decided to take a relaxing stroll across the Brooklyn Bridge it started to rain. I whipped out my flowery umbrella. Amazingly, it coordinated with my outfit. It brightened up this cloudy day!

I decided to wear something comfy for the long plane flight home. These bright flashy leggings are from the store Justice. I was brokenhearted to be leaving NYC, and the bright colors cheered me up.

Goodbye for now, New York!!

I will miss you!

The Fearless Kitchen - Drink to Your Health – by Marcy Lytle

We are officially in the “Dead of Winter.” I can’t be the only one who is drooling at the thought of spring while grey drizzly skies tower overhead. As if the subzero temperatures aren’t enough, this time of year leaves many people feeling a little under the weather. Unfortunately, whether it’s a cold, the flu, or even just allergies, many of us are constantly fighting something. No one enjoys being sick, and let’s face it, a congested, snotty nose and hacking cough isn’t very romantic for that Valentine’s Day date. That is why this month I’ve collected a couple of my favorite cold and flu-busting tips and recipes to share.

One of the most well known recommendations for fighting the flu or other physical ailments is to stay hydrated. But, not all hydration is equally helpful. It’s best to avoid dairy, sodas, excessive alcohol, and anything with a crazy amount of added sugars. Drink plenty of soup broth, 100% juices, tea, and water to help the symptoms subside quickly. Tea in particular is a wonderful remedy. Any tea will do well, but ginger, garlic, or even fennel, have extra health benefits if you can stomach them. One tea in particular is a super hero when it comes to helping your immune system: rose hip. A cup of rose hip tea has 710% of your daily vitamin C allowance, which will make your immune system happy.

See below for some other drink recipes that will ease some nasty cold and flu symptoms. You’ll notice there are three commonalities in each recipe. *Lemon juice, honey, and a warm liquid* is a fantastic starting place for any cold. If these recipes don’t entice you, start with these three ingredients and go from there.

Happy February everyone, and I hope you have a great Valentine’s Day. Feel better out there.

Best Hot Tea for a Sore Throat

Serves 1

Difficulty: 

Earl Grey tea is by far my favorite tea out there. But aside from its fantastic taste, it’s a great tea to drink when your throat is screaming. The bergamot oil in the tea mixed with the honey really does a great job at coating the throat.

Ingredients:

1 bag Earl Grey tea
8 oz very hot water
2 tsp lemon juice
1-2 tsp honey, or to taste

Directions:

-Steep tea bag in water until desired tea strength. (The bag recommends 3-5 minutes, but I just leave the bag in the cup while I’m drinking, for even more flavor.)
-Stir in lemon juice and honey to taste.

-Repeat as often as necessary.

Bran's Dram

Serves 1

Recipe courtesy of *Bon Appetit*

Directions: 

Sometimes a hot cup of tea can make all the difference in the world when you're feeling bad. The honey and lemon juice in this recipe help soothe a sore throat, while some say the rum is good for relieving congestion (in moderation of course).

Ingredients:

1 bag berry herbal tea

1 ½ oz white rum

¼ oz lemon juice

1 tsp honey

Directions:

-Steep tea in 6 oz hot water for 3- 5 minutes, or until desired strength.

-Stir in rum, lemon juice, and honey, adding more as desired.

Homemade Cough Syrup

Makes 2-3 servings

Difficulty: 

I haven't come across a cough syrup that is particularly tasty, but this homemade version is a far cry from Robitussin, and it works wonders on a nasty cough. Word of caution, the cayenne pepper does make it a little spicy, but it can easily be adjusted according to taste. Also, make sure to shake/stir the mixture before each use, as it doesn't completely dissolve.

Ingredients:

¼ tsp cayenne pepper

¼ tsp ground ginger

1 Tbsp apple cider vinegar

1 Tbsp warm water

2 Tbsp honey

Directions:

-Dissolve cayenne and ginger in cider vinegar and water.

-Add honey and shake well.

-Take 1 to 2 Tbsp as needed for cough.

Tried and True - Candy for Him – by Marcy Lytle

Red and pink heart boxes full of candy line the shelves everywhere, as well as those fake plastic roses. There are, of course, the real roses that are arranged so beautifully in a pretty vase, ones that are waiting for some prince of a man to stop and purchase and bring home for his sweetheart.

I don't know about you, but I don't want a box of candy or flowers for Valentine's Day. Chocolates are not a treat to me, and flowers fade so quickly, so I personally would rather go out for a fun evening to celebrate with Him.

But what about making him feel special this Valentine's Day? What about leaving something on his pillow, in his lunchbox, on the driver's seat in his car, or just handing him a little treat after you eat? Most husbands I know do love candy and treats and anything sweet!

Here are a few ideas that are small yet sweet, and easy to pick up and dress up, to give to him this special day, and they're super inexpensive!

Chocolate Covered Almonds – [These](#) are found in the produce section of your grocery store (at least they are in mine) packaged in a clear plastic box – and they are oh, so good! My husband loves them. Just take some of that leftover red ribbon from Christmas and tie it around the box (remove the price label first!) and leave it on the seat of his car.

Chocolate Laceys – Have you tried these? They are found at [World Market](#) and they're dressed up cookies that are flat, thin, and laced with chocolate. These macadamia ones are to die for, and he will love finding this cute stacked set of treats waiting for him next to the coffee pot! Just stick a red bow on top!

Cranberry Scones – While you're at World Market, pick up a bag of [cranberry scone mix](#) if you think your sweetheart might like something non-chocolate to go with his coffee. Either set aside a time to make and enjoy these together, or make them ahead of time and set out on a pretty red plate the morning of...

A Simple Chocolate Bar – My husband loves [Hershey's](#) with almonds, or a Mr. Goodbar, but he rarely buys these for himself. Think of his favorite candy bar and purchase one (or two), wrap them up in a tissue paper with a sticky note on top, and place in his lunchbox or if you can – deliver it to his office and surprise him!

Bakery Delight – Why not stop by a bakery and pick up a red velvet or carrot cake cupcake and save it for just before bed, to enjoy with two forks, just you and him? Bakeries are full of decadent desserts this time of year, so choose a large cupcake that's good for sharing. You could bake these cupcakes yourself...but why? Set out a pretty blanket, sit close, and enjoy.

Wafer Cookies – These are inexpensive, crunchy, and filled with flavor and one of my husband's favorites. I have no idea why, but he loves [wafer cookies](#), so maybe your guy will too! These are also found at World Market (they have LOTS of goodies!) Find a cute paper sack, place these down inside, fold over the top and place in his hand before he leaves for work.

See's Candies – My sister brings these to us each Christmas and we pass around the box choosing our favorite piece. If there's not a See's near you, you can order online, and they have tiny boxes as well as large ones! Check out their [lollipop box](#) with four flavors – 12 pops! These would be cute to take out and share with the family, all stating what you each love about “Pop” as everyone enjoys the licking...

None of the above costs very much money at all, and I bet your guy will be super delighted to receive any or all of them! Those listed are some of my husband's favorites...so think of your guy's sweet tooth and fill it!

HOME

Practical Parenting- Birthday Party Mania – by Mandy Major

February is the month of the year I spend my down time planning vacations to the beach. I dream of warm sunshine on my skin and my kids beg to go swimming at an indoor pool. (I guess you could say we are summer people!) This is also the month in which I was born...

Growing up as one of many children, birthdays usually meant I got out of chores, got to choose dinner, had cake, and a few simple gifts. I never felt like I missed out on anything! It was a special day, but not really a big deal, either.

Have you been to a birthday party recently? Parents rent out bounce houses, skating rinks, and arcades! Having children, it is hard not to get caught up in birthday party mania. Your children get invited by a friend at school and the party is at some awesome trampoline park. *Who wouldn't want to go, right?* So you go, and you stand around making small talk, and the kids run wild. *Fun, right?* Not really.

After doing this a few times, we were invited to our neighbor's birthday. He was turning 7, the party was at their house, there were 7 boys there, and the kids played together the whole time. Some adults stayed, some left. At the end of the party, Blake and I realized we actually had fun! We got to know our neighbors, we actually talked while the kids played, and there was no standing around watching the kids eat pizza! That was the event that changed the birthday mania for us.

The simple thing my neighbor Lisa taught me: These kids are at school together all the time, all they want to do is play together! So why not let them? Birthday parties are now easier, and my kids love thinking up what kind of party they want to have! We've done everything from bug parties to video game parties. (My caution here is to avoid Pinterest!)

Birthday survival tips:

- Keep it simple (buy a cake if you want to!)
- Keep decorations to the cake table. You don't have to go overboard!
- For a 1 year old the party should be mostly about you! Celebrate that you made it a year, give the baby a cake, and take pictures! Invite the people who helped you make it through the first year!
- Have kids invite the same amount of friends as how old they are turning. This is pretty appropriate until age 10! After 10 you can work it out with them depending on what they want to do.
- If your kid brings home an invite from school, ask them about the kid who invited them. I like to ask my kids the next day, when they're not thinking about the invite! Make sure they're actually friends! (A lot of times the whole class is invited!)
- Go if you want, but don't feel like you have to.
- Consider a friend birthday party limit (maybe three parties this year.) When there is a limit, your kids think about whose party they really want to attend!
- Consider having the party at your house. Let the kids just play, have a theme if you want to, but keep it simple!
- If the party is at your house, consider adult beverage options!

Simplicity beats mania any time, and fun will be had by all...

I Don't Do Teens - 10 Ways to Alienate your Aliens – by Marcy Lytle

All parents at one time or another look at their teens and say to themselves or out loud, “Where did they come from?” because we just can’t figure them out, their temperaments, their actions, and most of all the way they dress! Our teens are not meant to be clones of us, even though some of us secretly desire that. They are meant to be who God created them to be – them! And if we want to connect with them, love them, and support them, we have to be aware of ways that are certain to alienate these aliens who are growing up in the rooms next door to ours...

1. **Constantly say, “Because I said so.”** There is a time for that phrase, I suppose. But think about your reasons for your rules and explain them to your teens. They’re more adept at understanding than you think (at least sometimes.)
2. **Embarrass them in front of peers.** Correcting and scolding and shaming our teens in front of their friends can damage them for life. If they’re acting inappropriately, call them aside in a one-to-one talk and correct them in love, but never in front of others.
3. **Dress like they do.** Oh, I’m for staying young, for sure. But most of our teens don’t want us wearing matching tees or short shorts and being seen beside them. Really? Keep the *matchy-matchy* for well...I can’t think of a time when that is a good thing.
4. **Leave no room for grace.** Hard-nosed parenting with a rule book and a ruler to swat the rule-breaker makes for a less than happy home. Rules are great. But our teens will fail at times, and we must extend grace and love them like He loves us. Pray for your kids. And when they fail, receive them with mercy.
5. **Never listen to their side.** Kids have reasons for what they want to do. Hear them out. Talk it over. And make your decision. But always listen to their hearts. Sometimes you’ll see something deeper than the “absolute need” they’re stating with their words.
6. **Compare them to their siblings.** Okay, so your oldest is a model example of a kid, a perfect student, a loving child. So, what? All of your kids are different, and they should never be compared to their brother or their sister. Comparison is never a good thing, when it comes to teens.
7. **Give looks of disgust.** You know what I’m referring to, here. Across the room you spot him/her eating with their mouths full and you look at them with those stern eyes of complete disapproval until they squirm and realize what it is they’re doing. Roll your eyes elsewhere, and talk to your teens in private, and correct them gently.
8. **Make them say “thank you,” or “hello” to your friends.** I still don’t like being told to “Go say hello” to this one or that one. Be a good example in front of your kids, and they will notice and follow suit. Train them in the privacy of your home on proper etiquette with each other, but don’t pull them by the ear in public to perform for you.
9. **Make them be what you weren’t.** Maybe they’re a star athlete or an excellent student, and you’re so proud because you weren’t so good at sports or academics. But be careful that when you urge them to play on this team or score that goal that you’re not trying to fulfill your own missed dreams.
10. **Use scripture to scold.** Scripture, for sure, is a great instruction manual. But if we throw out a verse every time our kids mess up, they will develop a distaste for the Bible and only see it as a rule book of do’s and don’ts, instead of the story of a loving God who

sent his son to die and offer us life. Instruct your teens, love them and be a good example, and use the scripture to teach and encourage, not to place a heavy burden of shame and guilt.

We are going to mess up, as parents, and our kids are going to pull away from us. That's all a natural process of growing up. And we're going to feel at times as if our teens are from another planet. That's okay, too. But what we can do is make an effort to assure them that they are loved, accepted, and prayed for and cared for, so that we aren't the ones pushing them away ourselves. When they pull away naturally, they'll return again to our open loving arms. But when we push them away regularly, they just might walk away for good...

Pray for wisdom and love to reign and rule with you and your little aliens, who sometimes think you're an alien, as well...

Happy parenting!

A Night to Remember - Value Day – by Marcy Lytle

What if Valentine's Day were changed this year to be called "Value Day?" That doesn't sound so exciting, does it? But what if we were able to make our sweetheart, our family member, our friends, and those we know feel valued on Valentine's Day by the things we do and say?

Valentine's Day is all about boxes of candy and flowers, for the most part, in the stores and on the television commercials. But nothing makes for a better Valentine's Day than to know you're valued, and to make someone else realize their value, as well.

Preparation: You'll need construction paper of all colors for this devo: white, green, red, purple, etc. folded so they make cards. Include glue, and a gold piece of twine or thin ribbon. You'll also need to freshen up on how to make a paper airplane! Finally, you'll need a few Starburst candies.

Think of those for whom you'd like to do something special for, this Valentine's Day. Maybe it's the following people, so let's see how we can present to them their value, so that V-Day takes on a whole new meaning in their lives...and ours.

Galatians 5:6 says...

"The only thing that counts (or has value) is faith expressing itself through love."

Valentine's Day is all about showing those we care about our own expressions of love.

Teachers: Write your teacher a note, telling her/him what it is that you value about their teaching, their kindness, or even their rules. Really think about what makes your teacher unique and enjoyable, and write that down on a piece of construction paper, decorate it, and slip it in an envelope – handmade especially from you!

Parents: Cut a tree out of green construction paper, and small red circles (for apples) out of another piece of red paper. Take turns one at a time gluing an apple to the family tree, stating what you value and appreciate about your parents. Kids can do parents, and parents can do grandparents, and kids can do grandparents too! Soon you'll have a pretty, fruitful tree!

Sisters: Ask each member of the family to single out the girls in the bunch, either the sisters, or the mom, or even another girl who seems like a sister to your family. Use the gold thread to make her initial and glue it to the front of your purple card. Inside, write down what you love about her, and get it ready to mail or hand it to her, right where you sit.

Brothers: Now it's the boys' turn to be valued. Fold a piece of construction paper, any color, into a paper airplane, writing on the wing something you value about the guys in the family. If they're with you, send the plane flying their direction, for them to read. If not, prepare to mail.

Pets: If you've got a family pet(s), you'll want to let them know of their value to you, as well. Construction paper might not be the best way to do that, but you can stop the lesson now and toss them a treat, and watch them eat, petting them in affectionate love and adoration.

Friends: These are the kids at church, at school, or in your neighborhood that you love and value, but sometimes there are too many to handwrite a note to each one. Pick one or two special friends and a card for each. Using their first name, write it down vertically and then think of words to describe them with each letter in their name. Tape a few Starburst candies onto the front, and plan a time to deliver these Value Day cards.

Ourselves: Sometimes we need to stop and realize our own value to God, and how much he loves us and lavishes that love upon us. Take time together to express praises to God and what you value about His love in your lives, and then sit and listen to Him speak back to you about what he values in your lives. Speak aloud what you hear, to share with the family.

Family Prayer:

Thank you Lord for Valentine's Day, a day that we get a chance to express our love and your love to those you've placed in our lives with value. And thank you for being the most valuable of all...

Life as We Know It – One Full of Faith –by Erica Simmons

The Best that Never Was.

That is the title of the Marcus Dupree ESPN *30 for 30*. *30 for 30* is an ESPN sports show that highlights the lives of athletes and Marcus Dupree was an amazing running back from Philadelphia, MS who went to Oklahoma. As an avid football fan, my television spent a lot of time on ESPN over the winter break. So on Saturday morning when I turned on the television, I was able to catch ESPN's *30 for 30* on Dupree. The title says it all. Marcus Dupree was a great athlete coming out of high school, but never amounted to what he could have been at the next two levels of football.

He was the best that never was.

We all think about the life print we will leave, and watching this show made me wonder about mine even more. If I were to go be with the Lord today, it saddens me to say that this title would too be very befitting of my life. This very morning I was spending time talking with the Lord and I asked Him to show me what is holding me back – holding me back from taking off this weight, holding me back from being more financially secure – holding me back from my professional passions. And then this show was on my television when I turned it on.

You see, the guy who was “best that never was” had a lack of discipline issue and he was quick to give excuses – two personality flaws that also resonate with me. I don't have to really watch my calories, I'll start tomorrow, no one cares about my ideas, and on and on I go, headed down my own road of “the best that never was,” giving up too easily, never trying.

This column is supposed to be about parenting, so what has this topic to do with parenting?

Everything.

I have written about legacy before and the struggle to change the one handed down to me. And as I write this month's story, I am surprised to realize that this “best that never was” too is a family legacy. The marriage vows not honored, the life dreams that were not fought for, the settling for letting life happen instead of living a life. Until this moment, I thought this was a first generation legacy I was starting. The good news? It is not. The bad news? It is more entrenched than I realized. The best news? It is still not too big for my God.

My “life as I know it moment,” the moment that I face a truth so profound that I cannot continue to live my life the same, is right here, right now, as I write this story. I asked my Heavenly Father to show me why, and the simple truth is **I lack faith**. I work hard in my own strength and when that does not work or it is too hard, instead of turning to my faith, I turn to my excuses. They make me feel better and they let me say it is not me, but the circumstances. That is my problem. I see this pattern in my children. Yes, yes I manage to see the speck in their eyes, past the beams in my own. I now know it is a “destroy it in my life and it will be destroyed in theirs” type of victory.

So how do I take this truth and use it to live my life differently? This is the hardest one so far. These issues have been ones that have plagued me for so many years. Ones that time and time again I have yielded the victory to. They are true life changers, literally, to live a healthier life, to go after the passions of my heart and to be disciplined in a way I have never had to be disciplined before. I am basically sitting at the crossroads of freedom or continuing to live in

bondage in these areas of my life. I can continue to be ashamed when I see a picture of myself, or miserable when I go to work because there is so much more I want to do, or to be stressed about my financial future or about my boys' future.

“One step at a time,” my Heavenly Father tells me gently.

So that is how I will do it. I have decided to share the journey with anyone who wants to join me. I have created a blog that I will use to share. This is not for show; rather, I am asking for support and encouragement as I change my life story from possibly the “best that never was” to the “best in Christ,” and for others to join in to do the same.

Let's create a community of online Christians sharing their Christian journeys. Let's show each other it does not always have to be pretty to be a life in Christ. It just has to be one filled with faith.

Blog address - <http://lifeasiknowit-thymemag.blogspot.com/>

Email address – godspassion4us@gmail.com

Everything Home – The Fun of Change – by Mikaela Cain

Last month, our living room looked boring to me.

I wanted a new couch.

But, the *saver* in the family reminded me that we needed to use that cash for a grill, a headboard, and pictures of our vows on canvases. He was right. So, I decided to freshen up the tactile features within the living room, instead. We couldn't change something as big as a couch right now, but we had other options to help freshen up the room. We took a date to IKEA and bought some new accent pillows and a red throw. We washed our current pillows (and moved one upstairs). When they were all together, we had a cozier couch and warmer living room over all. It was a simple change, but it was different enough to satisfy my need for something new.

Growing up, I had the same wallpaper, curtains and bedspread for 10 years. I valued each element for the memories it held and saw the style as almost a tradition. I also wore my hair two ways: down or in a pony tail. I found a necklace that matched an outfit and stuck to it. But, I'm not that way, anymore.

I feel a lot more freedom in the fun of change, now.

I have **a few things I'll never change** in my decorations. There is a picture of Grant and me that has been on my bed stand in every room I've lived in since we started dating. That's never going to change. There are just a few special pieces like that in my home. I care a lot less about the plastic pot I bought at Goodwill. I got it because it matches my theme, and I move it around frequently. Neither decorating method—sentiment or just matching—is right or wrong. To me, our decorations, like our attire, reflect both who we are and how we feel in the moment. Although the overall theme may not change much over the years, the details and way it is expressed can. It's all about what we want to say. Right now, I'm having fun with my home, frequently, but without changing too much at a time!

Switching out knick-knacks is a simple change with a big impact. I have a lot of ceramics from my pottery classes in college, many of which are neutral colors. I like to exchange the pieces every few months. That little switch alters the overall look in the same way that switching jewelry does to an outfit. Edgy earrings provide an interesting contrast to a flowery dress, and a string of pearls accentuates an elegant dress. Accents complete outfits, and can make their own statement. Knick-knacks work for or in contrast to a theme in a similar way. When I want to add contrast to a white and grey theme corner, I might throw in a red-tinted tea pot. When I want it to be subtle, I'll switch it out with a white one. There is no commitment when placing knickknacks or textiles. If you don't like something after a couple of times passing by through the room, you can easily change it. Sometimes, I change the colors based on the season – weather season – or emotional season.

Another great way to change a look is to **change the books on a bookshelf**. The colors of book covers dramatically influence a room's color scheme. I only display books that color-match our living room. I also like to display the books that Grant or I have read, and would recommend to others. Approving the color and content narrowed down our options; but thankfully, we have a

lot of books! Every once and a while, I decide that I want to add more color or less and will switch out the books with others stored in my office. Book covers add a lot of color, and I have to be careful to think about what people's eyes will be drawn to and how I'd like for the eyes to bounce around the room. I am constantly thinking about how I want to feel and how I want others to feel in my home, especially the living rooms. And, I've learned that it's more fun (and often surprisingly effective) to **try new things** than to stick to one, seemingly perfect composition.

I created a list of projects to do when we moved a year ago.

We've complete most of the tasks.

We hung the pictures on walls, added curtains, built a faux book shelf, and decorated most corners. But, I still get an occasional itch for change. I've found little ways to spin décor and change the feel.

I used to be intimidated by change, thinking that if I changed anything, I would have to change everything. I don't feel that way anymore. A key to easy, inexpensive home adjustments is to focus on the tactile, knick-knacks, and books.

A key for expressing yourself in your décor is to not be afraid to change things every once and a while, and try something new!

The Family Practice - Snuggle Time – by Rachel Toalson

So much of the day whirls on by. There is getting ready for school, and there are home lessons for the little ones not yet in school and there is picking up from school and there is snack time and homework time and dinner time, and before the day is over I hardly know what's going on in the minds and hearts of my children.

In a household of six kids, it's often challenging to find time to simply look into the eyes of one of them. It's challenging to slow the world of meeting needs and picking up and making sure they're fed and clothed and bathed, because they're all still little, and some of them need much more help than others.

It happened a couple of years ago. I was out shopping for Christmas gifts. We didn't have much to spend back then, either, just like this year, because money was tight. There were two brand new babies. We were drowning a little. I found myself walking up and down the aisles trying to figure out what to get for my second and third sons. I walked and I looked and I blinked away tears, because I realized I didn't really know what sorts of toys they were interested in lately. Life had sped up with those two brand new babies. I didn't get to watch the others play anymore, because there was always a baby crying. I didn't get to share their quiet time, because I usually fell asleep while the babies were sleeping. I had no idea what they would want for Christmas.

The others I knew, because they were two babies, and how could you go wrong with a rattle or a teether, and the oldest is strong-willed and challenging and demands more time than most of his brothers on any given day. But those two easy kids, they always made wise decisions, and they helped wherever they could, and they played together happily and quietly. I racked my brain trying to remember what they played with. Puzzles? Games? LEGOs?

That was the day I came home and decided something needed to change. That I never had the opportunity to talk on-on-one with any of my children bothered me. There never seemed to be a good time in all our home schedule craziness, so my husband and I resolved to make time.

We carved out 15 minutes at the end of every day to take one boy and play with him.

We call it *Snuggle Time*.

It's not ideal. We'd like to be giving 15 minutes every day to every single son, but for now they have assigned evenings, right after silent reading time, when they'll spend time with just me or just my husband and talk about anything they want to talk about and do anything they want to do (Within reason. No screens.). They get our undivided attention for 15 minutes. We sit and connect and fall even more deeply in love with these amazing little people who share our home.

On our most crazy days, it feels nearly impossible to think about our boys as individuals instead of a collective. I talk about them and look at them and talk to them as if they are a collective, not individuals, mostly because time is short and it's just easier and there are so many. But they are

not a collective so much as they are individuals, and what Snuggle Time does is it helps them realize that they are each, individually, special to their mama and daddy.

We get to talk about their dreams and what they're struggling with at school or at home and how they wish they could have their own room, and would it be possible, someday, maybe? We get to hear about that thing their friend said that got them in trouble, and we get to hear about how they're worried about their common assessment test this week and how they really don't like this new church as much as the old one. We are often surprised by how much our kids open up during this special time.

And, sure, there are days I get to that Snuggle Time and I dread it a little, because it's been a rough day, but I'm *always* glad I carved out that time and filled their love tanks another day.

What to do with snuggle time:

1. *Set a timer for the length of Snuggle Time.* Let your kid choose what to do. Play a game or draw or color or do a puzzle together. Anything that opens conversation and allows the kid to feel like a parent is spending quality time with them.
2. *Come armed with some questions.* Not yes or no questions, but ones that foster communication. Questions like: What did you like best about your school day today? What was the hardest thing you overcame today? Or ask some deeper questions. What words would you use to describe yourself? What do you like best about yourself? What do you most like to do? What is beautiful to you?
3. *Soak up your child's presence.* Listen to the way he breathes. Look at his hands and his long, lean legs and the way his face has suddenly lost that little-boy look. Enjoy the time you have and let the rest of the world slip away, if only for a few moments.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - When the O Becomes an A – by Marcy Lytle

While I iron, I think and talk to God. And mostly I complain. It's the time I use to unload my questions and "wonderings" to him, because I know he already is aware of what's in my heart, anyway. So I use that alone time, with the slow moving back and forth of the hot iron over the wrinkled creases, to ask him, to wonder about why things are the way they are, and to listen to see what he says back to me.

This particular morning I was wondering again at why his ways are so hard to understand sometimes. I wondered why the elderly have to suffer so much physically and mentally, and how it's so hard to watch and observe. I wondered again why there's no assurance of tomorrow, and why in the Lord's Prayer he instructed us to pray for this day's bread only. I wondered about all of the same things I've wondered about a dozen times before, because sometimes those wonderings just get the best of me and cause me to then wander...in my faith.

As I was pressing, steaming, and admiring my work (I love to see the clothes transform from wrinkled to smooth – it just amazes me!), I poured out my wonderings and then I waited to listen. And I wondered if my wonderings were grieving His heart, because they weren't new wonderings, they were the same old ones he had listened to before, whenever I was tired, weary, and overcome with life and its hardships. And I wondered if wondering is a wrong activity to allow my mind to do. But how could it be wrong?

Wondering led to the discovery of a new world. Wondering caused try after try until the light bulb actually worked. Wondering isn't in and of itself a bad thing. It can be an amazing thing when it leads to discovery and new horizons.

But when the **o** in wondering becomes an **a** in wandering, then we have a problem.

When a baby wonders why his hand gets slapped over and over when he goes for the plug on the wall, he will learn to obey without understanding or he just might hurt himself or even die.

When a toddler wonders why mom says "no" every time he reaches for that glass vase on the table, he is angered until he wanders over and breaks it, cutting his hand. He then understands.

When a teenager wonders why it's not okay to just drink and drive anyway, because he certainly can handle the wheel, it won't be funny when he wanders into another lane and hits a car head-on, possibly ruining his life and the other driver's, for good.

When a young adult wonders why sex isn't something to be experienced instead of something to be revered and he wanders a bit too far, she might shake her fist at God when she finds herself pregnant and unwed. "Why, God, did you do this to me?" might be her wondering thought.

When young parents wonder why God isn't answering their prayers for their sick child but instead that child suffers and possibly dies, they might wander away from the truth that God is good and He's good all the time.

When seasoned parents who've achieved their dreams suddenly experience a huge downfall in finances, they might wonder what they did wrong, or why God is mad at them, and they then wander away from the love and unity that once had as they served Him together, looking for solace in another relationship.

When we start to see a few gray hairs, and we then see our parents feeble and failing, we wonder what life all about. We wonder if we're just going to get old and pass into obscurity, and that wondering might lead to wandering down a path of self-destruction or discouragement or depression.

I looked up the word "wonder" in the Bible and the majority of findings are in the context of His wonders and the wonderful God that he is. That should be our focus. We should look at creation and wonder and marvel at all that he's made. We should obey his word and see wonders unfold before us as he provides and leads us, even in paths that sometimes are full of hard rocks. We should praise him because we are wonderfully made, and he is a wonderful Father.

Wondering about how things work and how they can be better is one thing. But wondering why to the point of wandering away is another.

I finished my ironing and smiled at his reminder to watch my letters.

Has your **o** become an **a**, and you find yourself wandering aimlessly, into dangerous territory, head-on towards certain death?

There are reasons and knowledge that he has for how he's set up this world to be, and there are reasons and purposes to suffering that we cannot see. We can wonder until the cows come home (I've heard that saying somewhere), but we won't ever understand this side of heaven...

So we can choose to be amazed at his wonders and the wonderful and loving God that he is, or we can wander around until we burn and scar.

I knew better than to touch my hot iron when I finished ironing, so I unplugged it and walked away. And I learned that from someone once telling me that the iron was hot and would burn me.

I'm thankful that my Father listened to me spew my **wonderings** to him this morning, but I'm more thankful that he kept me from **wandering** the rest of the day away from his peace...

Under the Influence - I Thought It'd Be Pretty – by Marcy Lytle

I wanted an orange olive oil dispenser as an accent piece in my gray and white kitchen, to set out for a pop of color. However, it wasn't as nice as I imagined. I thought it'd be pretty.

There was this gray and white memory foam large rug I bought for my bedroom to place partially under my bed and have the majority of it cascade out across the floor toward the bathroom. I was excited to bring it home and place it, and it was okay, but...I thought it'd be pretty.

I saw pages in magazines of cute ways to put together scarves and skirts, camis and coats, and tops and totes and I cut them out, hung them in my closet to use for inspiration when I got dressed to copy some of those looks. I thought it'd be pretty.

I arranged my front porch with a sparkly white wreath and a lantern that flickers at night, alongside a comfy chair with a new cushion in a pattern that speaks winter, hoping for a cozy cute spot as a focal point for the house, but it lacks cohesion. I thought it'd be pretty.

I spend a lot of time and effort trying to make things or myself pretty, presentable to others, something I enjoy looking at, or something I hope others will look at and enjoy, too. This is part of our culture and our persona as women to want "pretty," whether it be on our bodies or in our homes. Pretty things grab our attention and don't let go until we own them or until they own us...

It's funny and can be amusing at how often we search for that pretty thing only to place it, set it, wear it, or look at it and realize it's not as pretty as we imagined, it doesn't look quite right where we placed it, or it certainly doesn't look as pretty on our bodies as it did in that photograph where we saw the pretty item in the first place.

And yet, we keep searching for pretty.

We thumb through magazines or swipe through photographs of celebrities in their bikinis and want to be pretty like they are. We sit in a crowd and observe her style or her bag that hangs so effortlessly pretty on her shoulder, and we wonder why we can't pull off that look. We shop until we drop for that perfect set of dishes; that chair to fit that space and fill up the room, or those towels to hang for guests to use and see and feel. We want to get it right, to arrange it just-so, or to pick that perfect hue, so that it all presents a pretty picture.

And time after time, we're disappointed that our imaginations and thoughts don't play out as pretty as we had hoped, and we're disappointed.

So we keep searching for pretty.

And then time passes, all of the pretties we placed last year now suddenly look old, dusty, and tarnished, and we put them away or give them to charity, and we start the search for pretty again. The seasons change and that which looked pretty last winter is now out of date, and we search for pretty this year. Only thing is, what's pretty has changed.

In fact, pretty is ever changing and ever elusive and ever deteriorating.

It's February, well into the New Year now, and I woke up just this morning not feeling pretty, dissatisfied with that orange olive dispenser, and wondering if the aging process is going to be my friend or my enemy. And I greeted the day with this sense of disappointment in the pretties of life.

And here I am near the end of this article, and I need to wrap up all of my "pretty" thinking and leave us with some sort of lesson or truth or wonder...

Here it is.

I'm going to leave the orange olive oil dispenser right where it is because it was a gift, I wanted it, and I've already used it, so it's staying. And I'm going to admire it, somehow make it sit pretty, and enjoy the cool shape that it is, even if the orange hue isn't exactly the enhancement I was hoping for in my kitchen.

I'm going to flip through pages of magazines and admire the pretties that I see here and there and perhaps copy a style or two, and I'm going to make those styles my own, create a new look that's not on those pages, and I'm going to be pretty...because I am pretty...and beautifully made.

I'm going to sit on my front porch in the comfy chair, with the light flickering beside me, and the white of the wreath catching the rays of the sun above me, and I'm going to smile because it's my porch, where I arranged a cozy cove, and I'm going to smile wider because I thought it'd be pretty and it is...to me.

And finally...

I'm going to embrace this month and each month to come, enjoying the pursuit of pretty, because I'm changing on the inside, searching for healing and hope and higher places in Him, so that those ugly things that have made me want to hide and have hindered my self-esteem are replaced with the beautiful things like peace, contentment and joy.

Beautiful is a step up from pretty. It's a higher place than the ordinary. And it has nothing to do with colors, cushions or rugs. It has to do with letting Him make me into His image, carry his thoughts, fall in love with His ways, and lay back and breathe allowing Him to do His work in me.

And when His work is complete, I will not be disappointed stating, "I thought it'd be pretty," as I rearrange and replace and rework and walk away regretting what He's done.

We are beautiful in his sight in all of our colors, our shapes, our placements and our purposes, when we know that we are loved and cared for by Him. And then the shopping, the searching, the setting and the sitting will be pleasantly attractive and pretty for now and for all of tomorrow...

I thought I'd be pretty...and I am.

Healthy Habits – Movement Melody – by Ginny Hurley

Exercise gives me energy! The more I move, the more energy I have. As I walk, run, bike, or do any choice of movement, I realize that I have more energy when I am finished than when I started!

Let's start with three definitions...

Sedentary: sitting too long

Sediment: matter that settles to the bottom

Move: change position; put in motion

Music changes everything!

I believe God gave us songs, melodies, and tunes for times of stillness, peace, and MOVEMENT. Our bodies were made to MOVE! All of creation is thriving with the joy of movement. In heaven and on earth things are moving! God created us that way.

So, our bodies move to the melody of life. If we work inside all day at a desk, we can MOVE. If we work inside all day in a mundane factory, store, or any place, we can train our minds to hear the music, and move to the rhythm of that beat.

At your desk:

1. Hold your breath and tighten your abs and back. Count to 20, five times. Sing the numbers.
2. Stand behind your desk, grab the edge with arms straight and tight, place legs about three feet behind you, straight, and do push-ups. Hum a tune and count. Repeat.
3. Turn on music and tiptoe around desk or work center. Then giant step, skip, bunny hop, lunge, leap, whatever makes you smile! Your colleagues won't laugh. They will join you!

During lunch hour:

1. Walk outside for a picnic, and stroll around the area. If it is a parking lot, a huge office building, or tiny building, just find a place to MOVE and enjoy some songs. Ask your colleagues to join you.
2. Always take the stairs! If it's a short break or an hour for lunch, find a friend and take two stairs at a time. See how many flights you can build up to. Take your tunes, or sing!

While at home:

1. Stretch while watching children, cooking, or watching television. Sit on floor in a V sit, which is just legs forming a V. Reach center with both hands and count as your fingers 'walk' out as far as you can reach. Sit in an L sit, which is with legs together. Reach and count. Tap out a song as you go. Repeat.
2. Go outside and walk! Run! Swing with the kids! Play ball with them. Throw, kick, jump rope!
3. While cooking, hold the counter and stand on your toes, hold, come down. Repeat!

4. While washing dishes hold the scrubber, do leg lifts, or swing your legs in an arch.

Running Errands or Going Out:

1. Always park as far as you can from your destination.
2. Take the stairs instead of the elevator.
3. Walk fast from store to store.

Be creative, but have FUN! You don't have to be athletic, or even enjoy exercise to MOVE! Remember the music! I am a health and physical education major who has lived through many fads and ideas that have fallen into the archives of ancient history. However, God created us to MOVE! That hasn't changed.

He said to lift up holy hands, dance, and move to the rhythm of His Heart.

From the tip of your head, to the bottom of your toes, you were created to praise Him and MOVE.

And your body and soul will respond in health when you do!

Beauty for Ashes - More than a Thing – by Pam Charro

Sometimes...

The world looks to be such a dark place that I get completely overwhelmed with life. When I consider all of the bad things that happen or could happen to people, I can become afraid to leave the house. My thoughts seem to be especially negative and fearful in the middle of the night when I can't sleep. I imagine what it must be like for those who are suffering or what might become of me or my children if this, or that, horrible scenario were to take place.

Sometimes...

Life doesn't seem to be a very valuable thing. People are mistreated, hurt, raped and murdered as though it were no big deal. As though we were nothing more than things to be abused, with no higher power to answer to.

God's Spirit was with me recently when I was having some of those thoughts; I was also remembering some things that had happened to me that had left me scarred and confused. He helped me to get in touch with my pain, held me as I cried, and then he said,

"You are not a thing. You never were. Imagine those things happening to someone you love - could they possibly be made less valuable by those horrible occurrences? I am the one who decides the value of a human being, and I love all people; from the prostitute in the big city to the child dying of hunger in Africa to the criminal in prison to every person that you know. People are never, ever things."

That night was a huge eye-opener for me.

I realized that no amount of wrong thinking, power, or hatred can make me or anyone else less than the beautiful creation God says we are.

I began to see a bit more of the incredible amount of value God has placed in every human soul.

No amount of temporary suffering can ever take that away.

Created for Life – That Smile – by Ginny Hurley

I call her Granny, as she is the BEST granny my kids could ever have! They adore her! She used to take them on 'Granny Adventures' in the van she and Dad got, just for the grandkids. Since my oldest child was a tiny preemie, she helped keep him away from any germs in the nursery, so I could enjoy all the happy activities without worry. She was truly an incredible cook and all the family gathered at our house or her Mom's house (who, by the way, will be the subject of another story) for all the holidays and special events. I would say Mom's life has been centered around family and close friends.

Mom never worked outside of the home. She is one lady who has been called genteel and elegant, quiet and shy, all while being loving and sweet. She's like a southern belle that grew up in Dallas and San Antonio. However, she and I are like night and day, rain and shine, sunrise and sunset. In other words, we are pretty opposite. Her skin is still perfect. I have more wrinkles than she does at her youthful 87 years. She always told me, "Stay out of that sun! You will be sorry one day!" I tell her now that I would do it all again, for the pure pleasure!

She smiled her smile.

Health was one of Mama's fortes, years before it was a fad. She always had two vegetables and a salad at every meal. She will deny this, but I don't remember many desserts. She didn't eat sugar or carbs for quite awhile and I remember going to health food stores before there were so many at every corner. When we moved to Austin, we had to drive down Guadalupe Street in the center of town, to find a tiny little health food store. She made me drive, and I had just gotten my license! She didn't know her way around yet!

She smiled her smile.

Not once did she miss an event or recital that we were in! She made all my costumes, while declaring, "I do NOT sew!" She even made the elf shoes that I needed for some crazy thing that I did! While I was participating in girls' basketball games, powder puff football, and tumbling on mats to music, she bought us tickets to the symphony, stating, "It will be good for you." I remember sitting in the back of the beautiful auditorium making wisecracks with Dad, while watching all of the elegant jewelry and furs walk by (on their owners of course) instead of listening to the music. I was a rascal...

She smiled her smile.

One of her greatest gifts was the library and my love for reading! We spent hours strolling the aisles and discovering the great treasures hidden on shelves. Then we found a cozy spot and sat down to dream and go to any place we chose. Mama never told me what book to get or what to read. Now I *love* to read many different kinds of books, and I can't wait for holidays when I check out 10 at a time! I am rarely without one...

This makes me smile.

Mom gave me ballet lessons that I liked, but I much preferred modern dance and jazz. I wanted to choreograph everything! After seven years of piano, Mama said that I needed

to choose, piano or dance. Of course that was a no-brainer, and now Mama had some extra cash since I wouldn't need to see that piano teacher again.

Mama smiled her smile.

To top off Mama's best effort, she sent me to the Jean Johnson Success School, which taught young ladies how to walk, sit, and do things properly. We even had to practice at home walking with a book on our heads. No kidding! I stood on my head and put the book on my feet. Then I called her to come and look!

She smiled her smile.

One silly memory I have is that while my dad was away on business, Mom sometimes let me sleep with her. We talked and I was silly. I remember one night asking her what she was putting in my lunch for school the next day, as we didn't have many snacks. She said she would get up in the morning and pop popcorn. For some reason it struck us as hilarious and we laughed and laughed about her getting up to do that. Tears rolled down our cheeks as we got that picture in our minds.

We both smiled...a lot.

Right now, she is here at my house on what she calls her *vacation*, giving my sister a much-needed break. I am keeping Mama. She still lives in her house with my incredibly wonderful sister, who helps care for her while still working full time. At this point, Mom can take care of herself as far as staying home alone. However, she no longer cooks anything other than scrambling an egg or heating up a frozen dinner. She spends most of her time relaxing and enjoying her comfortable bed while watching her favorite news and classics on television. She has loved her family, her life, and her Lord. She has outlived her husband, a grandchild and a great grandchild, most of her own family and close friends.

I remain amazed at my Mama. She is not famous, never even did anything noteworthy that I know of, yet I realize that her influence will continue for generations to come. All those lessons that I balked at, the support and unconditional love she absolutely always gave, and her gentle wisdom now make me smile.

I understand how she let me be myself, free, joyful, and full of energy. She never tried to make me someone else and I never remember her saying a negative word to me or about me.

I hope I have passed that down to my kids, and I believe they will continue the course.

The goodness of God never ends!

It truly continues for generations to come.

And that makes me smile...

MARRIAGE

In This Together – V-Day Reinvented – by Sarah Stennett

When you read the words “Valentine’s Day” what do you think?

Do you feel like boycotting the day?

Do you hate it?

Is it over-commercialized?

Singles Awareness Day?

International Love Day?

Where do our personal perceptions of this day come from?

Let’s go back to childhood to see where these feelings started. The sweet all-inclusive elementary school Valentine swaps turn into more sporadic middle school awkward giftings (think mini heart shaped boxes of chocolates with Garfield on the front). Then, in the wild jungle of high school hallways, flowers and heart shaped Mylar balloons clutter classrooms and hallways of the doted on girls. And finally, it progresses to the more sophisticated roses and perfume or jewelry in young adulthood. By the time a few years of marriage have been lived, the most common Valentine’s Day gift is a card and chocolates and most often celebrated with a nice dinner out.

My husband had his own perspective on the day. For as long as I’ve known him (we were friends throughout high school and college before dating) he’s felt exhausted by the hype of New Year’s Eve. As a teen hanging out with my brother watching TV in the basement, he’d explain,

“You have to be in the coolest place with the best people, wearing a cute outfit, and drinking the finest champagne. There is always a FOMO (fear of missing out) factor when it comes to ringing in the New Year. And regardless of how you spend the evening, it never seems to live up to the hyped up expectations of certain social circles.” (Well, maybe High School Rob didn’t use those exact words, but you get the idea.)

As it turns out, he feels the same about Valentine’s Day. It’s too much hype. The same jewelry stores begging for your business in December are out to conquer you this month. And the flowers, a must on this one day, are not only hard to find, but marked up ridiculously. But for husbands, it has to be done. And it has to be done well, to woo with romance, according to our cultural norm.

I think for me, this day has always been a little different. High School Sarah was trying to turn her attention and affection toward God, instead of dating boys. So, I had decided that instead of joining the other single girls in hating on Valentine’s Day (that always felt like a bitter reaction stemming from rejection to me), I’d to use it as a day to show love for those who were my near and dear. So I handcrafted Valentine’s cards (yes, with construction paper hearts, paper doilies, and handwritten words of encouragement) and baked cookies to hand out to my friends because I wanted them to feel loved on the Day of Love. Through dating relationships, engagement, and marriage, my Valentine’s Days became more “typical” in that they usually involved flowers and cards but also lots of love and romance.

It wasn't until a few years into our marriage that Rob and I addressed these perceptions. After an honest conversation about the day, we asked ourselves how we wanted this day to reflect our core values, in a way that High School Rob and Sarah would be proud.

His long held belief that it's overly hyped had led him to dread having to put on a horse and pony show for me. And my perspective of wanting to love those who were not part of a romantic relationship kept me from fully throwing my all into the romance part, too.

We knew what we didn't want that day to be for us, so we started to ask the question,

"What do we want Valentine's Day to be?"

From that conversation, we came up with these four basic thoughts:

1) We need to make a gesture of love for one another that speaks volumes to how captivated we remain.

If you've ever been single on Valentine's Day (and I've been single on many of them) you wanted to have someone to share it with. Some to kiss and love and read Shakespearian sonnets too. But just because we don't go all out and spend a ton of money, it doesn't get us "off the hook" to dote on each other. For example, last year I got Rob tickets to see an NBA game, as he had wanted to go to a game for a while, and I presented them in a nice card over a lovely dinner at one of our favorite restaurants. He, on the other hand, spent an hour leading up to our dinner locked in our office trying to print something. Over dessert he gave me a simple case filled with 52 envelopes, each holding a small piece of paper explaining something he loves about me...to be opened each week all year long. Needless to say, I felt silly with my basketball tickets, but it's not a competition between us. We're simply trying our best to show that we hear one another and are working to touch one another's hearts.

2) Our kids need to see us love each other on this day (and every other day.)

Parents are, far the most part, just these two beings that tell us what to do and not to do. But on Valentine's Day is our chance to show our kids that we are human beings who love each other too. Well, every day is that. But on Valentine's Day, when they are hearing the messages sent from the world around them, they need to see us fighting for each other. The kids should know how much we love one another.

3) It's fun to pull them into the holiday and lavish them with love.

It's not just romance, but a day to love on our near and dear ones. I don't want my girls growing up feeling sidelined on the holiday to the point where their emotions hinge on whether or not they have a "Valentine" each year. It's important to me that the girls know our love for them too, demonstrated in a tangible way. A few years back we started a family celebration involving red and pink heart decorations, heart shaped food, and a small gift for each girl (an age-appropriate book with a handwritten love note from each of us written inside of the cover). It's so cool for us (and them) to go to their Valentine books on the shelf and read through the letters we have written to them over the years.

4) There's no need to spend a ridiculous amount of money

Usually spending lots of money is something we do when we haven't thought of anything ahead of time. Some of the greatest gifts Rob and I have ever given to one another have cost very little to nothing. Sure, there's grocery money or budgeting a meal out, but we draw the line at \$200 bouquets and fine chocolates imported from Belgium. One of our core values is to be good stewards of our money, so we simply can't justify lavish things that are short lived for the sole purpose of impressing one another (because perhaps we are trying to impress someone other than our spouse?).

These four principles charted the course of Valentine's Day and its role in our married life. We still celebrate one another. We often go out to dinner, but sometimes decide to say in an order takeout for a romantic dinner at home, while kids are asleep upstairs. What we do isn't as important as how we try to make one another feel cherished. Our girls know it's a special mom and dad date-holiday. And they also know we always do something special to lavish our love on them, too.

We've all had a lot of bad Valentine's Days in our life, but that doesn't mean all of them have to be bad. This one can be good or even great. I'm sure we aren't the only couple out there who had been operating out of the norm in our Valentine's Day observances more so than out of our shared purpose.

So if you haven't chatted with your husband about your perceptions and how they meet your core values to observe the holiday, I encourage you to go for it! You may find that you have totally different needs or expectations than the Stennetts, and that's great.

But I encourage you to make this V-Day fabulous, as one that really strikes a chord with your identity as a couple!

Date Night Fun – Two Beating Hearts – by Marcy Lytle

Valentine's Day is this month and some of us have great expectations for romance and fun. Others of us could care less, because February 14 is just another day of the month like all others. And still there are those of us who are sad because we want the romance, but there's no one to plan it for us! I say take the opportunity to plan a date night with him every weekend this month. After all, it is Leap Year and there's an extra day on the calendar for fun with him! And since there are red hearts on shelves everywhere, our date night ideas will get your own red hearts pumping and alive...

Brisk Walk Together – Walking is good for the heart, and walking hand in hand with him is good for so many things! Scour your city for a new trail you've not tried before and plan a date revolving around that trail. Make it a 3-mile walk and stop at each mile, to do something romantic. Stop 1 could be to snap silly pics or videos of each other. Stop 2 might be to pull out a couple of romantic poems you've written to each other, and Stop 3 can be to sit and enjoy a hot thermos of coffee and homemade cookies you made together beforehand. These [red velvet](#) ones are decadent and well...red!

A Stirring Read – Reading to each other is very romantic and engages both of you in the story, and in thinking about what the story is saying. Pick a book on a topic you both are interested in, say cooking, for example. Or maybe you both enjoy travel. Start at the bookstore or library and find the book to read together. Drive to a pretty overlook and sit in the car before sunset, to read aloud, taking turns. Head to your dinner reservation at a nice restaurant and as you eat, discuss what you've read. Can't think of a book? Try this one, [Traveling Light](#), by Max Lucado. Or what about [Michael Symon's 5 in 5 Cookbook](#)? Reading together stirs the heart as one!

Nuts about You – This is a date night in, at home by candlelight, and it involves all things nuts. Make sure the entire process is done together from preparation to cleanup. Set a [nut-scented candle](#) on the table and light it ahead of time so the scent fills the air. How about [cashew-chicken](#) for dinner? This recipe is easy and so tasty! And finally, for dessert, enjoy this honey almond vanilla cake. While it's baking, sit and share the nutty things you like about each other, and put on the movie [Mixed Nuts](#), if you'd like...and see if your heart isn't healthier by night's end!

Memories that Smile – Remembering all of the fun times you've had together is good for the heart, so make date night "memory night." Think of your favorite places – coffee shop, restaurant, sight, walk, etc. – and make a schedule to hit all of them in one evening. Finally, end the night with one new activity to make a new memory together. Consider playing cards by a fireplace, maybe [Gin Rummy](#)? As you end the evening, give thanks for the memories you've created together, another good-for-your-heart activity.

I Love You – Show your date the love on date night by using all five senses to let him know, and this will make his heart beat wildly! For the sense of touch, offer him a massage on his shoulders. For the sense of sight, take him to see his kind of movie – whatever that may be. For the sense of hearing, pull the car over and either sing him a tune or play a favorite, as you look at the night sky. For the sense of taste, include an [Italian soda](#) and a box of [shortbread](#)

[cookies](#) from World Market. And finally, for the sense of smell, take him to a coffee shop and let him purchase a new bag of beans he can grind and enjoy!

Two beating hearts that pump strongly for each other – that's the celebration this month! You don't have to spend a lot of money to have a fun night together, one that's full of memories and romance. All it takes is a small amount of planning and a circled date on the calendar...

After 30 Years - We Both Wear Buttons – by Marcy Lytle

We all have them and touch them; buttons, that is. Even the Pillsbury Dough Boy has a belly button that when pushed makes him giggle. Sometimes we have buttons that are barely hanging on by one loose thread on our shirts and if we aren't careful, one wrong move and that button will fly. We encounter buttons on the elevator and buttons in the kitchen. They're everywhere, even in our emotions, especially with him...

No one can push our buttons like our spouse can. You know, those words or looks he gives, that way he does or doesn't do, or the accusations we both sling from time to time. When one of these words or actions is hurled, it's like pushing a button that turns on the music way too loud because someone left the volume turned up and we cover our ears. Or all of a sudden, a flood of reaction come out of our own mouths much like the rushing waters of Niagara Falls, only the scenery is not quite so stunning in the picture we've now created.

I'm thinking that when we marry, we come with a jacket all buttoned up tightly because of our childhood wounds and hurts, to protect and cover ourselves from outside wind and breezes. However, those buttons are sometimes barely hanging on by a thread because they have been yanked on too many times, and our spouse is the one who can barely brush up against us and send a cascade of buttons falling to the ground, leaving us exposed to the blast of the cold.

After decades of being married, my husband and I both know what buttons are barely hanging and what not to do, to unravel that last thread. But sometimes, our own weariness or thoughtlessness or even selfishness pushes us to carelessly tug on the buttons of the other one, forgetting what happens when we do. And then we have this mess of buttons on the floor, loose threads that need be pulled out and re-sewn, and an exposed and gaping wound now flung wide open.

It happens.

I can use the phrase, "You NEVER..." and right then, I've pulled a loose thread. I can start with an accusation or a pointing finger that attacks his very nature, the good man that I know he is, and disintegrate his self-esteem with just a few words, and several buttons fall. And sometimes my own lack of taking care of myself by not eating and sleeping properly results in my inability to keep quiet instead of speaking, because I'm so tired that I just want to spew. But when my husband receives that splatter, he has to fling off that tightly woven protective covering so that it can be cleaned and he can fun free...from me.

Have you been there?

I brought into my marriage some religious buttons that I'd shut tightly and never wanted to be opened again. I also carried a bit of shame for things I'd done, so that part of my heart was fastened and covered as well. He came buttoned up with loud, large buttons that brought attention to his covering, because he wasn't listened to very well, as a kid. And so when we married, we both had dozens of buttons we never wanted to be touched, unbuttoned, or messed with – at all.

As we live and grow and breathe, and as we fight and discuss and make up, and as we push and uncover and restore, some of those buttons are removed for good. Some are completely restored and buttoned up, because they belong in place to be opened and shut at will. But some of those buttons still sit there, now brittle and fragile, and they break into a hundred pieces if they're manipulated by our words and actions.

I think as we've matured, we've come to realize that neither of us is perfect, and we won't be until all things are made new. And part of our respect, honor, and love that we are to give each other is to learn to take care of each other's fragile buttons and not push and pull on them.

There are days when we act just like children. We're tired and cranky and we just want to go over to the other one and yank those buttons off, just to see them fall and make noise. But when we do, we have to be prepared to clean up the mess, restore the gaping wound, and say "sorry" for what we've done.

What buttons do you wear?

Can he push them and pull them? Do you adjust and straighten his? Are there some buttons you can loosen or remove altogether?

I've been thinking about all of the buttons that I wear that I don't want to be pushed or pulled, and I'm praying that I'll have the sense to only wear the buttons that improve and function as adornment on my appearance. I'm hoping that I'll carefully let Him remove any loose threads and let old rotten buttons die. And I'm believing that I will grow to love my husband more so that I leave his button adjustments to the Father too, and my job will only be to leave those buttons be...not disturbing them or opening them...or pushing them to send him on a 30-floor drop.

We married people are going to push the wrong button at the wrong time, and pull buttons completely off, causing hard falls and exposure that stings.

But one day, the only button we will all have left will be just like the one on the dough boy mentioned above. We'll be naked and unafraid, exposed and unashamed, and when anyone comes by and pokes or prods, all that will happen is a laugh that makes everyone smile.

How close are you to that day?

I'm sitting next to the Seamstress right now, asking Him to advise me on where to place my buttons or if I need to leave them off completely of the coverings that I wear...especially when my husband enters the room.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – So Think About It – by Rachel Critz

We have all heard the words,

“You cannot hang out with your friends until your homework is done.”

“You cannot go out until your chores are finished.”

And the worst words of all,

“You’re grounded.”

Those words are definitely not the greatest things to hear. Neither is that stomach twisting feeling we get when we know we have done something wrong and can feel the punishment coming. Or we get punished for something we did not know was wrong, or something our brother and sister might have done and we took the heat.

Exodus 20:12 says,

“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land of the Lord your God is giving you.”

From a lot of personal experiences, getting grounded is not fun. I feel like I have failed or disappointed my parents so much they have to take something from me until I get the point.

Several years ago, I tried to see eye to eye with how they view the punishment and I never understood why they felt the need to take my Nintendo away from me. Granted, I did not try very hard on my homework, so they had the right to do that. But at the time, I just really wanted to play *Mario Brothers* again. I was so furious that I could not have my Nintendo back I decided to play the silent treatment.

Trust me. I know now that this is not the best tactic if we want to get something back from our parents. After thinking about it for a while, I realized something. They do not enjoy punishing us as much as we do not enjoy getting punished. To take something from your kid that she finds joy in might can't be the easiest thing in the world.

Our parents only ground us for our own good. It's so we can learn a lesson for later on down the road, when we have our own kids to teach lessons to.

Proverbs 6:20 reads,

“Keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching.”

When our parents punish us, they do it out of protection and love. That may seem hard to understand, but take God as a fantastic example. He loves us more than our parents love us and He gives consequences to our actions because he loves us and wants us to learn.

Colossians 3:20 states,

“Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.”

Not only does listening to our parents encourage them, it brings favor to our Creator and he will smile down at us when we obey our parents.

Ephesians 6:1-2 says,

“Children obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother — which is the first commandment with promise.”

So think about it.

Being told to clean your room might be the first step in not being the annoying messy college roommate.

Moving Forward - I Was the Fat One – by Pam Charro

I always liked my food.

Ask anyone in my family.

My older sister used to call me Pamela Pooh Bear (and it wasn't because I liked Winnie the Pooh, either). My grandma told everyone at my bridal shower about the Thanksgiving when I was five years old and someone left the mashed potatoes in front of me; the entire bowl disappeared. And my dad always loved to sing "Fat and Skinny went to bed, Fat rolled over and Skinny was dead" as my sister and I went off to sleep.

It didn't help that my younger sisters grew up effortlessly active and thin as well, while I remained bigger and taller than all of the kids my age. I thought about food way too much; it had become a best friend I could always depend on.

I am sure that very little of the teasing was meant to be malicious, but the enemy sure used that negative label to try and take me out! I became very insecure about my looks, and, as I grew older, wanted so very badly to be slender and beautiful. I started dieting before I was even a teen, attempting to lose weight with any program I could get my hands on. I lived in an all-female household, so most of us fought our weight to some degree as we got older. It was the '70's and most girls I knew just wanted to be thin, no matter the cost. I even became bulimic for a short period of time since it seemed to work for many of my friends. One summer, when I was 16, I lost ten pounds in two weeks by starving and taking stimulants. During that time, I fainted twice and my gums got white dots on them that I believe were the beginning signs of scurvy.

Sounds pretty sad and hopeless, doesn't it?

But then God showed up.

I not only survived those years, but actually learned how to thrive, despite my messed up thinking. While it has been difficult to overcome my negative self-image, God has faithfully taken an unhealthy obsession and turned it into a blessing, not only for myself, but also for others. My quest to be thin has led me on a journey of learning to love and respect myself and my body and I know so much now about health and nutrition. I also have a deep compassion for other women who struggle with the same issues and I really want to help them. All because the enemy hated me and wanted to kill me!

Despite my own vanity and insecurity, God took hold of "the fat one" and made me into something that could bless the world.

He is not through with me yet, but because he has already turned a seemingly hopeless situation into something with such promise and potential, I am excited about the beauty he has yet to produce in my life.

Thank you, God!

One of my favorite places to meet with God is my garden.

This is how it started:

About seven years ago I saw, in my mind's eye, a group of people sitting around a covered patio in my backyard, singing and praising God. The same idea surfaced in various ways over the next several years....a place to talk about God, a place to pray and sing, a place with water and plants—a prayer garden! At the time, my backyard consisted of one lone tree and thriving weeds. The small 4 X 8 concrete slab by the back door soaked up and reflected the heat of the southern sun with no shade to soften it. The dog path beaten around the fence and holes in the yard defied anything to grow. Yet, the picture persisted and words were spoken over me and to me that indicated this was more than a personal desire.

Despite the sense of a spiritual origin, the idea seemed to be my own imagination, not a reality within my reach—I didn't have the resources or know-how to accomplish it and my backyard wasn't anywhere close to that vision. But I *had* been seeking God in the area of faith, asking to be more aware of His voice.

What if the Holy Spirit is speaking to me?

How do I know?

As often happens, doubt, excuses, and fear wrestled with Truth:

Without faith it's impossible to please God—Hebrews 11:16;

We walk by faith, not by sight—2 Corinthians 5:7;

My sheep hear My voice—John 10:27.

I decided to take a chance and *believe* that I was hearing the Lord. I decided I would rather stand before Him someday and say, "I did what I thought I heard You say," rather than, "I heard but was afraid." I took a step of faith by pouring all the faith and finances I had into a large round concrete slab. Since then, it's been a journey of obedience and faith, and God has provided in amazing, unexpected ways.

The prayer garden is still a work in progress. It's a place for God. Not that He needs it, but I do. It's a place where I spend time with Him and get to know Him better as I work and pray. As I soak in His Presence I become more firmly planted. As I exercise faith in His Word I become more firmly planted. Roots grow deeper in the right conditions, resulting in a strong plant that's not uprooted easily and has the ability to survive periods of drought and strong wind....

like a tree planted by rivers of water –Psalm 1:3

Are you listening for His voice?

Maybe you have a dream or desire you think is impossible. Maybe He's knocking gently on your heart about a seemingly small thing – *inside you know* – because His sheep hear His voice.

So listen to the Unseen and take a step to make faith *real*.

Saddle Up - Scratch That Itch – by Melissa Critz

Oh, the utter ecstasy for the horse when he gets to roll on his back after the saddle is removed or simply because the mud is there and feels oh so good!

Horses, like many other animals, cannot reach certain parts of their backs even with that long swishing tail. They have other ways to scratch that itch. Domingo, always after being ridden, will wander around, sniffing the ground and pawing, until he finds the 'just right' spot. It's usually either dry sandy-type ground or nice gooey muddy ground after a good Texas rain. He only rolls on one side a few times; gets up on his feet; finds another good spot; drops down and rolls on the other side.

I can see the contentment in his eyes.

Oh joy!

I let this roll around in my mind for a while (And, yes, pun intended.) I could have taken this as the Lord telling me to be content in every circumstance. And, yes, He does desire for us to follow that guidance. But I heard him say,

“Scratch that Itch.”

Really?

After working, whether it be a mundane job for that much needed paycheck, the daily grind of being a housewife and/or mother, or whatever is done on a daily basis for your living, you need to find time to scratch that itch. You need to find time to be alone doing something you thoroughly enjoy and that thoroughly refreshes you. It's good for you and for everyone else you are around.

But there is more to this – it's not just a 'me' time suggestion.

It's a 'me and God' time suggestion.

I find that when I am with my horses doing the menial tasks of cleaning stalls or grooming, then I have time to talk to Him, to pray, to vent, and to praise Him.

Find something that will slow you down and leave your mind time to dwell on Him.

Could it be picking up that brush again and dabbling with watercolor or oils on an empty canvas?

Could it be some kind of exercising – stretching, yoga, Pilates?

Could it be journaling or writing?

What has it been that you loved in your youth that could draw you into some much needed down time where you can also spend time listening to your Father?

I encourage you to take some time this winter and seek Him about what it could be for you to have some time refreshing yourself while enjoying some time with Him – scratching that itch!

And all you have to do is listen if that is what He is calling you to do.

Our Father wants to have time with US!

Isn't that crazy?

The Lord of the Universe, Creator of All, wants to just be with you and guide you, speak with you, listen to you. So find what that may be. You won't regret it.

After all that daily work for others, it feels good to lie down and scratch that itch and be with your Father.

Real Stories – All that Matters – by Marijoy Horton

I wondered the other day if I viewed Jesus as my back-up plan. I had consoled a dear friend when she expressed disappointment that all her hard work didn't have the payoff she wanted, and I said in the Christmas spirit, "But we have Jesus!"

Later folding laundry the question popped in my head, "Do I really get excited that I have Jesus or is it only when I'm out of options?"

For example: We didn't get the job--we have Jesus. We lost the pregnancy--but Jesus. We blew up another relationship--Jesus.

Is Jesus just my consolation prize?

Of course I want Him to be my first, last, everything, and even still, I resort again to my efforts, my way. And then the hard stuff hits and I remember, oh yeah I need peace and joy, and oh yeah, Jesus.

Dang it.

If only I could remain in that place of resting in Him, the whole "I shall not want." You know...the abiding thing.

Me – God = Nothing

Me + God = Everything

The math is clear, right?

By the time you read this I will have just turned 40. But I know less now than I did when I was 20. Sentimentality has taken over, and I am looking back...20 years flashing. Life rewinding and pausing, moving forward.

What remains?

Wedding, graduating college, marriage is hard, religious baggage unwinding, friends scattered, career compass haywire, identity lost, get a grip, BSF, substitute teacher, high school teacher, new friendship forged, prayer, fighting my husband's debilitating depression with him, job loss, job changes, marriage fortified, trusting, family dynamics evolve, goals, children, success, surrender, enjoying church, shalom, sickness, dysfunction, failure, job loss, job change, sleepless, fresh eyes with babies, friendships, move, awkwardness, death, unity, love, new places, new faces, truth, thinking, living simply, letting go, writing, preaching, the happiest place on earth, the poorest places on earth, struggle, growth, hope, justice, home school, grateful, pain, public school, press in, waiting, pride, insecurity, regret, try again, and always—Jesus.

What remains?

Nothing and everything.

When I forget to fix my eyes, He is undiminished. And when I strive and fail and then turn to Him again, He is unoffended. My focus or lack of focus does not deter Him from giving me life to the

full. It just may not be the life I envisioned. He never promised, "If you believe it, you achieve it!" He never said, "In this world you will not have suffering."

He never, ever is swayed by our disappointment, indifference, weariness, anger, neglect, pride, fear, doubt, sin.

Me + God = no longer me. And if I were a math wiz I would express that "minus God" is absolutely impossible. My logic or lack of logic does not change the reality that Jesus is in all and holds all things together. We are not unable to separate our movement from His, nor can we separate our power from His. It is both/and. And why am I attempting to formulize Spirit anyway?

So, maybe sometimes I do just go to Him for relief.

But today, I remember and I say it, "You are all that matters."

Today, abiding is closer to breathing.

And "but we have Jesus" is consolation and completion.

"He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together." Colossians 1:17 NLT

"So you also are complete through your union with Christ." Colossians 2:10 NLT

"...be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us." Colossians 3:11 NLT

I'm Marijoy Horton. I kicked off the New Year by chopping off my two feet of curly red locks because I needed a change, and it seemed better than getting a tattoo (although it's still on the table, FYI Mom). In addition to cracking the code on having a clean home without doing much, I'm compelled to write and teach about Jesus no matter how hard I try to avoid it. I'm passionate about religious rehab, I am an everyday advocate for justice, and I'm an Ambassador with Noonday Collection. I have a husband that loves me well and is my friend by pure grace. (Read: I am a hot mess). And we tag-team raise our 10-year-old son, who apparently takes arbitration classes on the side, and our 7-year-old daughter, whose dessert-negotiating skills rival even William Shatner. (You can read my occasional blog here: freegirlfreeworld.wordpress.com and shop fair trade accessories here: marijoyhorton.noondaycollection.com)

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Chef's Hat and an Apron – by Marcy Lytle

I can't stop watching it. Honestly, I can't. It's a video of my daughter's two oldest kiddos in their chef's hats and aprons, making cookies. I gave them the cooking garb and I was thrilled when my son-in-law sent me the video. It was exciting to see them wearing the striped fabric, all while having fun decorating cookies.

I'm asking you to watch it now, and see if you see what I saw.

Gideon, age 4, is so excited to be making cookies and he decorates one like Mickey Mouse. Ayla, age 2 $\frac{3}{4}$, is equally busy making her own – but it's a girl version – Minnie. And then if you watch at the end, Gideon's face says it all. He turns around so proudly to make sure his parents are watching, and it seems they are, because he has a look of happiness and satisfaction with a smile that covers his face.

I watched this video the day I received it, and I've watched it several times since. Sure, these kids are my family and they make me smile, but I am touched and healed by watching it over and over again, because I realize that part of their enjoyment comes from knowing that their parents are watching them and loving them.

There's no performance required.

There's no right or wrong way to decorate the cookies.

There's no time restraint, just free play.

There's no look of disapproval, because the parents set up the dough for the kids to decorate!

I'm trying to get it.

God enjoys hanging out with me, snapping photos of the joy I'm having in this life he's given. He gets a thrill out of watching me use my hands to create, my voice to think aloud, and my eyes to look up to him to say, "Look at what I'm doing. Isn't it fun?"

The kids could have made the cookies without the hat and apron, but donning that "uniform" empowered them to feel officially like bakers in the kitchen producing a beautiful product that all will taste and enjoy. (And I had no idea they'd look so cute wearing them!)

God too gives us richly all things to enjoy, including his robe of righteousness that empowers us to create and make things that others will want to taste. For example, when we realize we're clean before him and he's already pleased with us, we can stand tall and use our hands to give to others, knowing our needs will be met. We can create the world around us with kindness and love toward our neighbors, because we feel provided for and loved ourselves, so why not invite others to join the party?

Nothing brings more joy to parents (and grandparents) than watching their kids at play with the things they've given them, especially when that play involves something that makes them so proud and full of joy.

God always has jobs for us to do, our lives will be painted with suffering at times, and being busy for Him is all good and great...when it's time to work and grieve.

But there's a time when he wants us to put on the hat, wrap the apron around us, get in the kitchen and see what he's laid out for us to enjoy, away from the work.

There's a time to dig in our hands and let our minds roam free to create and feel and taste all of the yummy goodness before us.

And there's a time when we look up and see him smiling, and it makes us turn around and create some more, as we show him what we've made with what we've been given.

Then he smiles, and it makes our hearts soar, and we turn around and create some more...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0kWFfY6L8I>

FRESH THYME - Silly Little Song- by Marcy Lytle

Whenever the ants go marching by, you wonder when you're gonna die

They wrap you up in bloody sheets, and then they tickle your ticklish feet

They eat your eyes, they eat your nose, they eat the jelly between your toes

Your stomach goes in, your stomach goes out and all the gooey comes out of your mouth...

That's the version of [The Hearse Song](#) that I sang as a kid, or rather I chanted. It wasn't really a song per se. We laughed as we sang it and thought it was so gross, and so funny, as we thought of little ants wrapping us large humans up in anything at all...and then eating us!

I woke up thinking of those lyrics this morning, because some days I'm hit with mortality and the brevity of life. I'm not sure why this particular song arose in my thoughts, but it did. Maybe it's because my uncle recently suffered a stroke and he's now paralyzed on one side. A few short weeks ago he could move, and now he cannot. And he's been in my thoughts.

All of us have a relative, a friend, or maybe even ourselves that have been hit with an illness, a diagnosis, or just a devastating thought of what it might be like when we die. *How will we die? When will we die? And will it be sooner...or later?*

Why, in this song, is an army of ants the main subject? I suppose if an army of ants attacked us and stung us, we might die. But I've never heard of that actually happening, so it's not a fear that ever enters my thoughts. So why *ants*?

Maybe the song is supposed to make us smile at the thought of something so small, something we can crush under our feet or spray away with a can, taking our lives. Or maybe, since ants are so incredibly wise and strong when they join together, we're supposed to marvel at their strength and become sore afraid. Whatever the reason for the ants in this particular version that I sang, the lyrics and the tune have stuck with me since I woke up this morning.

What a gross rendition of dying! After the ants go marching by, we then are wrapped up and eaten, and we puke before we die. And all of that made us laugh as kids...but it's not so funny...as adults.

Or is it?

An army of ants is not going to march by and do any of those things to us. But small things that sting can send us to certain death before our time.

Thoughts of death, how we're going to die, and when we're going to die, and why do we have to die anyway, will kill our lives that we have now.

Observing the dying and those who are ill and wondering why this or that happened will zap us of our joy that we have now, today.

Grieving over our own diagnosis or our own illness that we are experiencing won't help us improve, but it might send us to the grave sooner than later.

Little stingers in life can ruin a perfectly good day and send us into the horrors of being eaten up and being extinguished, if we let them.

However, somehow singing or chanting that little melody made us all giggle as kids. The song and the catchy tune drowned out the lyrics and the images of the words written in this death decree. The lighthearted absurdity of ants taking a human anywhere dangerous and deathly was funny. Incredibly funny. In fact, downright hilarious.

The truth of the matter for those of us who know Him is that no one and nothing is going to snuff us out, eat us up, or hide us away from living. We are going to live eternally. That's an even harder concept to grasp than that of ants marching by to snatch us. But it's true.

My uncle is near the end of his race and I'm extremely sad for him. But he's so close to a new body that is complete and whole, and that's exciting to think about.

My friend who's suffering with cancer is unbearable to watch, and I grieve at her pain and prognosis, and I don't understand at all. But I can sing a song of hope over her to lift her spirits, and send her into another realm where the spirit never dies...

My own thoughts that make me wonder and worry and wail can be lassoed and brought back in by the absurdity and futility of thinking about that which is not yet, nor will ever come...because the reality is I'm eternal now. I will never die, because of Him.

So here are my changed lyrics to *The Hearse Song*:

Whenever the clouds go rolling by, I look up and smile, and I say, "Hi!"

They quiver and quake, they darken and shake, and then they rain on my parade

They wet my nose; they wet my eyes, they soak the ground right beneath my toes

My mouth opens wide, my face looks up, and all the praises come out of my mouth.

Dark clouds might be looming above us, threatening to destroy us, but they can't. We belong to him. And even when they start to rain down upon us in the heaviest of pours, even ones that knock us to the ground, we know that clouds do not determine our destiny.

The Son does.

Are the ants marching by and making you wonder about death? Sing a song, look up, feel the rain, and open your mouth – not to spew out gooey – but to lift up praise. And laugh a little, throw your head back and let out hilarious giggles that send merriness to your heart, soul and body.

FRESH THYME - The Hallmark Jerks – by Marcy Lytle

I do love the Hallmark movies, even though they're unrealistic, totally predictable, and absolutely the definition of sappy. I watched several of these films this past Christmas season. Now, here we are in the month that houses Valentine's Day and once again we're longing and looking at commercials and television to fulfill that deep hidden desire to be loved so perfectly and completely on February 14.

However, I want to address the jerks that appear in all of these "romantic" movies. You know. Either she is so self-absorbed and judgmental that she can't realize the gentleman that he is...or he is so caught up in his job or his own agenda that he doesn't realize the jewel that she is. There's always one in every movie. And then the snow falls, the music plays, the circumstances change, and the lights come on, and the jerk suddenly changes into the star of the show, and he and she live happily ever after.

There we sit, watching this whole story unfold, knowing that he will eventually come around, she will wise up, and they will lock eyes and then lips...and then they will ride off in a carriage ride for two, completely starry-eyed and smitten for life with only each other.

We know life isn't like that. We are aware that the jerks in our lives may never make us feel special and see us for the lovely ladies that we are, and so we watch it on the screen and imagine ourselves in the stories, next to the man who now sees us as the most beautiful being in his world, and we feel comforted and satisfied after the movie is over. The story somehow satiates our thirst for romance while we crawl into bed beside the man we really live with, the one who snores, the guy who doesn't notice our new dress we bought just for him, and the man who won't watch the Hallmark movies with us.

So, does this make our husband the jerk in our story?

Valentine's Day often comes with great expectation. Some of us hope that this year, this time, he will remember and give us the gift of our dreams, and the date night of our hearts. But some women could care less, or so they say. They expect nothing, because they've received nothing for years, or either they've been disappointed and it's healthier to just give up hope, than to continually have their hopes dashed.

In which category do you fall?

I've been in the position of hoping for a romantic evening – one that he plans that meets all of my needs – only he didn't plan ahead and the restaurant was too crowded. Or he brought me a box of chocolates and flowers, but that seemed like a generic gift that would only make me fat and the flowers would fade – so I felt disappointed and told him so. It seems that we sometimes set him up for a fall, before the day ever arrives because we have an idea of the perfect Valentine's date and he can never fulfill that dream, because it changes from day to day, depending on our mood!

I remember one particular Valentine's where he gave me tiny diamond earring studs that I still wear today, and I was so pleased. But I remember plenty of holidays where I was disappointed and saw the dismay on his face when he realized that he didn't meet up. And I felt like a crumb.

When we are little girls we watch Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty, and the thoughts are planted in our heads that we are supposed to be rescued by a prince or kissed and awakened to life and bliss forever. And that experience all hinges on having the "right man" in our lives show up at the right moment.

Only those "right men" are sometimes jerks. We women are sometimes jerks. We're obnoxious and self-absorbed and looking constantly to be put on a pedestal, treated like a princess, or crowned like Miss America.

I love Valentine's Day and of course, I love to be loved and shown love. I think it's ingrained into our being the desire to be loved.

I love a good romantic movie where the guy gets it, he finally sees her, and the two become one in the most romantic settings imaginable.

I love to be surprised with a gift, swept away to a dinner across the globe (okay, so that's never happened), or to be showered with compliments. *Who wouldn't?*

However, Hallmark jerks exist in our homes, and sometimes they never come around or see us like he sees her...in the movie.

And just what are we going to do about it, this Valentine's Day?

We can release expectations and leap for joy that we are truly loved and cherished by Him, and pray for our husband to love us in the same way.

And when the 14th comes around we can make a choice to see him as a jerk, be blessed by his prince-like efforts, or lay our hand atop his and lavish love on him.

By the time you read this story, you might be looking forward to the 14th, dreading it, or it's passed and you've now got fond memories or hurts.

Let go of expectations and simply love...and don't be the jerk in your own story.

FRESH THYME - The Scent of an Orange – by Marcy Lytle

Over the holidays, I watched the movie *Christmas Oranges* with several of the little kids in my extended family and we all loved the story. If you haven't seen it and think you might, then don't read any further, because I will spoil it for you. It's the story of an orphanage and the focus is on one little girl who has the sweetest spirit, even though she has landed at the age of 12 in a home run by a mean and grumpy old man who punishes kids by sending them to the attic.

If you think that's not a good movie for kids to watch, just wait. The story keeps unfolding and keeps getting sweeter, just like when peeling an orange and all of the juiciness comes running out...

The part of the story that prompted me to write is the part where the kids all anxiously await Christmas morning, because that's the day when the grumpy man's brother (he's nice) decorates a Christmas tree with an orange for each child. These children don't get to eat oranges during the year because that's an extravagance they are not allowed.

On Christmas Eve, the sweet girl Rose has heard the other kids talk of the feel of the orange, the smell of the orange, and the sweetness of the orange so much that she can no longer stand it, and she sneaks downstairs to get a glimpse of the decorated tree. She sees it and is in awe, as she steps closer just to touch the round orange orb. But wait! There he is, he catches her, and she's banned from enjoying Christmas morning at all with the other children...sent to the attic.

Of course, we were all heartbroken as we watched the mean old man scold her, but we all teared up as we then watched what the other children did.

They were given their oranges, one by one, but one of them carefully peeled it, keeping the skin intact into one spiraling piece. Each child took out one segment of his/her orange and then put those segments together into one orange, wrapped the peeled skin around it, and tucked it away in a cloth napkin to give to Rose when she emerged from the attic.

Imagine Rose's surprise and delight as the children handed her their gift. It was breathtakingly beautiful!

I won't tell you the end of the story, as I'm going to stop here and note what I realized after watching.

We're all in one of two places, just like the kids in that story. Either we are at a time in our life where we've been so disappointed or received a life-lashing that has sent us into the darkness, or we're on the receiving end of a juicy orange of goodness that we can't wait to bite into. We all know people in both places. But we can definitely identify and learn from these children.

We can peel back our blessings and share a piece of what we've been given, and if enough of us do this, our friends will receive equal blessings of juicy goodness as well!

I have a friend at church that brings me diaper coupons weekly because she knows I help buy them for my grandchildren. That's an orange segment.

I have another friend who often shares with me an encouraging text, for no other reason than she loves me. That's another orange segment.

I have a sister who listens to my woes and my successes with an encouraging ear and a rejoicing spirit, and that too is another piece of juicy orange.

I have a husband who cuts me a flower from my backyard and brings it in to set into a tiny vase to bring color into our house. That is a slice of juicy goodness.

At the end of a given day I have a full orange in my possession if I choose to see it, touch it, squeeze it, and taste it, and enjoy its goodness poured out all over me and mine.

And tomorrow, I can look around and see if any of my friends are sitting alone in the attic and peel back my own orange to share with them when I get the chance.

I think that's how it's supposed to work here on this planet we call earth. We're supposed to keep peeling and sharing, all of us, and when we do – no one goes without feeling the love and smelling the sweetness of life – His goodness and mercy that follows us wherever we go...

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

March 2016

TIPS

Seven for You – Stir on Sunday – by Marcy Lytle

My sister has this habit of cooking on Sunday, so that her weeknights are less stressful when making meals. She works full time and arrives home very tired, and doesn't want to spend an hour making dinner. But on Sunday, it's part of her weekend routine and she enjoys planning and cooking and stirring, so that Monday through Saturday she can sit and eat for more time than she spends standing and mixing!

Sunday might not be the best night for you, but maybe there is one day or night when you have a chunk of time to make some staples you can have throughout the week for dinners in a minute. Here are some ideas for food you can prepare and store, for weeknight relaxation as you eat with your family.

Rice. Why not make a big pot of rice to be used for stir-fry, or to top with leftovers, or even to eat for breakfast with butter and sugar? It's easy to make a big bowl and store it in the fridge for later.

Veggies. Chop up all of your favorites (carrots, potatoes, green beans, onions, zucchini, etc.) and toss them with olive oil and seasonings. Spread out on two baking sheets and roast at 375 degrees for about 20 minutes, switch the trays, and roast another 20 minutes. Now you've got a side dish or add-in for quesadillas or pizzas or pasta!

Chicken. Boil or roast a chicken, debone it, and store it in a bowl. Use it for chicken salad, atop a pizza, or in a wrap, or with greens for a nice salad! You'll smile when you start dinner on Monday and the chicken is already prepared!

Snacks and Salads. Let the kids help you with this one. Cut up carrots, celery, cucumbers, etc. for salads and dips during the week. Once you've got your weeknight meal made, all you have to do is toss these items with your favorite greens and you're ready to eat! Or include a few in your lunch bag in the morning.

Soup. If you make a big pot of tortilla soup, tomato soup, or any other of your favorite kind, you can use it for a starter for a meal any night of the week. Just heat and eat, and include a salad or bread, and you'll be warm and full.

Desserts. Decide ahead of time what desserts your family will be eating and get them made ahead of time. Maybe it's one batch of cookies and an apple pie. Again, make it a family affair. Your kids will be more likely to help if they get to eat the dough and taste the pie as you all "whistle while you work."

Drinks. Believe it or not, forgetting to make the tea or realizing you've still got to fill the kids' glasses sometimes just puts you over the edge when preparing a meal. Make a big pitcher of tea, make sure the apple juice is in the fridge, and include cut up lemons, limes and oranges, for flavored waters for weeknight drinks.

That sounds like a lot to do on one stirring Sunday, but after a few hours you'll have a fridge or freezer stocked full. And when the first night of the week arrives where you're tired and everyone is hungry, a smile will sweep across your face as you remember...

It's done! And dinner is ready in just a few minutes...because you stirred on Sunday.

The Dressing - Bring in Spring! – by Marcy Lytle

I love the change of seasons, especially going through my closet to see what still looks good from last year and what new pieces I need to look for this year. The fun part of fashion is that we can change up just one piece of our outfit and feel fresh and alive, and pretty on top, at the bottom, or around our necks or across our shoulders!

Here are a few trends we might want to try as spring, Easter, and sunshine make their way into our lives...

Stripes are in for this new season and we love this [striped pleated top](#) with the layers in the front! What a great piece for wearing with jeans, skirts, or shorts. It's so versatile and pretty and it's under \$20 from Forever 21.

Show your shoulder tops are in for spring, as is lace. And this pretty [feminine white top](#) has both. It's from Maurice's and looks great with anything you want to pair it with, since the color is white!

Nautical in the detail is something you might want to try in your bag, a scarf, or on your feet. This [bucket bag](#) from Charming Charlie is uniquely adorned with a drawstring and a buckle. Very spring-like and pretty!

Silver in the spring isn't what we normally think of wearing. We usually save it for the holidays. However, these [flat silver shoes](#) from Zara are super cute, and the website even shows you an idea of what to pair them with!

The New Jean includes released and oversized hems. [Here's a culotte](#) that sports the released hem (formerly called cutoffs!) and it looks cute with a tee in spring hue to complete the outfit. New York & Company has a whole section of "new" jeans!

The crinkled look is in and it's feminine and it's comfy. Check out this [pretty blouse](#) from H&M. Pair it with jeans for a casual yet dressy look for those days when you still need to cover your arms because it's not quite warm outside...yet. This look is from H&M.

Hair accessories can dress up the dullest of outfits, and this season clips, barrettes, headbands, and hats are everywhere! These [pretty hair pins](#) from Modcloth can be worn as a set or just on one side to sweep your hair up and back.

Honestly, there are so many new trends, we could all probably wear anything and be right in style! We don't have to wear something new and fresh from head to toe, but sometimes one little change, one bangle or bag, gives us a whole new look and a fresh attitude as the temps begin to warm, and we feel a little spring in our step...so bring it on!

Selah's Style – Girls Can! – by Selah Irwin

It's a new dirt bike year, so it's time for new dirt bike gear!

Dirt biking is a muddy sport but there is no reason we girls can't look stylish doing it.

This season I went for pink cheetah print!

Fox brand has a great selection of gear for girls. The different patterns on the arms and legs add flare. They are quite flashy but they give me that extra adrenaline I need to really push myself on the trail.

Details are the key to a great outfit. Grassy green gloves give you a splash of accent color and can make you feel like you are in a meadow of beauty.

Even my helmet and goggles are coordinated! They keep me safe, sassy, and looking good at the same time.

I am always on the lookout for comfy things to throw on after a long day on the trail. These tiger jammies are from Target and these boots are so cozy they just smooth my sore muscles!

Dirt biking is a rough and tough sport, but it does not mean a girl can't do it.

I love it and love sporting my Fox cheetah gear!

What's new with you, this year?

The Fearless Kitchen - The Sneaky Chef – by Christina Vetter

Before I had kids I swore up and down that my children would eat healthy. I foolishly thought,

Whatever I put in front of them, they will gobble down with a smile, thanking me for providing such wonderful fare for their enjoyment. They will bathe in vegetables and unsweetened green tea, and their palate will be as diverse as any world traveler and chef.

Not so fast, rookie mom. I ended up with not only one, but TWO challenging eaters. I know all the parenting advice says to not cave, and that they'll eat when they're hungry enough. But they have never met my oldest. I stuck to this mindset, and thought *come hell or high water, this kid will eat what I want*. Again, rookie mom.

After eating nothing but vitamins with a side of mommy's strong will and losing a couple pounds, I knew this was not the solution for him. Hence, my mission:

I am determined to get good nutrients into things my boys will eat. I know one day they will have to learn to eat the actual foods on their own, but right now, their nutrition is more important to me than winning the battle of wills at dinner time. I'll save that for when my one year old wants to eat Q-tips out of the trash or my three year old wonders why I won't let him play with daddy's razor. Right now, my goal is to put real nutrition into their sweet little bodies, and if I have to be sneaky to do it, so be it.

I puree cooked vegetables into spaghetti sauce. I mince spinach as fine as possible and sprinkle it all over Spaghetti-Os. I slather gobs of peanut only, all natural peanut butter with a miniscule smear of jelly, on whole wheat bread for a PB&J. I do everything I can think of. But it doesn't stop there. There are so many ways to incorporate healthy foods into regular favorites.

This month I'm sharing some recipes that sneak in great nutrients. Cauliflower Mashed Potatoes, Deep Dark Chocolate Cake, and a Super Smoothie are personally some of my absolute favorites, and I love that I can whip them up and gulp them down with zero guilt. I'm constantly looking for ways to sneak in the good stuff.

If you have any thoughts, please share in the Comments section below.

Have a very happy start to spring, and happy eating!

Deep Dark Chocolate Cake

Serves 10

Recipe courtesy of *Cook Yourself Thin*

Difficulty: 

This cake is one of my all-time favorites. It's very rich and has some nutritious secret ingredients, ground almonds and grated beets! Don't let that scare you away. The beets add a depth of flavor that is earthy and just delicious with the dark chocolate.

Ingredients:

For the cake:

Cooking spray

1 ½ C self rising flour

¼ C finely ground almonds

5 Tbsp cocoa powder

1 tsp baking soda

¼ tsp salt

4 oz beets, peeled and finely grated

4 oz low-fat buttermilk

2 Tbsp strong black coffee

3 eggs

¾ C sugar

For the Icing:

½ C dark chocolate, cut into small pieces

2 Tbsp strong black coffee

2 Tbsp honey

Directions:

-Preheat oven to 350F.

-Lightly spray an 8" spring form pan with cooking spray.

-In a small bowl, combine the flour, cocoa powder, ground almonds, salt, and baking soda.

-In a separate bowl, Using a standing mixer or handheld mixer using medium speed, beat the eggs and sugar for 4 minutes until pale and fluffy. On low speed, beat in the beets, followed by dry ingredients. Add buttermilk and coffee until the batter is smooth.

-Pour into the pan and place in the middle of a hot oven and bake for 30 minutes. Test with a toothpick inserted in the center for doneness, it should come out clean. Bake for an additional 5 minutes if needed.

-Cool cake for 10 minutes in the pan and unmold onto cooling rack. Cool on a wire rack until cold.

-To make the icing: prepare a double boiler. (This can be done with a glass or steel mixing bowl set on top of a pot of rolling boiling water).

-Combine all the ingredients and gently stir together until chocolate is smooth. Stir occasionally until the mixture thickens.

-With the cake still on the wire rack, pour the icing liberally over the top of the cake and let it drip down the sides. Transfer onto a plate or cake stand for serving and garnish with rose petals if desired.

Super Smoothie

Serves 1

Difficulty:



I originally came up with this recipe to get more nutrients in my own diet, but it's been a huge hit with my ever so opinionated little eaters. You can't even taste the greens. You can use spinach instead of kale if you like, as both are packed with goodness. Paired with whole wheat toast with a thin slice of all natural peanut butter, this is my go-to breakfast.

Ingredients:

1 banana, sliced thin

½ C frozen fruit (I like a mango, papaya, and strawberry mixture, but blueberries or really any fruit except grapes work well. Blackberries leave seeds in the smoothie, just FYI).

½ C kale leaves, torn small

½ C low fat milk, more if a thin smoothie is desired

Directions:

-Using a Magic Bullet, or other blender, puree ingredients together until smooth all the way through.

-Pour into a glass and enjoy!

Cauliflower Mashed Potatoes

Serves 4

Recipe courtesy of *Cook Yourself Thin*

Difficulty:



I'm one of those odd folks who happen to enjoy cauliflower, but I know many detest it. This recipe is a great way to incorporate the healthy vegetable without offending your palate. And who doesn't like warm, comforting mashed potatoes? It's an all-around success. Serve anywhere you'd serve regular mashed potatoes.

Ingredients:

½ large head cauliflower, broken into florets (about 8 cups)

½ C nonfat buttermilk

1 pound Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cut into ½" pieces.

Salt and Black pepper as needed

½ C - ¾ C low fat milk

1 Tbsp butter

2 scallions, sliced thin

Directions:

-Place the cauliflower in a steamer basket, set over boiling water, cover and steam 15 minutes.

-Transfer to a food processor, add the buttermilk and ¼ C milk, and puree until very smooth, about 2 minutes.

-Meanwhile, place potatoes in a saucepan, add cold salted water to cover by about 2 inches, bring up to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer until tender, about 15 minutes.

-Drain, return to the saucepan, and heat over medium heat for 1 to 2 minutes to dry. Mash with a potato masher.

-Add cauliflower puree, $\frac{1}{4}$ C milk, pinch of salt and black pepper, and stir to blend.

-Heat over medium low heat, adding more milk as needed for a creamy consistency.

-Stir in butter and scallions, adjust salt and pepper as needed, and serve.

Tried and True - Lunch Break Trios – by Marcy Lytle

Whether you work outside the home, or at home with your kids, lunch is something that sometimes gets passed by, hurried through, or eaten while working, and none of those choices is relaxing, satisfying, or good! What to eat, where to eat it, who to eat with, how long to break, etc. are all questions we must decide the answers to, and more often than not lunch is not pleasant and we find ourselves about 3pm wishing we'd had that time back to actually eat and relax.

Here are five suggestions on how to take a lunch break trio that will send you back to your afternoon duties with a full stomach, a better attitude, and a song in your heart...

Salad, magazine and a view – DQ actually has a chicken salad with honey mustard that I enjoy. Sometimes I drive through, or even pack a salad from home, take a magazine I enjoy (one full of fashion and home ideas), and I park where there's a fun view (people or scenery). That combo of three makes me happy and I end up smiling when lunchtime is over.

Veggies, 15 minute nap, and dark chocolate – Sometimes on the weekend, I roast a couple of baking sheets of vegetables. Then during the week, I eat those veggies in a wrap, with a bit of pasta, or just alone with pita bread. I lay my head back and set my phone alarm to wake me up in a few minutes, and then I indulge in a piece of dark chocolate. The trio that soars!

Drive-thru, 10 minute power walk, and a song – There are days when we just want a burger and fries. And those days are okay, once in a while, aren't they? Eat your lunch, take a power walk around a trail by your office or down your street, and sing a tune out loud as you head back in for afternoon labor. You won't feel so bad about the burger because you walked those calories off...at least a few.

Nuts and fruit, the daily news, and a prayer – Sliced pear, a few cubes of cheddar cheese, and a small cup of nuts really is a satisfying lunch and good for your heart! Unroll the newspaper or look at it on line, and glance at the headlines that interest you; then pray for those that tug at your heart. End with a prayer for your coworkers (or your kids if they're your coworkers!) and get back to work.

Lunch with a friend, encouraging conversation, and a hug – On that occasion when you have a bit more time and can get out and meet a friend, make it happen. Don't gossip or complain about your lives, but rather find ways to encourage each other and talk about fun things, or things you're learning in life that will benefit you both. Before you leave, grab that hug, and promise to meet again. This trio is worth the trouble and the time...even if you're busy.

Make your own list of lunch trios that you can manage – a fun food, an activity or a good read, and an inspiration at the end. If our days are going to have to be long and full of activities, we owe it to ourselves to at least enjoy the noon hour instead of looking up to see that it's 5 o'clock and time to make dinner. And we realize we never had lunch...

HOME

Practical Parenting – Unraveled – by Mandy Major

In his book *Loving Your Kids on Purpose* Danny Silk describes “yellow trucking” as bulldozing over your child because you are the parent and you are in control. You are the one with all the power in this relationship and they have none.

I see it all the time; in fact, I experience it myself, that moment when my children push me over the edge and I become unraveled. The moment my child isn’t doing what I want him/her to do!

What do we do?

In this moment we are faced with a choice. Do we want to make this our problem, or make it their problem? The beauty of making the situation our child’s problem is we get to see them begin to take responsibility for their own choices!

Finding natural consequences takes acknowledging that our children are powerful people who are in control of themselves. When we “yellow truck” over them and take all the control from them through fear, we miss out on the beauty of seeing our children learning from their mistakes. Now sure, we can win a battle through threatening, but all our child learns is to obey when there is a punishment involved.

- I personally want my children to obey when no one is watching.
- I want my children to learn to make the right choice because it is a lot harder to make the wrong ones.
- I want my children to learn they are in control of their choices, right or wrong, and...
- I want them to learn from their mistakes.

So how do we make a situation our child’s problem? What does this actually look like?

Here’s an example of something that recently happened in our home:

My son Caleb loves to play video games and he has a hard time remembering to clean up all the remotes and games after he is done playing. I was continually calling him back to clean up and then I realized my problem was I wasn’t making picking up the remotes his problem! So I told Caleb that leaving the remotes out was a problem for me because I like the living room clean. I told him it was taking my time because I was either picking them up, or having to call him back to pick them up. Then I told him that the next time he left the mess out I was going to clean up and take the remotes away and he wasn’t going to get them back until he did a chore for me.

Sure enough, he left the remotes out again, and he had to clean all the bathrooms in the house for me! It took a few times, and a few chores, but Caleb NEVER leaves the remotes out anymore! He even will clean up after his friends now, too!

I finally made it his problem and not mine!

Coming up with ways to make things our children’s problems takes some thinking and creativity, or sometimes even having a conversation with our kids. Sometimes, when I can’t think of something I say to my kids,

“You know whenever you do _____ it really bothers me, and we all live here and need to come up with a solution. What do you think we should do about _____?”

Here's the interesting thing. 9 times out of 10 my kid's come up with worse consequences than I ever would!

Think through the things your kids do that push you to the edge. Is there a way you can make those things their problem?

I promise you when you do you will be amazed at how quickly your children respond!

Remember who put creativity in us in the first place! Go to Him in your lack, and ask for creative ways to find natural consequences. You won't be sorry...or unraveled.

I Don't Do Teens – Will This Ever End? – by Marcy Lytle

I remember times when Saturday rolled around and I thought I'd scream if I had to go to another soccer game, help with another school project, or help my teen find people to buy their cookies for their school club, to raise money. Fundraisers are the worst, aren't they? It seemed weekends were full to the brim of going and coming, sitting and standing, driving and doing, until I fell in an exhausted heap of nothingness by the time bedtime rolled around. And then I realized my teen was out with friends, and I need to stay awake until she arrived home!

Raising teens is exhausting in a different way than when they were toddlers. Then it was bandaging a boo-boo, picking up Legos, or wiping bottoms and giving baths. All activities were back-breaking and mundane and tiresome. But now that the teen years are here, emotions and busyness rule, and we think these days will never end!

Maybe you're feeling that way today, so here are some practical hints for keeping yourself sane when sanity is nowhere to be found, when teens abound:

Remove the guilt. It won't hurt if you need a break, to drop of your child for a game and choose to sit in the car to watch the game from afar, instead of on the sidelines. Bring a book and a blanket, curl up and read while you occasionally look up to see him score that goal!

Say no. Maybe this one time you can't bear the thought or the time to help with one more fundraiser, so it's okay to bow out once in a while. You'll have more energy the next time, and maybe someone else will need a break then.

Ask for help. Find another parent who's willing to trade off driving or doing chores, so that you each get a break sometimes. If you don't ask, you'll never know. Maybe that mom too is wishing for a buddy to trade with.

Set boundaries. Your teens do not need to rule you, nor should they. If 10pm is the time you must be asleep, then require them to be home by that time. Staying out until "whenever" might be popular, but as my mom said, "Nothing really good goes on after midnight." Be the parent, and stick to your guns.

Teach them. Ask your teens often about projects and teach them to place the due date on a calendar, and figure out about how much time and material is needed. Then spread out the work over the next few days or weeks, so that neither of you is panicking to finish the night before. This is a good lesson to learn.

Protect the family. If every weekend is so full that you're all exhausted, maybe it's time to cut something out. Teens don't have to be at every event, go to every party, or be gone every night. Schedule family time where you all do nothing but play a game and chill. And protect that time, letting nothing override it.

Get away. Take the family and go. Miss a game. Make them moan. But go. Pack a picnic or plan an outing at an amusement park, or just get out of town away from it all. Have an electronics-free day away from the city, outdoors playing with each other and enjoying the

sunshine. Your teens may object at first, but if this is regularly scheduled and time is well spent getting to know each other, listening to each other, and actually playing together as a family, it will be a memory they'll never forget...and an activity they'll want to do with their own families someday.

If we don't stop, say no, and set boundaries for our teens, there will be too many screaming matches, slammed doors, and unheard hearts. And before long, we'll pine for another soccer game, another project to do, etc. because they will be gone. Seriously, take the time to enjoy them instead of just pushing them out the door and running behind them to keep up.

These hectic years will end. And you might as well enjoy and live and breathe while they're passing.

Life as We Know It - The Great Exchange – by Erica Simmons

A few weeks ago I attended our Women's Ministry church retreat. There is nothing like taking dedicated time to spend with our heavenly father. There were so many great things about Him that I was able to take away from that time. One such thing was our Savior's crucifixion; and more specifically, why He went through so much suffering. All he needed to do was to die for our sins, yet he endured so much than mere death at the hand of the enemy.

As I meditated on the events from the severe whipping, to the crown of thorns, to having to carry the burden of the heavy cross beam to his own death, I began to question what it ALL meant. His answer captivated me so, to the point that a couple weeks after the retreat I posed the question to my table at our weekly women's ministry meeting. The response I got was a beautiful, and I realized the whole foundation of our Christian faith.

It's about relationship.

I imagined the emotions a death like his would evoke. Being "whipped" publicly would cause shame, humiliation, and a sense of powerlessness. Placing the crown of thorns on his head, a source of mockery, was belittling to our Savior, in an effort to reduce him below who he was. Carrying that cross, defenseless and physically "beaten" down, he dug deep and carried it to the top of the hill, to his known death.

Why? Again, all he *needed* to do was die our death to redeem us to our heavenly father.

The answer I received during the retreat was that he wanted to provide us with more than a swap of a life for a life. What he did was provide a way out for me before I knew a way was needed. He took not only my sins upon him, but also the shame, humiliation, powerlessness, mockery, belittling, and my burdens when life "beats" me down. He took them all on himself and carried them up to the hill at Calvary and they were with Him, nailed to the cross.

It was indeed not only the great exchange, but the greatest of exchanges! And as my friend Kamrin said, he did it so that we can have relationship with Him.

In the past few weeks, I realized that great exchange came with so much more. It is and will continue to be the greatest of my life-as-I-know-it moments. I remember when I first started writing this column and all the inadequacies I considered myself to have as a "single" parent. I have come to realize that they too are covered in the great exchange. The boys are now driving, and I have exchanged my worry and fear for His comfort and peace, knowing He can protect them better than I ever can. I know that there are many, many more exchanges that I will be making as I transition to this new stage of life.

What about you?

Are there exchanges you need to make with our heavenly father? The price has already been paid, and there is no reason to pay again.

Below are three beautiful songs that depict this exchange I am talking about perfectly.

[Beautiful Exchange](#) by Hillsong, [Anthem song](#) by the Planetshakers, and the last is our declaration that we [Will Never Turn Back](#) by William McDowell, we will never go back to being who we were before God revealed Himself to us... because we have been changed.

Everything Home – The Barter Blessing – by Mikaela Cain

Our house is spotless every Wednesday at around 3:30 PM. The furniture is dusted and the floors clean. The ends of the toilet paper in the bathroom are folded into triangles. My husband and I both greatly enjoy the fruit of the labor of love in our home—and I, especially, love that that labor is not mine. A friend of mine cleans our house once a week and, in exchange, I teach her girls piano. What started with one trade last summer has snowballed into so much more. I also exchange piano lessons for haircuts, baked goods and clothing alterations. The lessons added more work to the week (full with two other jobs) but I don't mind because bartering brought abundance to me—and my house—that I didn't expect.

This column is about everything about the home. But, we don't do everything in our home. Our homemaking flourished when I allowed others to lend me their strengths. My friend who cleans can do in an hour and a half what would take me all afternoon. Her speed saves me times. She also sees things I don't see, like the spots on the backsplash of the kitchen sink.

I have benefited from letting others bring beauty, skills and talents into my home.

Bartering has also strengthened my community, which blesses my home's atmosphere. The exchange of time and energy blesses each party in a way that's hard to understand. It's simply a direct-time exchange (she cleans while I teach her girls piano), but afterward, we both feel like we "got a deal." This is only possible because it is "more blessed to give than to receive." And, when we're both giving at the same time, it creates something really beautiful and abundant.

This overflow resulting from reciprocation makes me think about the Acts 2 church.

Acts 2:45-46 says this about the first Christian church:

"And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as *any had need*. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, *they received their food* with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord *added to their number* day by day those who were being saved." (emphasis added)

Notice the giving and receiving, and that the attitude is joy! It seems that everyone gave what they could, and received what they couldn't. In the context of reciprocal community, many people were saved and added to the church. I believe that when a community truly gives, blessing multiplies.

So bartering helped my community grow. I'm grateful for the way friends give, and for the way I've grown in letting people come in to serve me, as I serve them. My home has been blessed, too! My hair, tummy and house are very grateful that I don't have to do everything in my home.

My friends and family are here to help – and not just when I'm in need – but at all times.

True community comes together in hard and good times, but it grows and sustains through faithful encounters. Consistent giving and receiving is a part of that, even if it's mutually beneficial, like bartering.

A Night to Remember - Jump with the Bunnies – by Marcy Lytle

Easter is this month and there will be stuffed bunnies, chocolate bunnies, marshmallow bunnies, and real bunnies all around us. Bunnies are so cute and fluffy and the picture of joy, aren't they? His little nose that twitches and his cute round cottony tail so white make us smile. And when he jumps across our lawn we squeal and point, "Look at the bunny!" as he hops away to safety under the nearest bush, away from predators like humans and other animals. What if we could have that same joy and jump like a bunny?

Preparation: You'll just need your Bible and an imagination and listening ears for this study. It might be fun to provide sugar cookies shaped like bunnies, or some other bunny treat for the end of the lesson!

Did you know that [Luke 6:22, 23](#) says we are to leap (or jump) with joy when we are hated and pushed aside and insulted because of our love for Jesus? In fact, we are to be glad! That sounds just the opposite of what we feel like doing, right?

Let's look at a few examples of what might happen when we leap with joy like a bunny, instead of rising up to bite like vicious dog, when others hurt us because of our love for Jesus:

Hannah was on the playground with her friends when one of them started pointing to another girl in a wheelchair and said aloud, "She looks funny and weird," as the other kids started laughing too. What should Hannah do, to show love to the kids and to the other little girl? (*Ask for answers, i.e. go over and introduce herself to be an example of kindness*).

After she meets the new girl, Hannah's friends then don't ask her to play with them anymore on the playground because she's now weird too, since she has a friend who can't walk. They start whispering behind Hannah's back and when she walks by, they trip her and make her fall. What should Hannah do when that happens? (*Ask for answers, i.e. she can get up and dust off her clothes and wave at her friends and keep talking to the other girl.*)

Right now, we've seen Hannah do some amazing things even when she was tempted to treat someone else badly. That calls for a **leap of joy!**

(Ask everyone to stand up and jump as you clap your hands and make joyful noises!)

On the way home from school, Hannah decides to walk beside her new friend as she uses her wheelchair to cross the street to her house which is just one block away, right on Hannah's way home. A couple of the other kids see her and yell out to her, "Hannah, why are you limping?" as they poked at her bloody knee that she received when they tripped her earlier on the playground. (*Ask for suggestions on what Hannah can do, now!*)

However, Hannah smiled and waved proudly at her yelling friends, and replied, "I'm having a great time; won't you join me?" And one little boy heard her reply and ran over to join her, as they both crossed the street.

Hannah's response during other kids' insults caused one of the accusing kids to stop and join her. Why do you think he did? (*Ask for answers, i.e. he saw that she was different and kind and wanted to be like her.*)

What a response! What cool thing to do, even when we are being made fun of, left out, and criticized for being friendly to a stranger who might look or move differently than we do. That calls for another **jump for joy!**

(Ask everyone to stand up and jump again, this time higher and louder with joyful noise and clapping!)

It's not easy to jump for joy like a bunny when we feel like running and hiding under a bush, especially when others are making fun of us.

Bunnies are easy targets for bigger animals that might hurt them, and that's why they run and hide. But we have Jesus in our hearts and with us all the time, so we don't need to be afraid to jump for joy, twitch our nose, and wiggle our ears with pleasure – even when others are looking on and watching how we will react under pressure.

In fact, God sees us when we are at school, at play, or at home, and he is so pleased when we react with kindness when we are being hurt, that **he literally jumps for joy with us!**

(Ask everyone to give one more huge jump for joy and imagine Jesus jumping with them!)

This Easter let's give thanks for Jesus's willingness to hang on the cross, be insulted by others, and suffer abuse and rejection for us – as he counted it all joy to suffer – because he knew that the resurrection was coming in three days and that he was obeying his Father to die for our sins.

And remember what happened on the third day?

Jesus jumped right out of that tomb into life and he still lives today, inside the hearts of those who believe!

Family Prayer:

Thank you Jesus for the joy you give us in serving you, so that we can jump like a bunny and enjoy our freedom to love others, as you have loved us.

The Family Practice – Go Ahead. Take It. – by Rachel Toalson

We're at the zoo, and there are hundreds of people, and I always start out really well, in a great mood, able to handle all the people pushing past me to get to an exhibit, even though they separate all of us. I keep my eyes trained on the ones who are mine and the husband who walks behind them, like a caboose at the end of a train. I have fun. Truly.

But come midday, I'm done.

Mostly it's because I'm an introverted parent who has a low threshold for noise. And it's true that we're out in the open and the noise is dispersed, but it's also true that the ride home will be a cause for overwhelm if I don't toe the line of my threshold and stay on the safe side.

"I'm ready to go," I tell my husband. He nods and rounds up the boys, who all complain about having to leave so early, right after lunch, really, even though we've only been here three hours or so.

If I let it, this can start to fester and pull at me.

I can't take my kids for a full day at the zoo?

I can't ignore my need to be in a smaller group than this thousand one for a day?

I can't let them have a little more fun because I'm overstimulated?

But I know who I am when the overstimulation becomes more than simple overstimulation.

I've seen it a thousand times, on family fun days just like this one. I get irritable, short, speaking in a way that is not loving or honoring or even considerate, and it's like a giant fire licking at the ropes binding us to connection. It will sever that connection faster than fire burns paper.

Years ago, I read *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Quit Talking*, by Susan Cain, and I recognized myself in nearly every page. Until then, I hadn't realized I was also an introvert. No wonder I was getting so exhausted on a day-to-day basis. I had six kids (five at the time) yelling to be heard and pulling at my sleeve and asking for hugs and kisses when they fell and lost some skin (which was nearly every hour).

Boys can be incredibly loud and incredibly active, and it's not unusual that, come dinner time, I'm already done with the noise. I'm already done with my day. I just want to hide away in my bedroom and read something that takes me far away from my reality.

We can be really hard on ourselves for this primal need to get away.

There are always needs to be met, and who's going to meet them if we don't?

There is always time to be spent with our kids, laughing and playing and snuggling, and what are we missing if we don't?

There is always laundry to be folded and dishes to be washed and tables to be wiped and papers to be signed.

There's not enough time.

It would be selfish to make the time.

The thing is, I know who I can become if I don't have those 15 or 30 minutes away from all the pressures of my world. I can yell and bite and blame and regret, and what is my family gaining

in that place?

The other day, my 5-year-old came home from school, during a week when he'd been spending every afternoon at a soccer camp with hundreds of other kids. Every word out of his mouth was a whine. He sounded a whole lot like me when I've crossed my threshold.

And this got me thinking: He's probably an introvert, like me. In fact, chances are, a few of my six boys will be introverts. This means they will need to learn what it looks like to recharge, too. This means my recharge time is setting a healthy example for their recharge time.

Teaching, even in the time alone.

So we can stop making ourselves feel so guilty about taking a block of time away to get our bearings again. We can know that every time we do, we are modeling what it looks like for our kids to care for themselves, too.

Go ahead. Take some time away. Your kids will be glad you did.

How to take time away

1. Start with 15 minutes a day. Do whatever it is you want to do. Read. Soak in a bath. Draw, write, sing. Just no work. Work is not recharge time. Forget about what needs doing and relax.
 2. Explore the possibility of spending one weekend a quarter without the kids. Call in the grandparents or friends to help (trade off with friends so they can do the same). It's important for every parent to take time away from their kids, so parents can find much-needed rest. It makes family life richer.
 3. Set aside a quiet space somewhere in the house. Ours is a home library. Kids go there when they need a little peace. Parents, too. One of our nighttime rituals is to engage in a silent reading time together. This is where it happens. It's my favorite room in the house.
-

YOU

Under the Influence - No, You're Not Super Woman – by Marcy Lytle

I'll admit it, being Super Woman is an idea that has its merit, like flying through the air, changing outfits in split seconds, and looking gorgeous while we accomplish it all and save the world. But it's not what we're supposed to aspire to be...at all. Super Woman is a cartoon character, she has no real body or mind, and she only exists in films and on the pages of books. She's not real. But we are.

When we belong to any group, there is that pull to be all and do all, so that others are impressed or that we feel good about ourselves, because we're liked and looked up to for all that we accomplish. It happens mostly in these three arenas:

Home – If we're a stay-at-home mom, it's easy to get sucked up in Pinterest, mommy groups, play dates, and all things mom-related, including kids' activities and their school functions. It doesn't take long to realize that there are favorites everywhere and accolades for jobs well done, for those who perform the best or show off the brightest kids. So we sign up for baked brownies and we want them to be decadent and taste the best, so others will compliment us. We desire to prepare the coolest parties with the cutest decorations so that others think we're so creative. And on the list goes, until our to-dos and our craft boxes and our pantries look like they're stocked for a millennium and we find ourselves wanting to fly away instead of to someone's rescue!

At Church – All the ladies look so pretty, they teach or they serve or they sing or they do this or that, and here we sit week after week, wondering where we fit and how we can be seen and noticed, as well. We try to impress, we want to be loved, we hope to be noticed; only we come, we worship, and we go home feeling out of sync and depressed, because no one cares. So we volunteer, we show up at every event, we wedge our way into circles, and we make ourselves a place. The only thing is that it's hard keeping up appearances, and that tight Super Woman suit is quite uncomfortable because it's hard to breathe...much less worship!

Among peers – When we're with friends, we start talking and we start hearing and seeing. We listen to her story, observe her new purse or shoes, hear about how her kids just got accepted to this college or that one, or how she and her husband just got approved for a loan on a new house over there – in that neighborhood – the one where we'd like to live. Next time we show up, we make sure we too have a new hairstyle, are smiling a bit perkier or have an amazing story to share, so that they will envy us this time. And there we sit all dressed up in red and blue with sparkles and shines, but our friends are leaving and turning away because they're being blinded by our glittery gobs!

No one really wants Super Woman for a friend. She's too perfect. She can perform feats no one else can. And she's not accessible, not real, and not attainable. And yet, we keep trying. We think that in order to be noticed and loved, we have to fly through the sky to meet everyone's needs, look beautiful in a moment's notice with every part of our body shapely and curvy and colorful, and be the best woman with the best husband and the best kids of anyone around.

All for what?

We know that God loves us and approves of us and ours, and yet we keep looking for love in all the wrong places...

We know that outward appearances are too hard to maintain and we're to love others for who they are, not how they look. But we forget about ourselves...

We know that doing it all only results in a big crash and heart that races and a mouth that sputters mean things to those who get in our way...

So what do people do when they're driving and operating and living "under the influence?" If they're lucky, some kind person in a blue uniform will pull them over, ask them to get out of the car, and take them in until they sober up and learn to drive safely.

Don't wait until you have to be pulled over for safety's sake.

Ask God to give you the confidence at home to be the mom He called you to be, to show up at church to worship in an audience of just you and Him, and to be among your peers as yourself, in your skin, wearing your colors, and walking on your own two feet as you give thanks for how beautifully and wonderfully you are made.

And that makes you Wonder Woman. A woman full of wonder at the blessings of God her life, a lady who continually wonders at the goodness of God all around her, and a girl with wonder in her eyes at the beauty of God all around her.

Who knew?

And all you have to do is let His power transform you from being inwardly focused on approval, clicks, and accolades...to being upwardly focused on His goodness and mercy towards you and yours.

Strengthening Your Core - Can I Borrow a Cup of Grace? – Marcy Lytle

Remember the days when we walked across the yard, stepped onto our neighbor's front porch and knocked on the door, and asked, "Can I borrow a cup of sugar?" That neighbor always gladly went to her kitchen and came back with a cup, stating, "No problem," and we went back home, never really returning the sugar but so thankful she was there "in a pinch" because now we could make the cookies our kids were begging for. It would have been disastrous had we not borrowed the cup of sugar! I suppose we can still do that...if we actually know our neighbor, if we aren't fearful of who they might be, or if we were really baking cookies...but for some of us that's just not on our list of to-do's!

Remembering "those days" (which I think were mostly before my time, as well!), I thought about my neighbor in another way today. She passed of an aggressive cancer a couple years ago, and she left a husband and two little kids. I still miss her, and I still remember how I felt once I learned that she didn't have much time to live. I've had other friends with diagnoses, kids with chronic health issues, and personal struggles in relationships that have rendered them broken and bruised, and I've often had the thought,

How did they manage, I don't think I could have done that...

In other words, I've tried in my mind to "borrow" a cup of grace for what they're experiencing and I just can't. I try to imagine how I would feel in their circumstances and if I would question God, shake my fist at him, run away to another planet, or curse the day I was born.

The fact is: We can't borrow grace. We can't go to that amazing friend who is standing in faith against all odds and ask her for a cup of that which is sustaining her. It's her grace, it's in her cupboard, and it has her name all over it. We can watch her, pray for her, marvel at her amazing stamina and faith, but we can't borrow that one – that thing called grace.

Grace is given to us when we come to Jesus, the grace to forgive and we receive it and live.

Grace is given to us when we are unlovely and yet he loves us, and we receive it and live.

Grace is given to us when we are suffering and yet we understand God's presence and we thrive.

We who follow Him have experienced the grace of forgiveness and love, but until we have experienced the grace of suffering we haven't fully experienced grace.

And grace cannot be borrowed so that we can see how it works and give it back. It's a cup of sugar, so to speak, that is given to us when we need it the most in our time of need. It's the sweetness of His presence that becomes so real and tangible that it permeates the ball of dough on our counter that sits there, fit for nothing until the sugar is mixed in, that will soon experience intense heat. That intense heat will melt the sugary sweetness and transform the broken pieces of dough into the most delectable of tastes – cookies handmade by Him that he will then share with others.

Grace is personal, it's His presence that we need in our deepest hour of questioning, fearing and longing to be set free, and it's ours – only ours – when we need it. He already has the door open when we arrive on his porch, waiting with cup in hand, and he actually escorts us back to our house and stays with us until the heat is over, the baking is done, and the final product is revealed.

When that victory, either healing and life down here, or death and life up there, is revealed – then we all get to enjoy and taste the sweetness of a life well lived, and marvel at the goodness of his grace in the lives of others who walked with him through the fire.

I don't really want to borrow that cup of grace, as I've had my own cup handed to me in times of need, and the stir and the baking was not pleasant. But I do know that once the baking is over, I realize now that the grace that brought me through was none other than His presence, His sweetness, and His goodness – all freely given to me when I least expected it.

Are you experiencing your own lack of His sweetness in your ball of dough that is sitting and waiting for tender hands to mix and stir, before you face the heat of the oven? His door is open. Are you like me, and at this time in your life you're observing others being handed their cup of grace and you're marveling at their increased faith?

The best part is that although we cannot borrow grace until it's our time of need, His grace is always available, always enough, and always producing something wonderful in our lives.

[Acts 6](#) says of Stephen (the guy who was stoned to death) that he was “full of grace and power” and was performing “great signs and wonders” but...he experienced great opposition. And when he was brought before the Council, many saw his “face like that of an angel.”

That's grace.

It's an adornment of beauty only those who suffer wear the best.

And we who look on are amazed at the Light that shines upon them, and the One who stands beside them with a full cup that never runs empty.

Can I borrow a cup of grace?

No. It's something that is given, not borrowed. Stirred in, not set aside. Baked and melted, not left on the counter. Transformed and shared, by Him...with those in need.

Healthy Habits – On the Go – by Marcy Lytle

Did you know that our car can be a place where healthy habits begin and are sustained? It's true. When we're out on a date, shopping around town, running errands, or just find ourselves with an hour before our next appointment, if our car is stocked – we can get in some much needed exercise or fuel – if we just keep a few things on hand.

The following tricks and things for travel can keep you at a high energy level for the entire day, if you just take a little time to think and tote. How's that for a sentence full of T's?

Walking shoes – Keep a pair on the floorboard or in the back of your car for that moment when you realize you've got 30 minutes to take a brisk walk, but you're wearing heels or shoes that would kill your feet if you walked a mile. If the shoes are in the car at all times, you're more likely to say yes to the thought of exercise.

A nice read – Perhaps work is too much, or the kids have pulled on the last thread of your skirt, and you've just pulled up to buy groceries but you can't tolerate the thought of thinking about your list...just yet. If you've stowed a fun read in your car, one you can pick up wherever you left off, take 10 and read and chill. It will do your heart some good and give your mind a rest.

Water, water everywhere – Why not keep a small cooler in the back of your car where you can toss an ice pack and a few waters every time you are going to be gone from the house for more than a few hours. This eliminates drive-thru costs for extra sodas, and keeps you hydrated, and it's really good for you! If you know it's there, you'll stop and drink it. If not, you'll order and spend dollars and calories you'll regret later.

Lotion – Inevitably, we get in the car, arrive at the wedding, the party, the store or at a friend's house and we find ourselves looking pasty and feeling itchy on our arms or legs, because we hurried from the house without that last part of our routine – the lotion rub! Just keep a travel size tube in your glove compartment for times like these and pull it out, rub it on, and your skin will thank you all day. Don't keep a large bottle, as the heat of the car will make the lotion lose its luster after a while. But replenish your travel sizes often. Lip lotion or Chapstick is a good idea, as well!

Traveling Nuts – You're stomach is growling, you forgot to eat breakfast, and you're starving. In your cooler where you're keeping your water bottles, make sure you toss in a few bags (small and portioned out) of heart healthy nuts as well. And go ahead and add a few dark chocolate chips in the mix. If you train yourself to keep that cooler stocked each time you're gone for a long while from the house, you'll find yourself smiling when you stop, grab a bottle and a handful and munch. And your stomach will thank you later. And so will your wallet!

Out of sight – Cell phones and blue tooth are so handy for catching up on calls while driving, but sometimes all of that talking can distract us, make us tense, and when we arrive at our destination we haven't observed a tree, the sunshine, or the pretty flowers blooming by the road. Try this trick of placing your cell phone in the back of the car and resisting the urge to call anyone...at all. Either put on music or enjoy the silence as you actually crack your window, feel

the cool breezes blow, and enjoy the ride. This one trick could determine how the rest of your day goes – well – or crazy! (You'll have to be silent to Bluetooth, as well...)

The Jacket – I leave one in my car at all times, a comfy one, one that's soft and feels like a blanket. It's what I grab when we see an impromptu movie, when the winds are a bit colder than I thought they'd be this time of year, or just when I want to pull over and catch a 10 minute nap and cover myself for a few minutes. The jacket is my friend, my companion, and my favorite piece to have on hand in the car. There's nothing worse than freezing for no reason, and shivering until your whole body aches.

What items do you store in your car to keep yourself healthy and happy? Think about it, make a list, and keep your car stocked and ready, so that traveling around town doesn't find you arriving home stressed, hungry, thirsty, and tired of sitting, never having observed a single bloom in nature. Instead, you'll arrive home with a smile on your face and realize your feet are still wearing the tennis shoes, because they feel so darn good!

Beauty for Ashes - I Can't Heal Myself! – by Pam Charro

I've been having recurring dreams for the past several years that have been very disturbing. In the dreams I am either the "star," and center of much attention, or I am fighting to prove that I should be. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out those dreams and just wishing they would go away, but a few nights ago, I went to God and asked him to give me some divine wisdom concerning them and what I could do about them.

He revealed a great wound in me that I barely knew existed. He showed me a deep insecurity that began when I was very young which was caused by feelings of rejection and abandonment. Those feelings have followed me and shaped my decisions my entire life. As a child, I only knew to deny and bury them, but now it was time to finally face them as an adult.

It looked too big for me to deal with!

Figuring out what was "wrong" would never be enough by itself, it would only feel depressing. I needed power I didn't possess. I said,

"But, God, I don't know what to do with this!
I don't know how to grieve it and I can't heal myself!"

Then it came to me to **just ask him** to heal me...even if the healing didn't seem to make sense...even if I had no understanding of how. I could just **give the wound to him** and **let him heal me**.

I haven't really felt like myself since that night. I cry more easily than I used to and I am having a hard time describing my thoughts and feelings, even to myself. But I also feel that a weight has been lifted and the transformation from insecure to confident has begun in a brand new way.

Psalm 27:10

Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.

Isaiah 43:1-4

...you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...since you are precious and honored in my sight and because I love you."

Hebrews 13:5

Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.

The lies have been revealed and they can now be swept away.

I can't heal myself.

But he can.

Created for Life – Beyond Today – by Ginny Hurley

When asked who the people are that have influenced your life the most, who comes to mind first? Do you think of relatives, bosses, teachers, principals, friends, pastors, preachers, coaches, or even politicians? Are they personal to you or people in history? Would you like to be like them because of the influence they have had on your life? Why did they inspire you so much?

Recently, I began to ask myself these questions because I want to be an influence on this generation, too. I want to be intentional and leave a legacy of hope and inspiration, a life well lived in the kingdom of heaven here on earth. Realizing that I don't have to be famous or powerful and successful to leave a heritage, I am asking God to show me what I have to leave for others to inherit. I want to dream with God on what that could look like. Of course I am a mom, daughter, wife, friend, teacher, and I have other hats also, but I want to know more specifically what I can actually leave that will last.

The story of Moses came to mind when I was thinking about the wisdom of longevity. He was born a baby in Egypt as an Israelite, raised in Pharaoh's household, driven into the wilderness, called by a burning bush; you know the story. He delivered his people from bondage in Egypt to freedom and a homeland. That was a long-range plan, but it wasn't his plan! Just think. He couldn't possibly have known that he actually changed his world, and left an inheritance for a people after God's own heart, because he obeyed! I do think that at the end of his life, even though he didn't go into the land with Joshua, he saw what God wanted him to see. God gave him a glimpse into the unknown and the mysteries of the kingdom!

Pondering this and other stories we know to be true in scripture, I was encouraged by the fact that **most of these heroes of the faith never saw the impact of their lives.** They believed by faith, that God would do what He said He would do, and that His promises are true and YES! I love all of Hebrews 11 about the saints who all died without receiving the promises themselves. In verse 13, we realize that by FAITH, they knew, and were actually assured, that these promises were true!

Now that is hopeful!

When I can't see what I am building, I must look beyond today and circumstances around me. I choose to look up, to gaze on Jesus. He has given me so many incredible influencers throughout my life! I could fill pages with stories of the rich legacy I have received from those around me. The bright thought is **God loves PEOPLE!** He uses them to represent His heart to us! In every sphere I can think of, there was someone God used to influence my life in a good way. This legacy doesn't have to be just our own children. We can be Fathers and Mothers in the faith, to leave great things for those who follow us.

“Children's children are the crown of old men,
And the glory of children is their father.”
Proverbs 17:6

Everyone influences someone. I want to make sure my influence is a GOOD one! If I am influencing others, then someone must be following me.

Look around at who is following you. When you leave a room, is a fragrance left behind? What is the scent you leave? Do you take it with you? I am thinking about these things in a more purposeful way.

I want my life to count for someone besides myself.

If I placed each person that influenced my life, side by side, they would add up to a beautiful picture of Jesus.

2 Corinthians 2:14-15

“Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.”

He uses people to transform His world. I'm so glad that He loves living in us and making us like Him. When I picture those most influential in my life, I can only smile and lift up my countenance to a personal God who is involved in my life every day!

MARRIAGE

In This Together – I Choose Him – by Sarah Stennett

Okay ladies, it's been a few months since I started this column and I have something to confess: I don't do a great job at setting aside my time, energy, and emotions to give myself fully to my husband. In all honesty, I also struggle with giving all of my time, energy, and emotions to my children, too. While I am being vulnerable here, admitting my failures, I want to take a minute to talk about how I process these shortcomings.

First, let's tackle the Mom Guilt issue.

My inability to give 110% of my time, energy and emotions to my kids 24/7 usually leaves me with a helping or two of Mom Guilt. You know what I am talking about. Your baby is screaming in the backseat of the van and you are dying to not have to make lunch at home, so you quickly swing into McDonalds to grab fast food. And the Mom Guilt creeps in. *How is she ever going to develop healthy eating habits if I am filling her body with junk?* Or, you get hired at a job that suits your skill set perfectly and helps your family financially, but takes you away from the home a little more than you're used to. Mom Guilt comes along and slaps you across the face for *abandoning* your children. You're exhausted after a sleepless night so you lie on the couch and let your kids watch TV and string their toys all over the living room. And the Mom Guilt eats you up about it: *too much TV, not enough quality time, etc.*

Sometimes I wonder if the Mom Guilt comes from our own expectations placed on ourselves as mothers or from fear of criticism from other women.

Deep down we feel that our choices are not "right" so the guilt eats away at us. And yet, I wonder if at some point we will be able to give ourselves grace in the same way we would a friend. If my friend spent a challenging afternoon trying to get her twin three year olds to settle for naps, I would graciously accept her choice to hide in the pantry and eat chocolates. I may even cheer her on. It seems, however, that we are our own worst critics and we feel that our kids should get 100% of everything all the time.

Second, what about our husbands?

How often do our choices lead to feelings of Wife Guilt? Our husband walks through the front door after work and we are too busy finishing dinner to stop and kiss him or even make eye contact. Do we even give that a second thought? We spend the whole evening serving dinner, cleaning it up, playing with the kids, getting them to bed, and then? We're exhausted and want to just watch a mindless show or read a book and fall asleep. Wife Guilt nags us about not connecting with our man.

It seems that Wife Guilt is far less vocal, isn't she? Why is that? Are my husband's needs any less important than my children's needs?

Oh sure, he's an adult who will be okay regardless of those small choices. But will our marriage be okay? In all fairness, failing to hug him isn't a fast track to divorce court. But consistently placing him on the back burner with little to no awareness that it's happening is definitely tearing at the fibers of the union. I would even say that our children are less delicate than our Mom Guilt gives them credit for – two days of TV watching while you lie on the couch recovering from the flu bug won't turn their brains to mush or leave them feeling rejected and unloved. Maybe our Mom Guilt would calm

down some if we started to bring our husbands back to the top of the priority list. Perhaps the Wife Guilt would help us to choose him in life's small and big moments.

As a general rule of thumb, we do need to give ourselves grace. Life is hard. And sometimes we make choices based on genuine self-preservation. I know that the more I try to juggle motherhood, homemaking, and my role as a wife in my own strength, the more I tend to flounder.

Surrendering my day to the Lord and asking for His wisdom in the small and big things helps me to give myself grace when I'm not the Perfect Mommy or Super Attentive Wife.

The guilt stems from missing the mark when trying to meet a standard. SO the best thing I can do for myself is to lower my standard for myself as a mother. I cannot give them 100% of myself 100% of the time 24/7. And that's okay. But when it comes to my marriage, I'm actively trying to raise my standard. I can give more of myself – my attention, my affection, my praise, and my thoughts to him. No, it's not 100% of me 100% of the time 24/7, but it's not my sloppy seconds or the leftover scraps either.

In order to feel valued, humans need a combination of quality time, words of encouragement, acts of service, thoughtful gifts, and physical touch. I know my husband requires more of some than of others, but I know it's my job to give them to him. He chose me, and I chose him. I must continue to choose him, even if it means the kids get 10 more minutes of screen time so Rob can tell me about something concerning that happened at work that day.

God blessed our union with tiny humans to love and value, but I can't value them above and beyond my husband.

I choose him because I choose us.

Date Night Fun – All Things Retro – Marcy Lytle

We recently went on a date with a couple we've known for years, and we decided to make it a retro evening with fun activities from the past. It was so fun planning the evening, I thought why not use that idea for date night this month? Everyone seems to love 50's parties, 80's disco, or some other decade from time gone by. It's great to find the music, the clothes, the foods, and the activities and step back in time to laugh, play, and have fun.

That's what date night is all about – having fun with him – hand in hand – being silly – wherever we go – and loving him while we're doing it.

Here are our retro date ideas:

1. **Visit the oldest** restaurant in your town that serves home-cooked food, drive down one of the oldest streets listening to music from your dating years, and stop for a milkshake to share with one straw, then head home to watch a movie or show from the past. Perry Mason and Alfred Hitchcock might fit that bill!
2. **Picnics retro-style** can be so fun. No coolers allowed for this date – only a large basket lined with a cloth for covering the food in transport, or a tin box will do as well. A retro basket that you make together can be so fun. Fried chicken, fruit salad and cheeses, and homemade cookies or apple pie can fill your basket. No cans of soda, only an old thermos or drinks [in glass bottles \(and straws!\)](#).
3. **Old Town stroll** can be as simple as seeking out a small old city nearby, or an old neighborhood where you can take a walk down streets lined with huge old trees, as you hold hands. See if you can find an old pharmacy, local hamburger dive, or a park with huge trees where you can sit and sketch, read, or even swing. When's the last time YOU sat on a swing instead of swinging your kids? End the evening [listening to oldies](#) on the way home.
4. **Pizza and Arcades** aren't just for kids, you know. You can have an adult version of this date by enjoying your choice of pizza, either [made at home](#) or eaten out by candlelight. Sometimes, movie theaters have arcade games in the lobby. So pick out a theater nearby, purchase a ticket for a later movie, and spend a little money on the games. If you can find Centipede and Pac-Man you're set for an evening of fun! Try skipping to your car...seriously. It's so much fun!
5. **Bowling for Two** can be a romantic evening to remember! Pick a night when there's no bowling leagues happening, and reserve a lane for a couple of hours. Be sure to eat the food from the diner at the alley, too, as sometimes their burgers or fries are the best! After you've won (or lost), stop at your local bookstore and pick up a [Mad Libs](#) notepad and finish the night filling in words and reading aloud your funny stories. The best date nights are ones that end in laughter!

It doesn't matter your age, you can think of retro ideas to do for two and have just as much planning the date as actually going on it! Invite another couple, or keep it just for two, but make it happen this month – a retro date to remember!

After 30 Years - He Makes the Bed... - by Marcy Lytle

...and that makes me happy.

Early on in our marriage, my husband learned that I need the bed to be made to be happy. I couldn't leave the house without the covers pulled up and pillows in place. Even if we were running late, I had to run to the bedroom to make sure the picture of our bed was perfectly neat and tucked in, awaiting me when I returned home. He questioned it a few times, but soon realized it was a little thing that made me happy, so why not go along...

As we progressed, had kids, became very busy, with my working from home with three jobs, and he working hard long hours, we started divvying up our chores. He would make the bed each morning, while I prepared the lunches. However...sometimes the bed wouldn't be made when he was running late, or if he decided to go into work at a later time than usual, and he'd leave the bed unmade for a while.

I'd step into my room – my office where I also worked at my desk – and see the bed unmade and be unhappy. I used the bed to lay out clean laundry and fold it, I sat near the bed when I worked and if it was messy I couldn't work, because it made my work space feel messy. It just bothered me.

I realized that he didn't know how it really made me feel, so I explained it to him. I told him how it was very important to me that the bed be made first thing, for the above reasons. I knew it was silly, I was sorry to be so anal about it, but it really blessed me when it was made before the day started for either of us. He was the last one out of bed each morning, it was his chore, and would he please make it first thing...

Do I sound like an ogre already? I have a point and a method to my sharing...

He saw the importance of that little thing to me, and he started making the bed first thing. I came in to work and the bed that was messy was now nicely pulled together. In fact, he makes the bed much better than I ever did or could. He tucks every corner in tightly, he arranges the covers so that the patterns are straight, and he aligns the pillows symmetrically so that the entire picture is beautifully smooth and pleasing to the eye...and to my heart.

He won me over. I was extremely grateful. And I've not forgotten, and I hope I never will, his willingness to do a simple thing to make my day.

He's like that. And I'm learning from him.

I'm learning to notice small things that make him happy, like getting up from what I'm doing to hug him before he heads to work instead of offering quick peck on the cheek. I've realized that he enjoys holding my hand in the movies even when I might be in the mood to be left alone, so it's a very small thing for me to lay aside my indifference to squeeze his fingers through mine. I know that he loves a latte from Starbucks, and that's one of his treats in life, so I don't gripe or complain about going through the drive-thru, even though I detest the taste of coffee.

We've learned over the years to notice and to acquiesce, even if we don't understand or have the same affinities as the other.

**The little things are big sometimes,
and it doesn't hurt us to notice and do them for each other.**

He's about to wake up now, and it's Saturday morning, a day to relax and have fun. But I know that when I head back to the bedroom to see his smiling face, the bed will be made first thing – because he knows that little thing makes me happy.

What else can I say?

I want to make him happy, too. Because kindness begets kindness...

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – That Was Last Year – by Rachel Critz

Ephesians 4:7 tells us,

“But to each of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.”

When a problem occurs in which you are affected, how do you react? You might immediately respond with anger or frustration, or you may already react with a calm nature.

Let me be honest. I am very quick to anger.

I react on emotions when something happens. Instead of looking at the facts of the situation, I tend to let my human reaction show. For me, that is trying every possible way to make it not my fault or just simply recognizing someone is in the wrong and feeling good about it.

However, I would have only reacted that way last year. Since then, my reactions have improved. In situations I face now, I take a step back and look at both sides, check the facts and then react.

How did this happen? I have learned about grace and mercy, the past few weeks in church.

Grace is getting what you do not deserve, and mercy is not getting what you deserve.

Have you ever been in a situation where you were the one at fault and you ended up not getting the punishment you deserved? That is someone giving mercy to you. Have you been in a situation where someone wronged you and you let them go without any harm? That is you extending grace. It is confusing I know. I probably got them mixed up, too. Extend me some grace though, or mercy. Either works!

Ephesians 2:8-9 says,

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, that no one can boast.”

When you receive grace or give it to someone, do not take it for granted or go around sharing it with everyone. Grace is a treasure that we must cherish since God has blessed us with it.

James 4:6 reads,

“But he gives us more grace. That is why scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.’”

Keep that gift from God to you dear to your heart. And learn to share it with others. How? Next time someone gossips about you or a friend hurts you, get angry for five seconds on the inside but then react with a calm heart. Deal with it in maturity instead of finding a way to get back at her. Show her forgiveness; be the example to the others around you. Teach them the correct way to respond to a hurtful situation.

Titus 2:11 says, “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.”

As a Christian, you are the gardener that will plant the seeds of faith inside of people.

Who knows?

**Next time you react with forgiveness it might just water that person's seed of faith,
and show them God's grace is real.**

FIRMLY PLANTED - Living Stones – by Dina Cavazos

I was inspired and energized, determined to walk the path of obedience, having no idea of the hard work that lay ahead. But isn't that the way of faith? We step out saying, "yes," often not knowing what that entails.

One of the first things needed to make the prayer garden "real" was a pathway. I'll spare you the details of killing and removing grass, leveling the ground, hauling and unloading rock, installing landscape fabric, and spreading load, after seemingly endless load, of decomposed granite (DG). The important thing is what I learned about rocks and fitting them together to make the path that I, as The Pathmaker, "foreknew and predestined." Yes, just like God foreknew and predestined you and me. I had a plan.

The path would curve around the house and lead up to the gate. Planting beds would be on either side. The rocks had to be laid out end to end to form the border. They had to fit together tightly to hold the DG in its place and keep the planting beds from spilling into the path.

I had an assortment of rocks to choose from. Every stone has its own unique characteristics; even each *side* is different. As I placed the stones, each one was selected to fit the spot. I turned it this way and that to find the best fit. How did it fit with its neighbor? Did it curve out or in, or go straight? No stone was better than another; each had its place and function, and each was necessary to form the unified whole.

God reminded me how much we're like those stones.

In His grand design...

"...God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

(1Corinthians 12:18-21)

Each one of us is unique and has particular attributes that fit somewhere in God's plan. We shouldn't think more or less of ourselves—we just need to find the spot God has for us.

Sometimes I had to chip away small pieces of the stone to make it fit right. As pieces broke off under the hammer's pressure, they were a symbol to me of things I need to let go of or change as God uses the pressures of life to transform me. Just as I had to shape the stone to fit the purpose for which it was intended, God shapes me to suit His purposes.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

(Ephesians 2:10)

Maybe if rocks could talk they would've complained to me about their spot, or about being hit with a hammer. They might've insisted on seeing the entire pathway, even though it was too big to see from their spot.

Thankfully, my rocks were quiet and cooperative in my hand. They didn't resist or jump away from the hammer or where I placed them. So my lessons from the rocks were Trust and Appreciation—trust in the Lord of our Pathway who has a plan for each of us, and appreciation for our diversity. The roots of Truth have gone a little deeper and I'm more firmly planted.

I pray that you also become more firmly planted as you appreciate your unique value in the spot God has placed you at this moment, and trust that He's shaping you purposefully. You are His workmanship—*living stones being built up into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5)*

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.

(Proverbs 3:5-6)

Saddle Up - We Need Each Other – by Melissa Critz

It was Sunday morning. After two years, our church was welcoming the new pastor as our beloved former pastor was taken 'home' to be with the Lord. Today was to be an incredible, memorable day. My husband and I even had altar team duty as well. I awoke without much effort, due to the excitement of the morning ahead.

After taking care of the inside animals and gathering my mud boots, I headed out to feed the horses. The night before was the first hard freeze of winter, so I had the horses blanketed but did not put them in their stalls. Heading out the back door, I spied Elijah, not at the gate like normal with head up and ears pricked, anxiously awaiting his alfalfa, but laying down off to the side of the barn. My stomach dropped immediately but I held on for some semblance of hope that he was not sick.

Praying in my head for help, I opened the roll top door to the barn and threw out the flakes of alfalfa, which Domingo immediately began to devour. Elijah didn't make a move to get to his feet. Now THAT is very unusual. Elijah loves his alfalfa more than any other feed AND never wants Domingo to be fed first. Reluctantly, I grabbed Elijah's halter and trudged over to him. After latching the halter, I used the lead rope to encourage him to stand. He did, but he was not excited to do it. I led him over to his alfalfa and he just stood there sniffing it with his head hanging low. Oh my...he was sick. He was colicing. I had no doubt.

For those in the horse world, you will know that this is what horse owners dread – the possibly fatal stomachache. Horses cannot throw up, so they have to pass everything out the other end. If anything sours or 'bunches up,' then it blocks in the tract inside and is very painful and possibly fatal - colic. It's possible that it needs to be taken care of immediately or some other things (like a paste called banamine) can be administered before the vet needs to see the horse. I called my vet – early on a Sunday.

The vet's directions required me to call on a friend who lived on the other side of the ranch as I had no banamine. I hustled to my friend's house, gathered the tube, profusely thanked her, and headed home to administer it orally. I also had to call my friend at church about our team duty and she and her husband graciously offered to cover for us. Now it was time to *wait and watch and walk*.

As the day progressed, I made another call to the vet as I wasn't seeing much progress. The decision was made to haul him in to see Dr. A. This meant I had to lean on our neighbor who had a trailer. And this meant leaning on yet others for help. My neighbor was at a horse event and would be home midafternoon and very willing to loan her trailer. During all this time, my oldest came home from college as she wanted to be with her retired barrel horse – he was the last horse she raced – and had been very good to her. She had to be there for him.

After our sweet neighbor came home, she hauled over her trailer; we hooked up our truck; we loaded both horses and headed to the vet. *Did I say this was a Sunday?*

Dr. A oiled him (tube through the nose to the stomach and pumped in mineral oil to get things moving); we hauled the horses home; stalled them overnight and did all the babying that I was directed to do, and Elijah was all himself by the morning.

So, why am I writing this story? So, why was this so hard?

I really have a hard time relying on others. I so love to help others but to have to ASK for help? Well, that's hard for me. I very much dislike not being able to follow through on obligations (altar team duty). I do not like to interrupt others with all that they have to do (retrieving banamine early on Sunday from my friend). I also have a hard time asking others for use of something that is very expensive (using my neighbors' trailer). And then I bothered someone on her day off (the vet). Maybe it's hard for me because I never saw this modeled while I was growing up.

I asked my Saddle Partner about this and his response was,

"It's because we are the BODY of Christ and we do NEED each other.
One person just cannot make the whole body work."

The Lord created us to be parts of the body so that we can work together and support each other. We need each other. We need to be able to reach out, ask for help, and realize that is what God intended.

This led me to 1 Corinthians 12. I am posting just part of this scripture but I encourage you to read it in its entirety. I also encourage you to recognize that the Lord made us for each other. He made us to help each other. He made us to need each other. Be blessed.

1 Corinthians 12: 12-27

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Moving Forward - Get Used to Winning – by Pam Charro

*I had an interesting dream last night,
right before my kitty jumped on my chest and woke me up at 4:45 a.m.*

I dreamed that I had won something exciting and valuable, and then the person next to me also won something and she was very excited. I was in the middle of explaining to her that, while it is great to be excited about getting something that is very desired, being a "winner" should not be a huge surprise because that is the kind of God that we have for a friend – the One who grants the desires of our hearts.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that we should live selfishly and that all Christians will win the lottery. But God in us (being the powerful and generous father that he is) does mean that winning at life should be something we are comfortable with. That is what our Daddy wants for us, in all of its forms. He isn't concerned about odds or obstacles, and **his vision for us is much greater than anything we can ask or imagine.**

But is that the way I really think when I'm not dreaming?

I wonder why I had that dream last night. Maybe it's because there is a lot of favor and power available to me that I haven't yet taken hold of.

I only get one life here on earth and I want to live it large!

I want to leave as big an impact possible for making God known!

Has it been a while since you have thought about what "winning" means to you?

Maybe it's time we revisit those thoughts and write them down and pray about them...and get used to the idea that our dreams just might become reality.

Real Stories – Friends with Grief – by Rayeanne O’Brien

I recently lost a precious friend to cancer. She fought hard, and her positive attitude and type A personality caused everyone who knew her to think that she would win this battle. We were taken by surprise when the end came too quickly and unexpectedly. It was made even harder because she left a husband and two young sons behind. Everyone wanted to do something to help out, but it's difficult to know what is really needed. As one who lost a husband to an aggressive cancer, I'd like to give a few suggestions on how to help others through their loss.

When a loved one dies, food, cards and good wishes pour into your life. I think the occasion of the funeral brings you together with a group similar to the one you've last seen at your wedding. Except it is definitely not the time of cake cutting and bouquet tossing. I had family, friends from high school and college, friends from past and present jobs, friends from groups and churches I'd attended...just about everyone who was important to me was included in this mix. It was a room full of people who had populated all eras of my life, and their attention was laser-beamed on me. It was comforting, but deceptive. They had to go back to their own lives very quickly (as they should.) I had to learn to live with the reality of the loss mostly alone. (As I *eventually* discovered I must.)

So, what was most helpful in my long and winding road of grief?

- Friends who still brought up my lost loved one in conversation. Sometimes people thought mentioning him would cause sadness, so they didn't refer to him at all. I found it made me very happy (even though it might make my eyes leak a little) to know that he was still remembered.
- People who marked their calendars to remember the anniversaries with me. My friends made sure I had a wonderful night out on my first birthday alone, beautiful flowers on Valentine's Day and mementos on what would have been our wedding anniversary. On the one year anniversary of his death I got about a mailbox full of cards acknowledging him, me, and the past year. I was touched that this date, and commemorating it in some way, was deemed important by friends.

- In the early days, don't tell a grieving person, "Call me if you need something." That would involve having enough brain power to find the phone, a phone number and identifying the need through a fog of grief. Just do what you know is needed. I had people checking to see if my outside pipes were covered at the first freeze, offers to cut the lawn until I could find a lawn service, leaves raked while I was away and cases of bottled water left on the front porch. Those may seem small or even trivial. They helped me feel like I was not alone in a swiftly tilting world.
- One of my friends chose to be alone on the first Thanksgiving after losing her husband. Her neighbor brought over a soft, fluffy robe for her. "I want you to wrap yourself up in this robe today and remember that there are people who want to wrap you in love. Every 30 minutes on Thanksgiving, I want you to reach in the pocket and pull out one piece of folded paper and read it out loud." The papers contained encouraging thoughts--all 48 of them.
- Ask a grieving person to go *anywhere* you are going, no matter how minor it may seem to you. I had a friend say she was passing by on her way to Barnes and Noble: would I like to go? (YES!) Another friend ended a meal out together by hesitantly telling me she had to go check on a house out in the country and would I like to ride along? (YES x 2!) I may not have had much to say, but there is no journey with company that is not appreciated. Especially when you compare it to staying at home in a too empty house.
- Ask, ask and keep asking. Mood swings are swift and continual. A grieving person not want to go somewhere with you today or tomorrow, but the next day a field trip with a friend may be just the ticket. Just because your grieving friend turns you down 99 times, that 100th time may be the magic number. Don't give up on inviting her places.
- My friends and I often wrote group emails with the subject line: Mundane Musings. We shared mundane moments from the week and I found it fascinating reading. There is no factoid too small to share by email, "snail mail," or Facebook that a grieving friend will not welcome as a touch from the outside world.
- I loved magazines that were passed along, devotional books that were purchased for me and helpful articles sent through the mail. The common denominator here? Short. Brief reading for a brief attention span, and a brain still foggy with grief.
- One friend suggested that I join a church support group called Grief Share. (Locations can be found at griefshare.org) The group is led by people who have lost loved ones, and I was surrounded and supported by others with similar losses. The group time was

the only two hours of each week that I felt like I was among people who *truly* understood what I was feeling. Most of my healing came from this faith-based program during the years that I continued to attend, and later lead, a group.

The most important thing I found was the continuity of friendship and contact. It kept me tethered to a world that seemed to be spinning out of control at times. Life would become manageable eventually, but the prayers and contact of friends was my lifeline. I am forever grateful that there were “friends who stick closer to a brother” (Proverbs 18:24) during this difficult period in my life.

Rayeanne Owen has been in education over 30 years as a teacher, administrator and curriculum writer. She and her husband have a blended family that includes four adult children and their spouses, and seven grandchildren. She enjoys traveling, spending time with friends and writing. She is presently at work on a book of devotionals written to encourage young mothers and wives.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – That Boulder – by Marcy Lytle

She's on a journey, and up ahead somewhere she knows there's a boulder that's sure to fall on her path. She knows this because one falls on everyone's path, at some point along their journey. And that boulder will be the death of her. However, she doesn't know when or where on the path it will land.

She has two choices, really...one of which is NOT to stay home. You see, that path is constantly moving under her feet, whether she wants to go or not. So her two choices are...

She can enjoy the path, observing the beautiful wildflowers that spring up on all colors around her feet, looking up at the sun one day and the clouds the next, being amazed at the warmth of one and the covering of the other, and she can walk beside others on the path, conversing and skipping and even running at times, because of the sheer joy of the journey.

She can walk in fear, always looking up on the side of the mountain for that boulder. She can walk behind others, never seeing their faces or hearing their voices speak to her in truth and understanding and hope. She can trample all of the flowers under her feet, crushing their beautiful petals, as she covers herself with so much protective gear that she can't quite see the ground below. And she can absolutely refuse to feel the warm covering of the skies above because of her fear of looking anywhere other than at that huge boulder.

Do you know who she is?

She's you. And she's me.

We hear of a friend who's received a devastating diagnosis, or we have another friend lose a loved one unexpectedly, and there it appears – that boulder. Somehow that person's boulder appears in our own path and rolls along with us as we travel, and we just wonder and fear and tremble at when it's going to roll down the mountain headed straight for us.

It's hard and really quite impossible, I think, to not wonder about death and when it's coming for you and yours. We live in a world full of births and deaths...and it will be that way until He comes. Oh yes, He's coming, but somehow we lose sight of that hope when the boulders appear on the side of the mountain.

Somehow, that hope of heaven is like a tiny grain of sand that we know is way up ahead somewhere, we can't quite visualize it or even imagine it, and the thought of it blows away as quickly as it appears, with a gust of wind on the side of the mountain that sweeps over that boulder of death and knocks us to the ground in dread...

What if...

She's on a journey, and up ahead somewhere she knows there's a wonderland that's sure to appear on her path. She knows this because her Father told her he was preparing it for her, and she believes him. And that wonderland is full of eternal things that never die, and bodies that never ache, and hearts that never hurt. However, she doesn't know when she'll arrive.

She has two choices, really...one of which is NOT to stay home. You see, that path is constantly moving under her feet, whether she wants to go or not. So her two choices are...

She can enjoy the path, observing the beautiful wildflowers that spring up on all colors around her feet, looking up at the sun one day and the clouds the next, being amazed at the warmth of one and the covering of the other, and she can walk beside others on the path, conversing and skipping and even running at times, because of the sheer joy of the journey and what's up ahead, or...

She can walk in fear, always looking up on the side of the mountain for that boulder. She can walk behind others, never seeing their faces or hearing their voices speak to her in truth and understanding and hope. She trample all of the flowers under her feet, crushing their beautiful petals, as she covers herself with so much protective gear that she can't quite see the ground below. And she can absolutely refuse to feel the warm or covering of the skies above because of her fear of looking anywhere other than at that huge boulder.

Do you know who she is?

She's you. And she's me.

And we do have a choice. It's a hard one to make, and it's often one we have to make daily, and sometimes hourly.

If we fix our eyes and heart on the wonderland and wonderful One up ahead, He will enable us to walk the path before us with joy on our journey. And honestly, when the boulder falls, he will take the brunt of the hit (oh wait, he already did – he took the sting of that thing called death), and he will carry us safely to the place he's prepared for all...

Who believe.

FRESH THYME - First Thing – by Marcy Lytle

It hangs on my closet doorknob every night, small and unnoticeable. However, when I awake early in the morning and flip on the light switch, there it is as big as an elephant in the room. My sports bra stares me in the face while I stand there rubbing my eyes and yawning, irritated that I'm awake so early once again. It taunts me and beckons me and calls to me, "Will you put me on this morning or are you gonna leave me hanging all day?" And then one of the most important decisions of the day is made in that split second: whether or not to exercise.

If I choose to answer that call and struggle to get the thing over my head and into place, I'm very likely to then eat my bowl of cereal, turn on the music and start moving. However, if I walk away from the call and turn off the light, donning only my robe over my sleep shirt, I'm dead sure not going to move a muscle to the beat. And that second choice is oh so tempting, every single day. I'd rather not wear that sports bra and get on with the chores and work of the day, but I know if I go ahead and answer the call, I'll feel better about myself, later.

This morning I'm wearing it. I'm going to pick out the music I love, turn it on, and start moving. It's not just any music, either. It's worship music, the kind of lyrics that lift your soul toward heaven, encourage your heart, and fill your mind with good thoughts about Him. I'm not even dancing or moving to a mean exercise video that includes a trainer yelling at me, "Here we go, one more time!" I'm swaying, jumping, sliding, bending and lifting all to the rhythm of my heart, bent toward Him and his goodness in my life, his mercies that are new every morning, and his love that lasts forever. And I feel uplifted, invigorated, and my heart is beating hard and healthy when I'm through...

What's not to love about that experience?

Why do I face that black silhouette on my doorknob every morning with hesitation about whether or not to remove it and wear it, if the act of doing so encourages and prompts me to do something so good for my body, my heart, and my soul?

It's because it requires effort, it requires taking the time before I start my day to do it, and it requires going against what my body wants to do first thing in the morning - nothing. I don't want put on that tight thing and get my heart rate up. I want to run a hot bath, soak in it, get on my clothes and be on my way.

But if it's not first thing, it's not anything.

If I turn off the light, leave my friend behind, and ignore her call to come and play right when my eyes open, she knows I'll not return until the next morning when I walk sleepy-eyed into the room again and see her staring and hear her calling.

There are a dozen other things we normally don't do if we ignore them first thing:

- God's call to come sit a while and listen
- That reminder to stop and whisper a prayer for her or him
- The fruit that sits on the counter we know is good for us

- Little ones clamoring to sit on our lap before we walk out the door
- That lingering kiss he wants before he leaves for work
- The verse on that calendar that still says the date of two weeks ago
- A notepad we bought to write love notes to him two months ago
- That big glass of water we need before we start our day
- Good thoughts to replace the bad ones lurking
- That plant over there that's begging for a drink
- The sunrise outside the window where the blinds are shut
- The sound of a bird joyfully chirping in the tree outside that same window

Aren't we funny creatures that want to hurry toward our busy days every morning so that we can be tired and hungry before 10 am, sleepy and wanting the day to be over by 2pm, and downright tired and nasty by 5pm to everyone who touches us?

If we'd just do it, see it, hear it, and observe it first thing, our days might be so pleasant that the hours roll by effortlessly and beautifully, our hearts pump a little faster and better, and our minds settle into a rhythmic peace.

What are you doing first thing this morning?

FRESH THYME – Small Things...Take Time – by Dina Cavazos

It was perfect gardening weather and I was looking forward to spending the rest of the day vertical composting.

The morning was already gone, but I'd committed to helping Arthur with his cell phone. Arthur is easily frustrated, but it shouldn't take me long to add minutes. Arthur has several functional limitations and assorted health problems, mostly self-inflicted. He has only one fully functional hand (the other is paralyzed as a result of an intentional overdose) and he doesn't see well (but refuses to put the prescribed drops in his eyes). He smokes 2-plus packs a day, with resulting high blood pressure and bad circulation, diabetes, and on it goes.

At 1 o'clock I find him at the local social service agency. He introduces me to the new director coming out of the building as his "friend." (*Maybe I need to rethink that definition.*) We sit on a concrete ledge in the warm sun and I start the process of adding minutes. I need his PIN—I was afraid of that. I misplaced his folder, with PIN, over the chaotic Christmas holiday. This means I'll have to get back with him tomorrow because calling the service provider to reset it will take longer than I planned. He worries his 20 minutes won't last, I reassure him they will.

The garden awaits...

As I walk to my car, I'm thinking, "*I'll make the call on the way home, then I can work in the garden.*" Then I hear a woman's voice off to my left, "Can I have a ride?" I turn to see who spoke. "We've been here four days trying to get help and we finally got a room for my son. I just wanna get home." She looked at me with pleading eyes, fluffy pink house shoes on her feet. She got in the front seat and two young boys in their early 20's got in the back. Her one tooth moved up and down as she explained that her son couldn't stay with her anymore. As I dropped him off at the motel where he would stay for one night, she told her very sad story that had me asking God, "Why are there so many hurting people, how do lives get so twisted, where will he stay tomorrow and the next night? What can I do when the need is so great?"

I didn't hear an answer to those big questions, but in my heart I knew that taking time for small things—giving her a ride, helping with cell phones—was something.

"Where do you live", I asked. She named a place and I asked how many people lived there.
"Too many", she said. She cried when I prayed for her at the end of the ride.

And I cried as I worked and prayed in my lovely, peaceful garden.

Matthew 25:40

Assuredly, I say to you,

***In as much as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren,
you did it to Me.'***

FRESH THYME - The Lynch Mob – by Marcy Lytle

She's an unwelcome visitor but later after she's gone, I realize that I invited her in. She arrives and takes a seat and starts talking the minute she opens the door, because I've left it unlocked once again. And there she takes up space on my furniture, speaking in my space about things that are untrue. She whispers most of the time, but there are some visits where she talks so loudly I want to cover my ears. And then there are the few visits where I actually sit down beside her and start to consider what she has to say...

I'm talking about *Doubt*. She's quite ugly, makes me feel sick to my stomach, and she even leaves the door open so that all of her posse can arrive after her and take a seat in my space as well, like her most well-known companion *Fear*.

How did I leave the door for her to enter in, stealthily yet brazenly, to take a seat where I live?

It happened just yesterday. It was a sunny day and we were on a daytrip, one of my favorite activities for a Saturday. I saw her putting up her campaign signs in my yard, but I didn't stop her. Some of them said, "Doubt for King," because she's always campaigning to take the place of the King of Hearts. Another one she put up near where I live said, "Doubt Rules," because she likes to undermine anyone and anything else that speaks truth or absoluteness. And so her signs went up, partly because I was too tired to remove them, and also because it was a day when I was swaying toward her side. Oh, I always end up voting for the King but she sometimes runs a tight campaign when I look and listen and consider...much to my dismay.

Doubt never considers my "no soliciting" sign or my "go away" mat at my front door for all unwelcome visitors, because she considers herself above those silly signs. She mostly peers into my windows to see if I've left the blinds open, if I'm watching her hammer her signs into my green grass and near my still waters, so she can poke holes and disturb my view. She places one sign right against the part of my yard where there's a patch of dry ground that I've watered and watered, yet something keeps killing the growth. She sticks up another over on the other side next to the biggest tree in my yard, an evergreen, and discovers dents in the bark where Woodpecker tapped all night with his incessant "why, why, why" over and over again. And so she continued.

My mind had run a bit off course throughout the day, as I enjoyed the sun and the fun, but *Worry* about the future showed up in the backseat of our car. I did nothing to keep her out, either. Later, *Irritation* about something I thought of, a disappointment, spewed out in accusation against my husband, and I vomited it out as if my stomach had been churning for hours, making a mess on both of us. During a movie, there was a scene where a young wife got hit by a car, and *Anger* slid in beside the empty seat beside me in the theater and started with his fists in the air shaking them at a God who would "allow" such tragedy to good people. And finally, I had relayed a story about someone that was well – just gossip – and I felt *Shame* light on my shoulders and then settle in for a heavy sit.

You know the routine, you've experienced it yourself. A perfectly grand day disintegrates into an evening of exhaustion as you lay your head down on your pillow at night and realize that all

of these visitors hung with you and crowded you as the day progressed, and then Doubt sits across the room staring at you to see what you will do. Will you invite her to spend the night or throw her out and ask her to take her posse with her...along with her ugly signage that has now peppered your green grass with squares of black and white letters?

I did nothing. I went to sleep and I slept.

But this morning I'm awake and I'm opening the front door wide, sending Doubt and her gang away before the sun comes up, and I'm pulling up the yard signs so she can take those with her, too.

Some days are like that. Sometimes our thoughts get the best of us. And some nights are restless and weary, because we've toyed with the idea once again and the question another time, "What if some of what I believe about God just isn't true?" "What if it's all just words on a page about his love for us?" "What if tragedy comes to my house?"

I just finished reading a book about eight women who were persecuted for their faith in God, to the point of torture, losing their family members, and being imprisoned over and over again. I read about their cries to God for rescue, and yet the persecution continued. But what amazed me the most was that the more the intensity of the fight, the more their faith was strengthened, and the more the Word of God changed lives of others...and their own. And that stunned me. I'm sure Doubt showed up many times to the space where these ladies lived, but they were so busy listening, having compassion, and loving the God who saved them that each time their bodies were beaten and bruised, or another angry official took them in, Doubt herself looked on in amazement and disappeared without a trace.

The choice is really mine. He's already told me that He's enough, His ways are lovely and I'm to delight in them even if I don't understand them, and that His love is better than life, and it endures forever and ever and ever.

He didn't fill my house with unwelcome visitors or scatter campaign signs across my pretty lawn. I did that. I chose to turn, after Doubt and her mob arrived with signs in hand, to invite their real leader *Unbelief* into the center part of my space – my heart.

And for that, I'm truly sorrowful. Unbelief is to Peace, as Termite is to Wood.

And yet Jesus forgives me, He loves me, and He holds me close to him – all unwelcome visitors gone and the yard clean and green – as he tells me once again that the is The Way, The Truth, and the Life.

And I believe.

And Peace signs start emerging from under the ground where the water resides and roots run deep...as my doors and windows are open now and the cool breezes blow of a hope and a future...secured by Him...now that the lynch mob has gone.

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

April 2016

TIPS

The Dressing – Invest in a Vest! – by Marcy Lytle

When's the last time you wore a vest? With all of the cute tops out this season with textured and colorful sleeves, they need to be shown, not covered up with a cardigan! Vests have been revamped, redesigned and upgraded, and they are really very cute to make all sorts of unique outfits while you're out shopping, on a date night, or just having dinner with friends. And...they cover a multitude of "sins" from bulges, to stains, or even to wear over something that's just a speck too tight!

Check out the ones available in the stores now, and make plans to add one or two to your spring wardrobe:

[The military vest](#) goes well with almost any color – pale pink, navy, white and more! It looks great over a simple t-shirt and with a pair of jeans, for a casual Saturday while you run your errands and hook up with friends. It also keeps you a little warm if the cool breezes are still blowing... This cute one is from Maurice's.

[The longline vest](#) is so beautiful – to be dressed up or worn down – over jeans with a white shirt as pictured here looks stunning! Forever 21 sells this long vest that is cut out in the back (look at the different views!). Since it's black, it's long, and it's lean, I can't wait to get one for myself!

[The sleeveless trench](#) – have you seen it? It's pictured here in white, and it's worn with flared pants for a dressy, classy look. It can be worn open or shut, with the belt tied in the back or the front – it's your choice! And it's on sale at White House Black Market!

[The crocheted fringe open vest](#) from Old Navy is lightweight, and we love the color, "careless whisper!" This is a great piece to throw on over t-shirts and shorts, or it can be worn over jean capris with a flowy blouse for evening.

[The denim vest](#) is a classic and never goes out of style. Don't wear it with denim jeans, but pair it with a patterned skirt, white jeans, or any other color BUT denim. Wear any t-shirt under it, and you've got yourself an outfit. This one is from Maurice's. Isn't the back of it cute?

[The printed vest with pockets](#) from Macy's gives a lean, clean, modern, put-together look. I love this one! It's almost like a dressy jacket minus the sleeves, and it looks really pretty paired with a white tee. Or other solid color tees, for that matter...

[The lace vest](#) might be the cutest one yet – and worn over a $\frac{3}{4}$ sleeve t-shirt with jeans, you'll feel like a million dollars! This vest is from Target, and look how pretty the tuxedo collar is! This vest is a winner for this spring's wardrobe!

I'm anxious to go shopping to find a vest or two to mix/match with all the pieces I already have in my closet. After all, that's the art in shopping and style, finding a piece that you can pair with what you have – to make at least three or four new looks for the season!

Happy Shopping!

Seven for You - What Shall I Make? – by Marcy Lytle

It's the question every mom (or dad, if he does the cooking) asks herself on a daily basis, before it's time for dinner, before she goes to the grocery store, or before she opens the fridge to stare at the ingredients and try to be creative with cucumbers, leftover blackberry cobbler, and onion dip...

I am not one that can always just whip up a gourmet meal with random ingredients, so I like to have recipes and a plan, at least most nights when we eat at home. But it can be quite overwhelming when choosing what to make, when there are so many sources to go to for help!

What I enjoy doing is choosing just one of those sources each time I visit the store, like this:

Cookbooks. I have a cabinet full of them. If I choose cookbooks as my source one week, I pull out a few and start flipping and thinking and choosing. I try to choose a few main entrees, a few veggies, and maybe one dessert or two. I look for recipes with few ingredients, ingredients I can easily find in the store, and ingredients that are healthy and tasty. I mark the pages, write the page numbers down and place that on the fridge, and fill out my grocery list. And after we've eaten, I make a note on the page of the cookbook with a "Yes!" or a "Nah!" Believe me, it's not fun to make a nasty meal twice because you forgot it tasted horrible the first time, but you forgot about it and made it again!

My favorite cookbooks: *Forks over Knives*, *Barefoot Contessa Back to Basics*, *Four Ingredient Cookbooks*.

Pinterest. I randomly save recipes throughout the month on my Pinterest FOOD page, just as I'm looking at my phone at night, or while waiting at the car dealership, or wherever. So when it's a week where I want some inspiration, I'll bring up my page and print off my favorites that I've pinned. I gather the pages from the printer, make my list, and off to the store I go! I keep a file in my kitchen of "THIS WEEK'S FOOD" and that's where I keep the pages I print, for easy access!

My favorite Pinterest recipes: [Polish style sliders](#), [chocolate chip cookie brownies](#), and [creamy basil salad dressing](#).

Magazines. I subscribe to lots of magazines – I just love reading ones with fashion, cooking, and home ideas! Each one of them includes recipes, so as I read, I tear them out and these also go in a folder in my file in the kitchen title "CLIPPINGS." When I'm in the mood to cook from these pages, I just pull out the file where I've been stashing my tear-outs and I choose my recipes for the week, make my list, and go. If the recipe's a keeper, I file it away. If not, it goes in the trash, and my family thanks me for never making that one again...

My favorite magazines for recipes: *Rachel Ray Everyday*, *Cooking Light*, and *Food Network*.

Farmer's Market. Sometimes, when we have the time and when I feel so inclined, we show up on a weekend at the Farmer's Market for all things fresh off the farm. I'd like to say we do this every weekend, but honestly we don't. Hopefully, we make it once a month. There are the

homemade tamales, fresh bread, all of the colorful fresh produce and veggies, and sometimes eggs and meat. We take a tote bag and a cooler (if we're not going right back home) and fill it with all the goodies we love.

When I get home, I think of meals I can put together with what I've bought. This requires creativity and it's a challenge, but like I said – sometimes I feel so inclined...

My favorite Farmer's Market buys: A squash or tomato of any kind, fresh herbs, and homemade bread!

PF week. This is the week where I stare at my pantry and my fridge and I look at what I've not been using, like that box of rice, the jar of green salsa, the tortillas, the sausage links, etc. You know what I'm talking about – all of those things you buy at the store and think you'll eat, or you lose the recipe you thought you'd make, or you just didn't get to "that one." So this particular week, you realize you've got random PF food (pantry and fridge) that you really need to use before it goes bad. Thinking in terms of types of food, I figure out if I can put together a quesadilla or tacos of some sort for a Mexican night, pull together items mix with pasta sauce for another night, etc. Or maybe we just have a smorgasbord! I feel better about myself when I use up what I have, before I head to the store to buy more.

Favorite PF meals: Leftovers with salsa and cheese between tortillas for a quesadilla, leftover veggies chopped and piled atop rice or greens, or pasta as a base for whatever's left that still looks good!

Off the Cuff. There are times when I just need groceries, and I'm in a hurry and don't have time for cookbooks, Pinterest, or even for thinking ahead. I just need to go. These are the times I start in the produce section and pick out an array of vegetables that I know I can roast for all sorts of meals. I then move to the meat/chicken section and I sometimes grab a seasoned chicken breast packet, a frozen tub of pulled pork, or even a sausage link or two. These are easy to cook, add in veggies or rolls, and we're good to go. Once I've started off on that end of the store, I'm less likely to stack up on boxes and jars of things with added ingredients we don't need. From the choices I've made in the fresh area, I then go home and write down what I can pull together the next week, without a recipe...and place the list under a fridge magnet!

Favorite off the cuff meals: Pulled pork rolls, fajitas (pre-seasoned chicken breasts and peppers/onions), sausage and veggies grilled to perfection.

Old Stand-by's. I have a book of recipes from when I first got married, and occasionally I'll pull out some of the old recipes that were really good from way back when. These are the ones my mom or my sister gave me, or ones I started out with that were simple and easy, and I kept them and don't want to lose them! I even have an old recipe box with recipes actually written out on index cards – what? Seriously, I do.

Favorite old stand-bys: Burritos (refried beans, ground meat, a jar of salsa and cheese – that's it), tortilla rollups (ham or turkey, mayo, salsa, cheese, lettuce) and French's Chili (ground beef

with chili seasoning packet, chopped red pepper and white onion, 1 can each of whole tomatoes and pinto beans – both undrained – 3 T Worcestershire sauce and 1 T hot sauce).

How do you decide what to make when you put together meals? If you have small kids, and picky eaters, it's not always easy. Even when the kids are gone, then you have the challenge of cooking for two or going out to eat...which is always tempting. But I've found that when I keep it simple and just look one place for recipes before each trip to the store, I enjoy my menu a lot more, and keep it interesting from week to week!

Selah's Style – Wet Weather Wear – by Selah Irwin

April showers bring May flowers! But on't let the wet weather wash your color away! Let every raindrop bring a splash of color to your world! You can brighten up these dreary days with just a few cheerful fashion accessories.

First of all, let's talk about these awesome rain boots. My grandma bought them for me and she also bot a matching set for my little cousin. Isn't she adorable? I picked this color because yellow is fun and looks like the sun. They help me imagine it is a sunny day. Don't get me wrong.... Rainy days still amaze me. I love splashing in puddles and going on rain walks. I would just like to thank these boots because they make that all possible. These boots were made for walking, and that's just what they'll do. Are you ready boots? Start walkin'!

I have quite an affection for this umbrella collection. I like to be ready. I like to be prepared. I like to wear a rainbow. I like to have different colors and patterns to go with my different outfits depending on how I feel.

When it is just a light sprinkle outside, I like to whip on my neck skirt. That is what I call my poncho. It's warm and cozy and everybody know-sy!

I found this little hat in my dress up clothes. It makes me warm and keeps my hair from getting' all wet. A hat makes a good addition to your wet weather apparel.

These are my wet weather tips. I hope they help cheer up your spring. Who knows what the spring can bring?

The Fearless Kitchen - Super Star Salads – by Christina Vetter

Spring is finally here!

It's time to shake off the winter cobwebs and breathe in a deep breath of the new season as the wildflowers begin to peek through the ground. Every season has its beauty, but I'm not sure if any of them can rival spring. The landscape is flooded with color, fragrance, and delicious new fruits and vegetables everywhere the eye can see. Seeing the world in bloom has me craving fresh wonderful produce this month, and that means a lot of salads.

I'm a sucker for a good salad. The more complex the better. While I enjoy even the simplest salads, iceberg lettuce drowning in gobs of dressing falls somewhere at the bottom of my list, maybe even off the list all together. Salads are meant to be colorful, healthy, bursting with flavor, and beautiful to look at. In the food world, these are called "composed" salads. Traditionally, a composed salad is meticulously arranged on the plate instead of tossed together, but the title has become a little more lax, especially in American cuisine.

Whether arranged or tossed, a composed salad simply needs to have a balance of colors, flavors, and textures, and is usually served as a main course. The possibilities are endless. Vegetables seem obvious in a salad, but don't be afraid to mix up the base greens. Many of them pair very well together. Be daring with fruits, nuts, exotic cheeses, and proteins. But please, please, please, don't overdress your salad. Dressings add wonderful flavor and are definitely welcome, but the last thing you want to do is have a beautiful arrangement of wonderful flavors drenched in overwhelming sauce, turning everything into mush. Be light handed; you can always add more, as needed. There are so many wonderful ingredients that work beautifully together.

Look below for a few combinations to get you started. Happy composing! And happy eating!

Chef's Salad

Serves 3-4

Difficulty:



Chef's salad is one of those household favorites. My husband and I love this traditional hearty meal of a salad. I would serve the dressing on the side, in a separate container, so there is no danger of over dressing.

Ingredients:

- 1 lb spring mixed salad greens
- ½ lb turkey breast sliced thin
- ½ lb ham, sliced thin
- ½ C grated Swiss or sharp cheddar cheese
- 10 cherry tomatoes
- 4 hard boiled eggs, small diced

½ C matchstick carrots
1 large avocado, small diced
Dressing of choice (I like a homemade ranch, my husband likes balsamic vinaigrette)

Directions:

- Wash and completely dry greens if not pre-washed.
- Arrange greens as base, and in individual rows, arrange ham, turkey, and eggs in vertical lines across the top.
- Horizontally arrange cheese, carrots, and avocado across the proteins.
- Carefully place cherry tomatoes around the edge of the plate.
- Serve with desired dressing in a separate container.

Deviled Egg Salad

Serves 4

Recipe Courtesy: Bobby Dean

Difficulty: 

This one was too hard to pass up. I love deviled eggs, and this recipe really hits the spot. In the original recipe he omits the egg yolks, and if you're watching calories, feel free. However, I feel the flavor and texture the yolk brings is worth the extra 75 calories. Also, I doubled the dressing. Drizzle on however much you'd like. Either way, this recipe is spot on.

Ingredients:

Dressing:

½ C light mayonnaise
½ C light sour cream
2 Tbsp Dijon mustard
1 tsp hot sauce
1 tsp Worcestershire sauce
Juice of 1 lemon
4 Tbsp olive oil
Salt and black pepper to taste

Salad:

9 large eggs
1 head romaine lettuce, torn into bite size pieces
5 radishes, thinly sliced
3 strips turkey bacon, cooked and crumbled
4 scallions, white and green parts only, thinly sliced

Directions:

-Dressing: In a medium bowl whisk together the mayonnaise, sugar, sour cream, mustard, hot sauce, Worcestershire, lemon juice, oil, and 2 Tbsp of water. Season to taste with salt and black pepper.

-Salad: In a medium sauce pan, cover the eggs by one inch of cold water. Bring to a boil over medium heat. Remove from the heat and let sit, covered, for 9 minutes. Meanwhile, fill a medium bowl with ice water. When the eggs are done, drain them, transfer them to ice water, and let sit for 5 minutes, or until cool. Peel eggs, and halve them crosswise, cut the halves into ¼ inch slices.

-Divide the lettuce, radishes, and sliced eggs evenly among four plates. Drizzle with the dressing and garnish with bacon, scallions, and more black pepper.

-Serve immediately.

Spring Spinach Salad with Red Onion Vinaigrette

Serves: 4

Difficulty: 

If I had to pick one favorite salad of all time, this would be it. I came up with this one for a bridal shower I catered, and it was a huge hit. It's also my husband's personal favorite. It's a little more involved than your traditional salad because you need to pickle the red onions hours in advance, but you'll be so glad you did. Pickled red onions are a pantry staple in our house and can be used on just about anything, including hamburgers and sandwiches, so go ahead and make a ton and keep them in the refrigerator.

Ingredients:

Salad:

9 oz spinach leaves

1 C seeded watermelon, medium diced

½ C Kalamata olives, minced

½ C pickled red onions, recipe below

1 C feta cheese, crumbled

Dressing:

½ C pickled red onion juice

¼ C olive oil

2 tsp dried oregano

Salt and black pepper to taste

Pickled Red Onions:

1 red onion, sliced ¼" thick

½ C white vinegar

½ C apple cider vinegar

2 tsp sugar

½ C water

Pinch of salt

Directions:

For the Onions:

-In a small sauce pot, bring onions, vinegars, sugar, salt, and water together up to a simmer. Allow to simmer for 3-5 minutes, or until onions begin to soften. Remove from heat and allow mixture to cool to room temperature, before placing in the refrigerator until chilled, preferably overnight.

For the Salad:

-In a large bowl, mix spinach, watermelon, olives, and red onions together.

-In a small bowl, whisk onion juice, olive oil, and oregano together. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

-Pour dressing over salad and mix until covered.

-Sprinkle cheese over salad, and mix only once or twice. Be careful to not over mix, or the cheese will become too loose.

-Serve immediately.

Tried and True - Too Many Totes – by Marcy Lytle

I love bags. In fact, most of my friends love bags. We love purses, totebags, makeup bags, book bags, all kinds of bags! I know I have plenty, but when I see a good bag – I just want to get another one! However, it's a pain to store the bags, right? If our bags are of any size at all, and we have a whole closet full, where in the heck do we hang them, stack them, or put them?

I've come up with seven storage ideas that might work for you, as they have for me:

Bags inside bags: This is a great way to store those grocery bags, for sure. Fold up all up but one, and stuff the folded ones inside the unfolded bag. This even works with purses. Use your larges bag-type purse, and store the smaller ones inside.

Hanging in the closet: We have a front entry closet for coats, but sometimes I store my grocery bags there, on a hanger. They're out of the way, and they are easy to grab on my way out the door.

Hooks in the entry: If you've got a few pretty totebags that would look nice hanging in plain view, consider hanging a few on a hook near your front door. We have an entire hook display, where I usually keep a hat, my purse, a scarf, a jacket...and some totebags!

In a drawer: I like this plastic 3-drawer chest that I keep in my closet. One drawer is reserved for the small purses that fit in here perfectly – like clutches, makeup bags, and small evening bags.

Under the bed: These cool hideaway zipper boxes are great for storage under the bed, and they too can be a place to stash large totebags that are maybe seasonal, like ones with summer flowers, or that one with a reindeer for Christmas shopping, or the pretty fall bag with painted leaves.

In the car: In the back of your vehicle, keep a few totes stored there – one for books when you go to the library, a few grocery bags, a bag for carrying in items you purchase while out, etc. Just remember to return them to the car when you head out the next time, or right after you unload inside the house.

Away and out of sight: If you're like me, you've got way too many bags, but some hold memories or carry nostalgia. And although you don't carry or use them anymore, you don't want to toss them! Consider using these for storage! Store rolls of wrapping paper in large totes, tennis balls and other park items in other bags and keep in the garage, tights of all colors in small totes (hung on a hook in your closet), or even out of season clothes or décor in another. That way they're functional and out of your grab-and-go area, and into their useful place!

When we're on vacation, I love to purchase a tote as a souvenir. I think those are my favorite kinds – because they remind me of where we've been, they're not too expensive, and I can carry them and use them in a practical way. And over the years, I've collected quite a few that have meaning, not just use!

Where do you store your totes and bags after you've loaded them up, dumped them out, and put them away?

HOME

Flickers of Fire

Walking with Children through Hard Times

My husband likes to give me pretty jewelry and I like to wear it. We're a great match. However, pretty jewelry is not the basis of our relationship. Like the gold in pretty jewelry, our marriage has been through some tough times, what some might refer to as "tried by fire." Most things are destroyed by fire. Wood products become ashes, for instance. Gold remains gold. Once it is refined, gold can be melted and re-poured into different forms, but it is always gold. I'm not an expert on refining gold, but, as I understand it, gold goes through many stages, most involving heat, to get to a state where it is pure and usable for fine jewelry.

All that to say, our lives are often developed by hardships – fire, if you will. The fire boils up all the ugliness, dross, or impurities in gold, to the surface, to be scooped off. When I fuss at my children for something inconsequential, I see the selfishness in my heart and ask God to scoop it out. With every bit of selfishness that is scooped out, I take on a little more of God's character, which is the gold standard. I wish I could say I am completely unselfish, but I'm afraid selfishness knows no depth. I can say I more often see my attitude for what it is and choose a different reaction. Perhaps one day, when I'm 980, God will have scooped enough selfishness out of me to make me pure enough to be a piece of costume jewelry.

We recently experienced a death in our family. It would have been nice to avoid that heartbreak, but we would have missed the refining God did. The death showed us God's circle of life. We remembered many funny, touching, and painful memories we shared with each other and our loved one. We reminded each other that God's plan is perfect, even when we don't understand it. We talked about trusting God and how we should really celebrate a Christian's passing, rather than mourn it. Without walking through this fire, I and my family would have less understanding of what the end of life means when we face it.

Like most parents, I want to protect my children. I teach them not to run with scissors and not to climb on the refrigerator and not to stick their tongue to an icy pole (not much chance of that in Texas!). Regardless of the safe habits I teach them, they will each walk through their own fires. They **MUST** walk through hardships in order to develop godly character. If I protect them from struggles, they may never know God's faithfulness and kindness and grace as anything more than a Sunday School song.

That doesn't mean I throw them in the deep end and hope they swim. Instead, as trials come up in childhood, my husband and I counsel the children on having a godly attitude and making wise choices. For example, we practice an open email and letter writing policy with my oldest daughter. If we observe an unkind or inappropriate comment from her or a friend, we discuss the comment, talk about how to phrase the comment better or how to address it with the offending friend, and then how to handle the situation better the next time it happens. And it will always happen again. Even these flickers of fire now begin the process of forming godly character in her.

If I were to ignore struggles in her very young life by giving her "space," how would she learn anything...or the right things? I'm not an advocate for leaving things to chance. I prefer to meet growing pains head on. By starting now, I hope my daughter will avoid my mistakes, learn from my experience, and reap the benefits of God's purification process early. She'll make her own mistakes and have unique refining fires, but she won't suddenly face a blazing forest fire never having experienced a little fire with help.

Any parent can be a babysitter and let a child grow up haphazardly. God's plan for Christian parents is to prayerfully support their children while God refines them into his gold standard. For this purpose, don't protect your children from hardship, but rather walk through the fire with them.

I Don't Do Teens - What If We're the Reason? – by Marcy Lytle

Back when I taught my kids to drive, I used the home version “education in a box” that I ordered on line to teach them myself. Inside the box were tapes to listen to in my car, instructing me how to instruct my teen to drive. Over and over again, the voice said something to the effect of, “If your young driver makes a mistake, it’s your fault.” That’s not what I wanted to hear, while teaching my kid to stay out of harm’s way, maneuver through rush hour traffic, and stay under all the laws of the land while doing so.

However, I quickly learned that when I was behind the wheel and made any wrong turn, forgot my blinker, or took my hand off the steering wheel, my teen was quick to point out my mistake by commenting, “Mom, you cut that person off!” I had to drive perfectly (while he was watching at least) so that he would learn what I taught and follow suit.

It’s a hard load we carry, we parents of teens, because they watch us like hawks watch their prey. If we tell them to do something we’re not doing ourselves, they will pounce on us like that mighty fowl pounces on food – and will devour us in seconds. We think they’re not watching, but they really are, and we can’t help but make mistakes from time to time.

However, we can correct the mistakes that blatantly look us in our own eyes, especially that of lying...

We’ll call those mistruths that are obvious and cruel “boldface lies.” We can pat ourselves on the back for not spewing out these. We’d never think of telling a complete lie, one our kids know is untrue, because we know the outcome. Our kids will chew us up and spit us out.

But what about those subtle lies we think they’re not hearing...or noticing? Here’s what I mean...

- *When our kids* deceive us by hiding their phones under their pillows at night, way past curfew until we open their door and “catch them in the act,” we might consider our own deceit we might have demonstrated in front of our kids, among our peers or with our spouse, while they were listening.
- *When our kids* tell us they’re going one place, and they’re really going another, we might consider if we’ve instilled fear in them so much that they’re afraid of talking and asking and coming to us with their ideas and thoughts and desires.
- *When our kids* tell us their homework is complete when it’s not, we might consider if they’ve heard us tell a “white lie” over the phone about why we didn’t show up at a meeting for which we volunteered to serve.
- *When our kids* are fooling around with the opposite sex and saying they’re not, we might consider the fact that perhaps we’ve avoided the subject, laid down the law without love, or allowed them a leash when they should have been reined in.
- *When our kids* start cheating, shutting their doors to hide away, looking sheepish when they’re called to dinner, we might consider that we’ve been too busy to notice, to care, or to ask about their concerns, their desires, and their struggles daily.

It's always a good thing to examine ourselves, our actions, our thoughts, and even our seemingly unnoticed agendas and motives in what we do, once in a while, and see what kind of picture we're creating in front of our kids as we "drive" through life in the fast lane, with unsafe lane changes, all the while yelling at those who dare to come near us.

There's no need to condemn ourselves, because we're human, and we're going to fail. But as loving parents, it's our job as the adults to realize our faults, confess them to Him (and sometimes to our kids, too), and watch transformation take place in our hearts...as well as in the hearts of our teens.

We really do still influence our kids while they're teens, maybe as much as we did when they were toddlers, or maybe more. They're always watching, learning, and mimicking what we do more than what we say, and if they're doing things to upset us – we can always look at ourselves first – and go from there.

Sometimes, it's outside influence that draws our teens. It can even be their own thoughts and persuasions from what they've read, listened to through music, or watched on television or the big screen. But even all of that is to be monitored by us, the parents.

If your kids are lying, pulling away, hiding, and doing things that alarm you, pray. Ask God to show you first, if there's anything you've presented that's influenced your kids negatively, and ask forgiveness. Then turn to your kids and do the same.

Our kids will remember times like these, more than the vacations we take with them, more than the rides at the amusement parks, and more than the allowance we dole out, because they will see our hearts and love us for portraying vulnerability, humility, and holiness.

And when we've done our part, He will do the rest...even if it seems like they're running. We can place them in His hands and know that he will pursue them until they too turn and say, "I surrender."

Be encouraged, not dismayed. It's a good thing to consider ourselves and our ways and see if there be anything at all that might cause them to fall...

Everything Home – Until Things Change – by Mikaela Cain

In summer of 2014, my husband changed careers and, while in-between jobs, he stayed home while I worked. I assumed he would care for the house—doing chores, groceries, and cooking—but he didn't even think about it. Grant had this weird guy thing where he didn't notice a mess, but did notice—and appreciate—when it was cleaned. *I did not understand that.* I saw the dusty fan blades, the spotty windows, the socks on the floor, the splash on the kitchen sink, everything! And I sometimes asked him to clean up while I was gone.

“Like what?” he asked, completely puzzled.

“Don't you see the dishes, that we're running low on food and that the bathroom is gross?” I replied, bewildered as well!

“No,” he said, hesitantly.

I realized that I felt as overwhelmed by the house needs as he felt trying to guess what I wanted to be done.

Somewhere in the middle of that season, we came up with three obvious solutions to take care of house-related issues.

We made lists. Grant loves them and it helps me a lot to narrow down the most important things. However, it took a lot of heart conversations to get to use this simple solution in a powerful, peaceful way. Grant and I slowly realized that the person who has more time doesn't automatically get the chores dumped on them. There's a lot more going on than just time when it comes to loving your home.

When Grant and I got married, I took care of the house mostly by myself. I enjoyed maintaining a cleaning routine and hunting for cheap, organic foods. I had just graduated ministry school and chose not to work for a season. Homemaking filled my time. Grant occasionally cooked (because he is good at it and loves it) and vacuumed, because I hate vacuuming. But I did everything else. I had time and energy and wanted to. When I eased into working, those desires changed. And list-making was effective.

We talked. About six months into marriage, Grant worked full time and I worked part time. I tried to see chores as a second job. That way, Grant and my “work time” ended up the same. I didn't realize that housekeeping changed from an enjoyable adventure to a “chore.” It felt like work after work. It felt weird for me to ask Grant to help around the house. I don't remember how or when it started, but I broke down one day and it came out that I needed help around the house. It didn't matter that he worked (for money) more hours than I did. Switching between part time jobs was stressful to me and caused an emotional drain that matched his when he came home. And really, we learned that it's not about comparing hours or energy. Answering the question “who does what” in a house, or in a marriage, boils down to sharing where you are, listening with love, and learning to dialogue options together. We learned to care about the other person's needs more than our own, while still be honest about our own.

We worked together. Our solutions varied during that time. While we dealt with the deeper heart stuff, we came up with plans to help each other out more. Eventually—when Grant quit his full-time job—we turned to list making again.

Typically, I wrote a list and asked,

“This is everything I’d like done today/this week, can you help me with some of it?”

And he took he wanted to (usually half or more than half, because he is a stellar guy) and I took the rest. We worked at different paces and different levels of detail. But, in the end, everything would get done and we did it in our own time and our own way, together. It worked really well for us.

When Grant saw me looking around frozen with the amount that needed to be done, he ran for the pad of paper and a pen and said,

“Okay, we know we need to call the bank, we need to clean the kitchen, and what else needs to be done?”

Grant started working again, and I had two part time jobs (and, eventually three) and the house work, but we were better prepared to take care of the home God entrusted us with. Grant did some house things that he enjoys and I did some things that I enjoy – and we took turns with the rest.

I feel like taking care of the home—from chores, to groceries, to car maintenance, to taxes—will always be an ongoing conversation between Grant and me. However, our conversations will be based on needs, energy, desire and mutual respect and care for each other.

We like to make decisions together.

We like to talk through budgeting and decorating and everything!

We like to rely on each other.

We mess up a lot and a lot gets let undone, but that’s just kind of how we are right now. And, until things change, we’ll just keep talking and making lists, and doing things together.

Life as We Know It – This Time was Different – by Erica Simmons

“Wow, Erica I am so impressed by your attitude. I remember a couple years ago we could not talk to you about any of the things going on in your boys life that you are now so excited about.”

That quote is from a dear co-worker friend of mine. We both work in different departments now but every now and then we get to spend some time together. I was catching her up on the new phase of my life: my boys getting their driver’s license and having more independence. She made the comment above because when my sons were in 8th grade it hit me hard that they would be in high school soon, and it was a very sobering experience to realize they also would be leaving home soon. I didn’t want any comments about them growing up spoken out loud.

As I think about who I was then and who I am now, I am amazed at how much I have grown in my attitude toward my boys growing up. God sure knows what He is doing. 18 years is right about the time we start to ask, “Are they gone yet?” (I’m just kidding.)

The Journey

It’s funny how faith journeys start. In the beginning, we get nowhere as we look at the destination and think there is no way we can get from here to there. So we spend too much time not going anywhere. Somewhere along the way we grab hold of some faith and think if we focus on baby steps, we can do it. Then comes the realization that we have come a long way without even noticing.

My journey with the boys began simply with the realization that I had not prepared them enough spiritually to go out into the world. Just think. If I had kept that mentality, they could have left home before I even began to give them what God wanted me to deposit in them. Since that time, **I have become a praying parent who makes a conscious effort to get out of God’s way in my boys’ lives.** I have had so much growing to do spiritually, myself, in this entire situation. It has not always been easy, but my life-as-we-know-it moment made me realize just how far I have come.

It all started with a phone call from Jordan’s teacher. She said she noticed Jordan had an attitude and kept him after class to ask him what was wrong. What she said that came out of my son’s mouth was quite surprising, and she wanted to talk with me before she decided about the consequences. I got on the phone with my son and let him know in no uncertain terms what I thought about his behavior. I ended the conversation before I said something that I would have to ask forgiveness for, later. I was upset, but not angry. A peace surrounded me about the situation – a peace I had not felt before.

Being in a cubicle environment means I have very little privacy when on a phone call, so when I hung up, the principal of the new campus (who has an office in our area for now) came over. She said she did not mean to overstep, but couldn’t help but hear my conversation. She shared that she had a son who too had to be told to be quiet before he got himself into too much trouble. We talked about our respective issues, and that’s when I said it. I told her **my son’s behavior is NOT a reflection of me** (my life-as-we-know-it moment.)

As parents, we feel shame and embarrassment when our children behave in a way we know we are not teaching them. We feel it because we think we are being judged based on their behavior

(which may be true) but we know what we are teaching them. They then choose how they want to act and that is their choice.

It was very liberating for me to be able to lay it at my Father's feet. It was a huge growing point for me. In the past, I would have been in my boy's face yelling at him about his behavior, but not this time. **This time I was able to lay my son at my Father's feet and be at peace.**

God did put a verse on my heart for him.

For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks - (Matthew 12:34b ESV)

My charge is to spend more time with my boys depositing into their hearts the good words of life, words that will overflow out of them when they need them the most. That is the next leg of this journey, one that I know has been prepared for me already (as every leg has) because my Savior has gone before me to do so.

All I have to do is act in faith and do what He has called me to do, and that is to be a steward of my boys and prepare them for Him.

A Night to Remember - What in the world? – by Marcy Lytle

That's a good question...what's in our world? Sometimes, all we see is our little world in our hometown and all of the places we go. However, the world is a big place and many don't have the luxuries we do, because their part of the world is full of sickness, war, and poverty. We need to be aware of these needs, so that we can pray, give, and send others to help. So what's in the world, outside of ours? Let's find out together...

Preparation: You will need a world atlas or a globe for this lesson, and two baseball mitts or two large stuffed gloves to represent the hands of God. Finally, provide paper, pencils and scissors for each one participating. Lay the mitts or gloves out on the table to represent God's hands, stating that his hands are always open and big enough for any need we have.

There are huge needs around the world and in our own country. We can pray and give to make a difference in the lives of people, even if it's only a little that we can do. If everyone does a little, it will make a lot!

Use your pencil to trace the outline of both of your hands, and then cut them out.(You can do this ahead of time, if you wish.)

We are going to write down some specific needs of countries around the world onto the fingers of our hands, so that we will remember to pray for these countries. Then we are going to place our hands into God's hands, trusting him to hear and answer our prayers. We serve a big God who loves the whole world, and he hears our prayers.

Poverty-stricken countries are those that lack money and the basic needs of life, such as food, water, shelter and education. Extreme poverty is most prevalent in Africa and is defined on living on less than \$1.25 per day. *(Find Africa on the map and write "poverty" on the thumb of one of your traced hands.)*

Christians are severely **persecuted**, tortured and killed in many countries, just because they believe in Jesus and worship Him. Afghanistan is one of these countries. *(Find Afghanistan on the map and write "persecution" on the pointer finger of one hand)*.

Some countries have people that **abuse** children in horrible ways. In places like Sri Lanka *(find it on the map)* children are enlisted as soldiers to fight in wars. There are also women who are trained in the use of weapons. *(Write "abuse" on the middle finger of one hand)*.

Swaziland is a country high in cases of **AIDS** victims. *(Find it on the map.)* AIDS is a deadly virus. There are too many people in this small country who get this disease and die. *(Write "disease" on the ring finger of one hand.)*

A Tsunami (huge waves of water) hit Japan *(find it on the map)* and killed many people, and other **weather disasters** hit different countries year after year. Weather disasters cause flooding and loss of homes, leaving countries devastated and in need. *(Write "weather disasters" on the little finger of one hand.)*

On just one hand we have written just a few of the worldwide problems that are causing people to be under great affliction, great need and even death. There are too many to even count or name. As we know, **war** *(write "war" in the middle of the same hand)* is also going on in many countries, where fighting, bombs, attacks, etc. go on every day as a normal occurrence in some

cities. People everywhere need the love of God to shine upon them and his peace to fill their hearts.

God loves all people everywhere all over the world. We can read his word, pray and believe for relief and aid to these countries. We can pray that God would send workers to help and Christians to show the love of Christ to people who are hurting. We can give to our local storehouses that provide food for the needy. We are His hands extended to the world.

Read Psalm 145:16. Write "provider" on the thumb of the other hand.

Read Psalm 12:5. Write "protector" on the pointer finger of the other hand.

Read Psalm 18:17. Write "deliverer" on the middle finger of the other hand.

Read Psalm 6:2. Write "healer" on the fourth finger of the other hand.

Read Psalm 4:8. Write "peace giver" on the little finger of the other hand.

Now, one by one place both of your hands in the "hands of God," praying aloud for one of the needs you have written, stating what God's word says about that particular need.

Join your hands together by placing them on the map or globe, and pray...

Family Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you that you are a good, good Father and you care for all of your children. We ask that you heal, protect, and provide for the people in world who are in need. Show us what we can do to help them. In your loving name, Amen.

The Family Practice – The Morning Hurry – by Rachel Toalson

Every single morning, without fail, someone can't find their backpack. Another someone has misplaced their jacket. And another someone forgot how to look for his left shoe. So when it comes time for leaving, there's a mad rush for the door and three voices bemoaning that they're not going to be able to go to school today because they can't find the very things they need for going to school.

I have a hard time with this craziness. Mostly because I want to teach my kids the value of being on time, and their school, at the beginning of this year, changed its start time to five minutes earlier. You'd be surprised what a big difference five minutes can make in a household of eight, but it really does. When I don't feel like I'm going to make it on time, I start to live in panic mode. The back of my throat closes off, my head starts to spin and, usually, I get that hurried tone in my voice that doesn't sound the least bit honoring.

I start to really dislike myself, every single morning.

Panic mode isn't good for a family.

Because, what it inevitably looks like is that we will get to that leaving time, and we've just spent the last 45 minutes together, talking about what we hope for the day and how everyone slept and any bizarre dreams that might have happened in the dark, and then it comes leaving time and I've become a completely different person, a person who will yell and complain and hurry, hurry, hurry so we won't be late.

And then we'll start on the walk to school, and it's not a leisurely walk, it's a brisk one, where the 3-year-old twins have to run the whole time, because we can't be late. We can't, I don't want us to be late. We aren't, of course. My pace makes sure of that. But by the time I leave my kids at their classrooms, it is not with great tidings and joy, because we've just spent the last 15 minutes racing to get here, which left no room for the valuable conversation that could have happened.

On one of my walks home, when I'd delivered the three older boys to their teachers, I started thinking about this hurry phenomenon, how hurry does not speak love, how kids do not know, really, what hurry is, but they do know what the tone of our voice is, and the tone of my voice in hurry says,

You're annoying, you're not making right decisions, you're not meeting my expectations, you're expected to be someone different.

And then, because of the race to school, we're not even able to talk it out, so they're left, in their classrooms without me, remembering the way we parted.

Because of this, I've started carrying a camera on our morning walks. I've started snapping pictures, because sometimes what we need is the lens of a camera to show us how much we love someone again. Sometimes, after a whole morning of hurry, hurry, hurry, it takes the miracle of a still shot to remind us what it means:

*to walk, unhurried
to walk, unburdened*

to walk, lovingly

Now when we're on our way to school, sometimes I stop, even if we're running late, to take a picture of a boy who looks so beautiful in the morning light, with it falling over the side of his face like that. Sometimes I take a picture of two waiting at a corner. Sometimes I take a picture of the one who likes to walk and read at the same time. Sometimes I take a picture of a dandelion on the grass before one of the 3-year-olds picks it. Sometimes I take a picture of the sunrise, because it looks like a promise. Sometimes I take a picture of the baby, who won't be a baby forever.

Looking back over these pictures helps me remember that it's not about how fast we get there, but it's about the journey we take to get there.

And that lesson has a lot to teach me about life.

Some ways you can slow down the morning rush:

1. **Play / Spy** on the way to school (or wherever it is you go with your kids in the mornings). Kids love this game. It can get tedious, but the drop-off is also the cut-off, so at least you won't be playing it forever. But */ Spy* teaches kids (and parents!) to notice things. We spend so much of our days not noticing things. It's worth it to slow down and notice every now and then.

2. **Establish a practice of observing the sunrise.** This is one of my favorite things to do. My kids don't usually notice how beautiful the sky gets until I point it out to them. Sometimes there are clouds that spread the sunrise color all throughout the sky. Sometimes the sky is clear, like a perfect painting. Every day it's a different beauty.

3. **Grab a camera or notebook.** Record some details about what you see on your way in to school. If you don't walk, make a mental note, and write it down later (voice memos are great for this). This camera or notebook becomes our record of notice. It's amazing the details we capture of our day when we notice them.

YOU

Under the Influence – That Garden We Left – by Marcy Lytle

Did you know...

Circumstances and flesh (our bodies) were never intended to sustain us?

Back in the garden, before that terrible couple ate and shared a bite from the forbidden tree, that which sustained them and fed them was walking with their Maker in the garden. It was after they screwed up, disobeyed, and had to leave that garden that they then looked to the land and people and flesh to keep them going.

Seriously. That's what happened.

They had these two sons, Cain and Abel. I really like those names and rarely hear of them today! In fact, anyone who knows the story of these two brothers probably avoids the name Cain altogether. Cain and Abel were at odds, like many brothers, and Cain grew so angry and envious of his brother's acceptance before God that he killed him! That has to be the absolute worst circumstance for parents to find themselves in – that of having a son who killed his sibling in anger. Can you think of anything more horrible?

At the end of that chapter of the murderous young man, it says [men then began to](#) "call upon the name of the Lord."

Can you imagine with me that Adam and Eve probably told their kids, after they tried this living on their own without their Maker, after the boys were angry and fighting ensued, that there was a time when...all was perfect, all was provided for, and all was present...in Him. I'm thinking that at some point they realized that disobeying God was the worst mistake they'd ever made, and they relayed this to their kids (which by now included another son named Seth.)

It didn't take long for this couple and their offspring, and the others present on the earth, to realize that toiling and laboring on the land, giving birth in pain to children, and living outside the garden of bliss was quite impossible without help.

They now found themselves tired, weary, grieving over the loss of a son, trying to understand the actions of another son, and taking care of new baby on the scene. And they realized they needed help.

Dare they ask the One they too grieved when they chose death, instead of life?

Maybe, they remembered that when they were found naked and ashamed, even when God had to send them out of the garden because He is holy and He warned them, that [he actually clothed them](#) before they left.

Maybe they realized that He really did love them and that his intentions for them were good and not harmful, and it was they who made the choice to leave those loving arms.

Maybe they chided themselves constantly for choosing to believe a lie instead of the truth.

Maybe they all talked among themselves and thought if they called out, maybe he would answer.

We all get caught up in living, and we often think all of this living here on earth is up to us, it's in our own strength, it's too hard and confusing and we just have to crawl our way through, and it's just a fact of life that we're going to be tired, worn out...and eventually die.

But wait!

The truth is that all of these things we do, i.e. work, play, give birth, plant gardens, go to doctors, enlighten our minds, etc. were never intended to be our sustenance. They were never meant to make us feel loved, accepted, worthy, pursued, or joyful...or even well.

That place is in His presence, eating what he planted, what he created, and listening to what He says.

We live in this world, but we're not to be of this world. That sounds weird, but it's not. It's a good reminder that we aren't born out of chaos, big explosions, or even evolving mysteries of animals to human beings.

We were created in His image, to bear His name, to hear His voice, and to respond to His love.

And that is why we call on Him and he hears us, when we abandon it all in favor of walking with him in the cool of the day...to hear what he has to say...so that we might live.

Strengthening Your Core – Better with a Belt – by Marcy Lytle

Jeans.

They're maddening, aren't they?

We can't live without them, and we have to own several pairs of them because they're skinny, they're flared, and they're cropped. They're high-waist, low-rise, and sit just below-the-waist. And they're extra maddening when they don't fit properly for our bodies; which happens way more often than we'd like to admit. If our jeans fit our thighs, then the waist is sometimes loose. If the jeans fit our waist, they're often too tight after a large dinner and we end up with that dreaded fashion faux pas, the "muffin top."

In the past year or so, I've started wearing a belt with every pair of my jeans, whereas I used to never wear one!

Why the change?

I can keep my jeans up to the place where I want them to be, the belt pulls in all the gaps and keeps me feeling taut and firm throughout the day, and for those jeans that stretch and become baggy after wearing them a few hours, I no longer have a problem of them slipping down and cutting into my stomach when I sit down!

Problem solved!

So this morning I was thinking...

Lots of things in life are "better with a belt," aren't they?

There's a verse in the bible that says this:

So stand ready, with truth as a belt tight around your waist...

(Ephesians 6:14 GNT)

My lightbulb moment about wearing a belt to end my wiggling, yanking, and sucking it in, made me think of this verse about how truth does the same thing to our hearts and minds that a belt does for bodies.

Think about it.

Lies barrage our thoughts daily and cause our faith to slip from being firmly set, to where we start to feel a bulge of doubt. It's then we need **to tighten the belt of truth**.

Gray lines appear in our black and white worlds of raising kids, dealing with aging parents, putting up with grumpy spouses, etc. and fear about the future starts our day with an uncomfortable cinch where we should be free. It's then we need to adjust our belt and **lift our thoughts back into place** – thoughts of his love and mercy and goodness that follows us every day of our lives.

Weariness sets in after days and days of too much on our plate, too many hands pulling us in all directions, and too many bills to pay, until we're sagging and drooping and barely able to stand. It's then we need to **pull in our sanity** with realizing what we can handle and what we cannot – and learn to say no.

Depression visits our hearts when we sink back into old familiar ways of self-sufficiency, hopelessness, and despair, until we honestly feel undone and undressed with our jeans falling to the floor! It's then we need to remember the belt, and **fasten it with our identity and provision** as that which stays put and never comes loose, because we belong to Him!

I feel so much better now that I've learned to add the belt to my jeans. I feel put together, held up, secure, and tightly reined in to the comfort level that makes my day enjoyable in so many ways.

How about you?

Are you wearing a "belt" of truth today?

He is the truth, and if you ask Him and read his Word, he'll secure you tightly and keep you together in ways that will even astound you, as you look in the mirror and realize that it's always...better with a belt!

Healthy Habits – Produce Appeal – by Marcy Lytle

When I was first married, I knew nothing about shopping healthfully – it wasn't a trend or anything I really had learned growing up – so I just bought and ate whatever looked good on the shelf. Boxed, jarred, canned, and sacked were good for me; and I never read a label or even knew the label contained anything I should read. Of course, we all know differently now, and we also know that those labels now reveal so much that isn't good for us to consume as the mainstay of our diet. Sugars, carbs, calories, salt, and other ingredients we cannot pronounce are in tiny lettering that takes time to read and calculate percentages and grams.

Now decades later, I've listened, observed, felt, and changed my shopping habits. I don't go for fad diets, cutting out this or that, or even being fearful of a label. But I have changed where I spend most of shopping time – and it's not on the aisles with the items listed above. It's in the produce section where I feel seriously – like a kid in a candy store. I get so excited when the new seasons roll around and beautiful, colorful, tasty fruits and vegetables appear! And I love the local Farmers Markets on the weekends, when I get a chance to show up with my bag and fill it up for the coming week.

So what's the big appeal?

I'd rather have fresh corn, fresh green beans, and fresh carrots any day over the canned variety. I still buy black beans for Mexican dishes and garbanzo beans (chickpeas) for hummus, but the other veggies we eat for sides are so beautiful and fresh, and easy to make for our families. They require a bit more planning and time to prepare, but we can include the kids! We can teach them to snap beans, show the older kids how to [shave the corn off the cob](#) without it flying across the kitchen, and peel and cut carrots into sticks for lunches, or roast a whole bunch of veggies together for weeknight sides. There's nothing like them! Learning to sprinkle on seasonings and herbs of all kinds, we'll never go back to the canned varieties.

I've realized that if I have cut-up fresh fruit in a drawer in the fridge and in a basket on the counter, I'm more likely to **reach for a snack of fruit and nuts** (which are most delicious and healthy – and in the produce section too!) rather than a candy bar or cookies. Packaged cookies just are flavorless, so why take up space in your pantry with them? Reserve "real" dessert time for that occasional night out, after dinner for a treat, rather than every hour when you're at home. Or why not blend up some [almond butter](#) for a spread on crackers?

Fresh ingredients pulled together from the produce section are so much more fun to create with, rather than prepared meals in a box that includes the pasta, the dried veggies and the powders. Using whatever protein you have available (beans, chicken, ground beef), put on your creative cap and put together a meal that's artful and thoughtful and tasty! **Herbs, greens of all kinds, and fresh tomatoes and cucumbers and onions** – can be put together in a variety of ways to make a meal fit for a king – no boxes included! [Fresh salsa](#) is the best!

If you're stuck in a rut and think boxes and bags are easier, faster, and all you can do, think again. Here are a few suggestions to get started toward produce appeal:

Pile together say a dozen recipes that include fresh ingredients and keep those stocked in your fridge. You can find these on Pinterest or in cookbooks everywhere now. Let your kids help you find them!

Plan ahead one night a week by cutting, peeling, washing, snapping, and organizing your greens, veggies, and fruit into containers and drawers in your fridge.

Put together three mason jars of herbs for the week – maybe start with parsley, cilantro and thyme or basil – for picking and chopping and sprinkling.

Place healthy choices in visible places like pretty baskets on the table, cute small colanders in the fridge, or even muffin tins full of salad toppings, so that you see them and want them.

Purpose to avoid the aisles with boxes, bags and cans, as much as possible. Keep your ratio 75% produce, 25% other. (You can even [make chips](#) with fresh corn tortillas!)

That's five P's to help you with your Produce Appeal. Once you make the switch, you'll find yourself with a whole brain full of creativity that wants to flow into the bowl, onto the pan, and atop the plate. Your family will be healthier, feel better, and learn to love the freshness!

Beauty for Ashes – I Was Rescued – by Pam Charro

I read once that one of the reasons some Americans don't like the idea of Christianity is because they don't like the idea of having to be rescued. It doesn't seem to fit with our American idea of democracy and independence. We like to think we can take care of ourselves.

Believe me. I knew I needed to be rescued.

Okay, maybe not exactly rescued, but I was looking for something long before I knew it was Jesus. Even at the age of seven, I would wander the playground and ask "something out there" what made me valuable. How did I know that I was loved and that my life mattered? So many experiences seemed to say otherwise.

I started looking at different churches in my small town in Montana when I was 15. I wandered in and out of several and was left more confused (and a little shaken up) than ever before. I wanted to know what the big deal about the Bible was, but I most certainly did not want to be like the religious folks I knew. Yuck!

When I was 19, I remember telling my boyfriend, "I feel like a diamond that's been thrown in the fireplace and is covered with ashes. I just want to be beautiful but I can't get this dirt off me." Most people didn't like it when I talked that way, and they often told me to just have another beer and be quiet. It seemed I would never find any answers.

I tried several things before I found the truth of the Bible. I lost a lot of weight and tried various relationships. I tried many different types of drugs. My big dream was to be a famous rock singer, so I went to Boston and took voice lessons and started auditioning for bands. Very scary stuff for a Montana girl on her own, but God graciously protected me. In fact, he actually led me to my church of origin there! I was living with a boyfriend and beginning to wonder what else was left to try when I was invited to a Bible discussion group. Yay! Finally I could study the Bible and find out what all the fuss was about.

But, wait a minute... They wanted me to actually make decisions about what I read and start living it. Whoa! Hold the phone! I was not ready to do that at all! I didn't want to belong to this group of freaky people! I took some time out, and, during that time, my mom started mailing me books about other religions. I was torn for about 5 1/2 months while I read the Bible, read the other books, and prayed. My Bible group told me we couldn't study anymore until I decided to make changes in my life based on what I was learning.

*I told God,
"If this is really you, please make it plain to me,
because I have searched way too long to turn you away."*

I still didn't really want the Bible to be true, but I had to find out if it was. I told my group of women that I was ready to start making some changes. When we did the study on baptism and Jesus trading places with me, something started to happen: I began to fall in love with him. And I knew that I had to make a conscious decision to believe the Bible, or to not. The idea that God came here in the flesh and rescued me just seemed something I could not turn away from. Even though it meant I had to belong to these people, and even though I had to change

my entire life. I was terrified but I couldn't walk away. I made the decision to believe that my God had come here in the flesh and died for me.

And my dirt really is washed away. My shame really is gone.

*The girl who wanted nothing to do with religion was won over by blood-soaked hands and feet
and eyes that looked into my torn-up soul and wanted me.*

It all started there on October 23, 1988.

I have made a decision to never forget how I felt before I was rescued, and how God has given me life ever since. I messed up my life while I was searching but God was faithful and lead me to himself.

Thank you, truly thank you, Lord.

Created for Life - April State of Mind – by Ginny Hurley

April showers bring May flowers.

As I pondered this little saying, I was surprised by a sudden sense of comfort. April is, and has always been, my favorite month. Not just because it is my birth month, but because it brings freshness and a special fragrance all its own. No other time of year pours us out of doors, like April.

We sit outside for meals, visit with neighbors, take long walks, ride bicycles, and enjoy a multitude of activities in the springtime air. As the calendar turns to April, a feeling of new beginnings gains momentum, even more than in the month of January. We seem to walk with a lilt and hum as we drive through flowery scenery on our way to work. Bold yellows and bright reds peek out of fields and driveways. Our hearts begin to soar and thoughts of refreshing carefree days saunter into our minds.

We were made for such a time as this!

- April!
- Beauty unfolding!
- Streams in the desert!
- Browns transformed into greens!
- Such loveliness!

As these thoughts and pictures invaded my mind, I thought of Paul's words.

Philippians 4:11, 12

“Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.”

I don't know why I thought of this verse, but I felt the Lord say, “You can always live in an April state of mind.”

I knew just what He was saying! I don't have to have a month, or day, or season, to rejoice in the freshness of His beauty. Every day I can choose contentment, comfort, and joy! Even on a winter day, even in the hot dry desert, I can blossom like a rose. I can choose how I feel and decide to rejoice, no matter what the circumstance brings.

I looked up the word *abound* and it means to be plentiful, filled up, well supplied. Knowing Paul's difficulties through much tumult and even persecution, he was able to abound. I want that! I want to be able to say,

“I am content. I am able to abound in pleasure and in lack.
I am His and He is mine, all the time!”

What peace floods my soul, just thinking of this kinship with Paul. He raised the bar. He set the pace. I want to follow in his steps and demonstrate the goodness of God in all circumstances and states. I do want an April state of mind.

I was reminded of a walk in late winter when I spied two lovely yellow blooms growing in the midst of a field of weeds. This picture came back to my mind, and I saw the glory of God's heart. He knows and cares for everything that concerns me. He keeps me in every season and holds fast to His promises.

What season are you in?

Despite the month of the year, we all have times of growth, loss, victory, and failure. Let's make a decision to walk in April, no matter what our season brings.

What fruit abounds to our account in this season?

I am glad He reminds me to blossom and bear fruit always.

In Him, I can do all things!

MARRIAGE

In This Together – Serve as One – Sarah Stennett

My husband is a pastor.

Almost every Sunday of our marriage has been a workday for him. In fact, even back when we were dating, he has served on staff at a church. The only exception was early in our marriage when we moved to Los Angeles for two years for him to study screenwriting at UCLA. During that time, instead of working on Sundays, we attended church together, like most couples do. At first, it felt strange, like we were back in college, forgetting to do our homework or something. But once we found a church body that we connected to, we found a way to serve the local church together. Rob and I became really involved in the leadership team at our Young Marrieds group in Bel Air. We loved being a part of what God was doing in that church community. It was a much needed shift in the way we viewed our relationship with the local church, as a married couple.

We discovered that actively doing ministry together drew us closer to one another and to the Lord.

A few years ago, while we were still living in Colorado, my husband came home from work and announced to me that he had signed us up to lead a small group at church. I was a bit stunned, since I was working in a new teaching position and already feeling a bit overwhelmed with two kids and a full time job. He explained that he had hoped that we could, once again, serve in local church ministry together, as a married couple. At that time, he was working at a large church and felt that not only did he not want ministry to just feel like his job, but that he also wanted it to be an active part of our marriage. It took some convincing on his part, but the more he shared his heart on the matter, the harder it was to say no. That group ended up being a wonderful community that sought Biblical answers to our daily questions alongside other married couples who were also raising small children. It wasn't easy to carve out the time or energy, but we were committed to making it a priority.

As we continued to have more children (we now have four), some seasons of our family life have required us to take breaks in our local church service as a couple. Over the course of the eight months that we have lived here in Austin, Texas, Rob and I have been praying about how and where to serve our church together, as a married couple. My building community and relationships with the women in the congregation and his building relationships with his ministry teams has all been wonderful and powerful, but we have been feeling ready to build His kingdom together as well. We felt like God was saying to help build local church community by opening our home to a small group once a week. It's been about a month now, and although we had a rough start, we believe that God will continue to build this group, and we will be obedient stewards to lead it by loving His people.

Can I just say that it's beautiful?

Not only doing daily life together by swapping stories about the day's work, feeding kids, and watching our favorite shows together, but by also believing God together to use this always-a-bit-messy house and our flawed, yet authentic team (the husband/wife duo) to build His Church.

I love watching my husband look people in the eye and ask them real questions about life and faith.

I love that we can tag team off of one another to talk about God and life with the people who come to our home.

Even our kids get excited about welcoming the kids who come (and serving at church on Sundays).

I guess I'm telling you all of this because I want to encourage you, whoever you are who may or may not still be reading this, to pray about how God wants to use you in your local church. When I say you, I mean you and your husband, as a team. It may be an off season for you, it may be a small commitment like volunteering to greet people together as they enter the church doors a few Sundays a month, or maybe it is to lead a small group.

But know that the act of serving the Body of Christ as one flesh is beautiful and holy.

It will bless your marriage, your heart, and the loves of others.

Date Night Fun – Picnics in the Park – by Marcy Lytle

Who doesn't love a picnic? Well, they're not fun if ants are present, the wind is too strong, or we have to slave over the stove to prepare a feast that we're too tired to eat, once we arrive at the park! But honestly, picnics can be the most pleasurable date time of all, when we just decide to go and have the right places and pieces in place.

This month, we're sharing five picnic ideas for that time you just want to be alone, with something good to eat, enjoying the spring-like temps, and chatting with good conversation...

1. **A blanket and a basket** – This is the traditional picnic with a checkered tablecloth and a basket full of goodies, you dressed in your spring frock with hat on your head, and he barefoot and holding your hand as you find a shady spot to park. Okay, so you've never done this. Do it this month. Here's a [pretty cloth, and a basket](#). Now all you have to do is fill it with either store bought goodies, or make your own snacks, and pack it. Do nothing but eat, lie back and find pictures in the clouds, and then get up and maybe fly a kite...
2. **A table under the trees** – There are picnic tables and parks all over towns everywhere. One of our parks has cute tables secluded in an alcove between trees, right next to a creek. There are even cute table under gazebos in neighborhood parks with grills nearby. Stop by your local deli and get a to-go picnic box (Jason's Deli makes them, where I live), visit a local bakery for freshly baked cookies, and go through a drive-thru for your favorite iced drinks before you arrive...or take charcoal and all the ingredients for [cowboy meals in foil!](#)
3. **A backyard bash** – Maybe you have an afternoon or evening where you want to stay home, but you don't want to eat at the table or in front of the TV. Take your dinner out back. Put on some tunes, light some candles, and after you eat your leftovers, your sandwiches, or your [gourmet dinner for two](#) – get up and dance on the freshly mown grass – and enjoy your date for two without ever leaving your house!
4. **An adventure on the go** – Sometimes it's fun to just park and picnic in the car, with windows down, and sights to see. Take a drive out of town and pull into a small city park, maybe to watch a baseball game out your windshield with teams playing where you don't know a single person. Turn off the motor, eat your [fun snacks you've prepared](#), then lay your seats back and take a nap. After you've eaten, you can then exit the car and take a walk, get popcorn from the concession stand, or drive on to the next little town for an ice cream float.
5. **A late night on the floor** – This can be one of the most romantic picnics for two, especially for young parents with kids, once the kids are asleep. Light the candles, spread out a quilt, grab a couple of pillows off the sofa, pop a big [bowl of popcorn](#) with lots of candies for topping, and pop open your favorite soda. Put on a late night comedy movie, and picnic together...and maybe even just fall asleep there and never move...til morning!

Picnics are truly one of the most satisfying dates to plan, because they involve intimacy, pure pleasure of relaxation, and food that we enjoy preparing and eating. What more could you ask

for on a date night (or day)? Dates don't always have to be expensive, in the confines of a restaurant, or dressed up to the nines for a Broadway show.

Grab that basket and blanket, and go...go on...enjoy.

After 30 Years - That's Not My Husband – by Marcy Lytle

I remember back when we were first married, when I compared myself to others because that's what young wives do, right? In that cesspool of comparisons, I also at times compared my husband to other men. Comparing ourselves among ourselves is not wise, [so we read](#), but most of us do it anyway...and suffer the consequences of poor self-image and discontentment with the blessings that we have.

One time I looked at guys who dressed up for work in suits, how pressed and distinguished they looked! For a moment, I wished I had a guy who looked dapper on the way to work instead of heading off with tools in hand...

But that's not my husband.

I do remember observing other couples and hearing the quiet way their husbands spoke, and wondered if their homes were quiet, peaceful, and if he always was the calm, demure young man he appeared to be in public. I wished my spouse had a lower decibel when he spoke, because his voice boomed even when he tried to whisper...

But that's not my husband.

There were times when I even assumed some of the guys in our circle of friends made lots of money, more than we probably had, and I envied the lifestyle they brought to their wives, one with lots of shopping for whatever and whenever. I secretly harbored disdain in my heart for the job my husband had, one that paid our bills and more. I wished he too made the bigger bucks...

But that's not my husband.

I've been married for a few decades now, and I hope I've matured and adjusted my eyes' lenses and see a bit more maturely as I look at others and mine. Oh, on occasion I still have a wandering mind that goes back to comparison, until I shift and realize such good that belongs to me, and I need to take note and recognize them – and give thanks.

I now see a man who wears a uniform to work with pride, receives accolades for a job well done, and who is one of the smartest men I know who can fix, reconfigure, and manage any sort of building out there or our home here, and comfort my fearful heart over and over...

That's my husband.

I listen to his voice that rises above the din no matter where we are, the voice that speaks encouragement to a crowd of people to love God more, and one that is heard above the noise of the discouraging world around me, and I smile...

That's my husband.

I watch him work hard, I take his pay that is hard-earned, and I pay bills, I plan outings, and together our incomes meet all of our needs and more. Our lifestyle is one that is all our own,

one that he enjoys immensely every day in every way, and he pulls me in toward being thankful for all that we have...

That's my husband.

We can all become quickly dissatisfied with the guy sitting next to us in the car, lying beside us in the bed, or standing near us in line to eat...when we look around to see what we're missing and what we wish we had. Or...we can choose to look in his eyes, grab his hand, and lie next to him and breathe, knowing God is good and all good gifts come from him...including our husband. With all of his uniqueness, his funny mannerisms, and his lame jokes (I forgot to mention that one!), we can choose to admire him instead of wishing he was a wax figure we could melt and remake.

No, that's not my husband – that guy over there.

This is my husband – this guy right here.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – You are Enough – by Rachel Critz

1 Peter 2:9 says,

“But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God’s very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Do you ever get those days where you simply do not feel like you are enough for someone? Like you know you can do better than this, but you have honestly given your all and you do not feel like you have met their expectations?

I know I have.

For me, I genuinely adore being around people. I tend to figure out a way to get along with someone no matter who they are, if they’re new to somewhere or if I am new. I always take what people say to heart, because what others say to me matters to me, even if it is not the best words a person can receive. So when someone dislikes something about me or just me in general, I get this voice in my head saying,

Not good enough...change....

So me being the person who likes to meet others’ needs, I decided to change that part of me to get them to like me. Yeah, well, not my best work. I have realized not everyone in life will like a carefree tall blonde girl who laughs at nearly everything. And from this moment on, I have decided to put an end to trying to meet someone’s needs where their opinion has no meaning behind it.

You should, too.

Your worth is not in the words of men but in the eyes of the Lord. You are his child, the one he chose to spread light in the hearts of the lost. Do not put yourself below others so they have this power over you; because honestly, the time you put in to changing yourself for them, they might already be insulting the next kid and you are not even a thought to them anymore. Stop wasting time attempting to be enough for someone, do not even give them a look in their direction.

You are enough for the friends who make you laugh and love seeing you smile.

You are enough for your parents who will do everything with the power God has given them to protect you.

You are enough for your brothers or sisters, you have their blood inside you, they are treasures to cherish.

And you will always be enough for the one who died for you, who saved you.

Guess who?

Jesus!

1 Corinthians 6:20,

“For you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

Do not live your life trying to meet these pointless expectations. Just be you, and the ones who stick with you will be the ones who matter. God will always be there with you, no expectations to be met, because he already loves everything about you, even before you were created.

You matter, and you are enough.

Firmly Planted – Simply be True – by Dina Cavazos

Living a simple life, especially in our busy consumer culture, is not easy. Ads continually entice and beckon. Stores filled with *things*—beautiful *things*, useful *things*, necessary *things*, and junky *things*—multiply like a virus in the landscape. *Things* can stir the “lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” *Seriously?* Well, for me it is serious.

For the last few years I’ve been pursuing a simpler life. Moving from a larger house to a smaller was an exercise in letting go of things I loved—mostly thrift store bargains—but I had a lot of them, certainly more than I needed. So I got rid of stuff, but my *love for stuff* remained.

My love affair with thrift stores started as a teen (a long time ago!). Bargains and old things just satisfied my soul somehow and I developed a “good eye,” recognizing things of value. Sometimes I bought and sold for a bit of profit—nothing wrong with any of that in and of itself, but a problem arises when something begins to have a higher place in our lives than it should, and I began to realize that it did.

Living more simply was my assignment. Getting rid of clutter, becoming more organized, and having less to manage would help me focus on living a life that was purposeful and meaningful. As a favorite pastor of mine used to say, “*We only have so much bandwidth.*” I wanted to use more of my available “bandwidth” on the most important things, and, for me, that meant less stuff and less time spent getting it. God’s work in our lives requires our cooperation, and therein lies the struggle.

Some activities, however harmless they may seem, have a grip that hinders us from living to our full potential in Christ, doing what He’s called us to do. God graciously identifies these things. He’s never condemning, but, thankfully, He is persistent.

I held on to some things and continued to collect more. I felt prompted at one point to take a lot of “valuable” stuff and give it away. I tried to compromise with God by trying to sell it, unsuccessfully—He has a great sense of humor! He’s taught me lessons and gradually the “collecting” has decreased and the awareness of the issue has increased. I’ve become much more selective and often walk out with nothing. I’ve realized it’s not so much the stuff as the seeking of it—the bargain hunting, the experience of the “eye candy,” making a little profit on a good find. Conjointly, it’s very clear it’s not my vocation, calling, or talent, nor a good use of my time.

Most recently I bought some uniquely framed prints that are great for *someone—not me!* I don’t need or want them and now I’m spending time trying to get rid of them to just break even. This really hit home and I’m so sorry....sorry to have wasted my money and time on something I’m not called to do, sorry I didn’t listen to God, sorry I’m such a slow learner. It feels like an internal spanking: “for whom the Lord loves He disciplines.” This discipline makes me thankful because I have a stronger resolve to stay away from the temptation until I can resist it, and I know Christ is strengthening me to do just that. But we all know from experience that *resolve* isn’t enough. He’s also removing the *desire* as I choose the better things. *That is the true work of the Spirit!*

Please understand I'm not knocking collecting things, thrift stores, buying and selling, or any of that. What causes me to stumble may be your foot rest. I am encouraging you to listen to the Lord your God, and simply be true to His calling in your life, whatever it takes and whatever you must give up to get there. As we're obedient and lay down on the altar the things that we hold on to, His grace comes in and begins to transform. Even little things are important to Him and lay the groundwork for bigger ones. By our actions we confirm and establish that God is number one in our lives, and we become more firmly planted in Him.

Is there anything that stands between you and your God? Have you allowed anything to become an idol, taking precedence over your first love? Ask God to examine your heart and your actions—He surely will.

Luke 16:10 "If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities."

Saddle Up - Be Selfish – by Melissa Critz

Really?

Is that what I just heard?

My core so wrestles with the statement in the title of this article. As a Christian, I have always been taught and trained to share everything. After all, it's all His anyway, right?!

Go back in your past, whether it was rather recent or way back when your parents or grandparents were the mainstays in your life – or maybe they still are. Do you recall when they gave you something that they considered of great value, not necessarily monetary value (but it could be,) but more of emotional or historical value? Maybe it was a family heirloom like a brooch from your grandmother or a historical gun from a war of old. What did your relative tell you? They said to keep it and protect it, of course. It was of value to them and they wanted to share it with you and pass it down in the family.

Do you think your grandparents/parents want you to share their heirloom with anyone and everyone? Maybe it's an American Girl doll or a set of Hot Wheel cars that your own children will be able to play with and use - something that can maybe actually be loved on, but is of value to the person passing it on you. They want YOU to have it; want YOU to enjoy it; want YOU to cherish it, as that "thing" holds memories for all.

This was thought impressed on me by my Saddle Partner in regards to my horses. If you own a horse or horses, then you will understand what I am about to write. Many times, when someone finds out that you own a horse, the very next question is, "Oh, when can I come out and ride?" For many horse owners, this really puts us in a tough situation. We never want to appear selfish by not sharing something that is near and dear to us. However, not all horses are meant to be shared in this capacity for a variety of reasons.

Personally, for me and my horses, they are semi-retired speed event horses and are therefore not beginner horses. As any of you horse owners can attest, I have tried to explain the reasoning but many responses are still, "But I only want to walk around on them. I'll be very careful." Honestly, that's not what an owner wants to hear. Even more, we don't want to be asked if our horses can be ridden.

I have wrestled with this, as well. All that we have is what He has given to us, so we should share all. But isn't wisdom to be used?

I was talking with my Saddle Partner about his one day, recently. I heard Him say to me,

"I have given them (my two horses) to you to care for and to enjoy – they are for pure enjoyment for you. You are charged with their care and protection. Be wise. Be selfish. Be protective. Love them – they are yours for your enjoyment."

Yes, I wrote it down and those are the words that I heard.

Be selfish?

He is like that relative that gives a precious something to someone that he or she loves and wants to bless that person with something that needs to be protected and cared for

AND also enjoyed – pure enjoyment meant for just that person. It's something special that no one else can understand completely. It's not the worldly definition of selfish: *lacking consideration for others; concerned chiefly with one's own personal profit or pleasure*. It means to value something so highly that you will do everything to care for it and protect it, but at the same time purely enjoy it.

It makes me think of the story of the Kingdom of Heaven being compared to a pearl in Matthew 13. I know it's not exactly the same, but it does refer to something being so precious that you will do everything to find it and keep it, protect it and enjoy it.

Back to my personal experience with my horses, I do share them. I have a young lady that comes out once a week (weather permitting since I do not have a covered arena) and rides. I teach her some riding techniques and then she can ride on her own around our five acres for a bit. However, I heard from the Lord to do this. I sought His wisdom and believed this was what I was supposed to do.

I have had others ask to ride. I felt that it wasn't wise – it wasn't safe for my horses or the rider for various reasons. It's hard to say 'no' sometimes, for me, as I want to always share. But my Saddle Partner spoke so plainly to me that day that I KNOW it's okay to say 'no'.

We need to use wisdom.

We also need to learn that some times the Lord gives us things for us to enjoy – just purely enjoy – and not feel like we are being selfish.

Is there something in your life that you think you are being selfish about by not sharing with everyone, but now you may feel differently after reading this? Please share with me in the comments below. I would LOVE to hear. I am not condoning the worldly meaning of selfish, nor do I say to not share. We must lean on Him, seek Him, ask Him, and be open to hear from Him.

He will tell us.

He loves us.

He wants us to enjoy what He gives us.

And sometimes that means being selfish...

Moving Forward – He Really IS Good – by Pam Charro

"God is good - all the time!"

We have all heard it said many times. And few would argue, at least among us churchgoers. However, I am sad to admit that I have not always had a strong belief of this truth.

Why has it taken me so long to really start believing that God is always good?

There were just too many other voices telling me otherwise, and reading it in the Bible wasn't necessarily believing. Life has sometimes been hard, puzzling and unfair, and where was God in all of that? If he is always good, why isn't life always good? I have heard countless others argue the same thing, and it is hard to deny that life's evidences don't always reveal a very caring and loving God. But the difference for me was, I truly wanted to believe in the kind of God that I can always trust because he always loves me, can always be depended on to look out for me, and is always powerful.

I was held back because I didn't yet understand the power of both the set mind and the spoken word. Had I only realized that all I needed to do was decide that what God says about himself is true every time I was tempted to doubt! I could have saved so many years of floundering about in my faith.

Now when I don't like what is happening, I still sometimes get sad and I still get mad and I even complain a little. But I don't spend nearly as long feeling badly because I remember to decide to believe God, speak it out loud, and praise him for being who he is, no matter what is going on or how I feel. And each time I have done that, he has added to my faith and made me a little stronger. Just for deciding it was true no matter how things appeared.

Believing in a perfectly good God doesn't take supernatural faith or supernatural strength.

It just takes a decision!

Real Stories - A War Cry – by Cyndi Borselino

Words are so powerful. They have the ability to breathe life, and they have the ability to cut down and destroy. Since the beginning of creation, God spoke, and so it was. For me, it's just such a word phrase that caused a paradigm shift; human trafficking. My journey of healing hasn't been easy; however, the realization of knowing that I myself had been trafficked as a child reinforced the notion of knowing just how loved and valuable I am as a daughter to my King. That statement might sound peculiar to a few people, to suddenly realize your worth once you realized you were enslaved.

The truth is that growing up I never really felt alive. I used to describe my life as living inside a glass box, where I could see out, but I could never feel anything at all. I believed I had no soul. I believed I was created for evil and for men's pleasure. I didn't believe I had a right to feel anything, not even anger. The only emotions I claimed as my own were self-loathing and self-hatred.

My belief system accepted that my value and worth were exclusive to causing others pleasure, even at the expense of my own.

I still look back on my life and am amazed at how I got out alive. I was living in a home in Florida, prostituting, getting high and drunk daily. I was just 16 when I first officially entered 'the life.' Over the course of the next few years, while a blur to me, were some of the most painful and dehumanizing experiences that only enforced this belief system, that my worth and value were exclusive to servicing others. I still don't understand it, but one day the manager, who intimately oversaw the entire operation, grabbed me and threw my stuff in his suitcase. He kept telling me to trust him. He drove me two hours on the highway and dropped me off and told me to never come back. He informed me that I was in process of being sold and that if I didn't leave, I would never get out alive. I never looked back.

A miscarriage after almost five months of pregnancy caused me to end up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The process of pursuing a road of freedom and yet losing my unborn daughter was incredibly painful for me. I got a job as a waitress while in New Mexico and met an older gentleman who would tell me stories of redemption. I was completely closed off at the time at the idea of God, however the stories this gentleman told me gripped me in a way I had never felt before. I soon came to learn that these stories of intrigue were actually about Jesus Christ. It was then that I had my first encounter with a loving Father. I could hardly believe that anyone would want to love me after all of the horrible things I had done and endured. I was filled with guilt, shame, condemnation, unworthiness and so much more. And yet...

I could not deny the encounter that pulled at my heartstrings, telling me that I was valued, and worthy to be the daughter of a king.

I then went back to my hometown and thought I could save all my family, but instead I ended back in drugs and getting pulled into a scheme from an older man who was creating a prostitution ring in Chicago. Once I realized he was creating a prostitution ring, I confronted him and told him that he was from the devil. He choked me in attempt to take my life. A few other people pushed him off of me, and forced him out of the house. He shot several bullets through the windows. Somehow, the bullets whizzed right

past us. I should've died then. I told God, that if I somehow got out alive, I would completely commit my life to Him.

I did get out alive and went to see my Aunt and Uncle who I knew were Christians and could teach me more about this man named Jesus. They led me to a group called "Kings Kids," so I could go through drug rehabilitation. I went and lived there for a year until I was no longer dependent on drugs. I will admit though, my identity was still in "sex." I got into an abusive relationship after I left the group home, but the Lord was still with me and opened doors to allow me to escape. I also got an amazing job, even though I didn't have a high school diploma, let alone a college degree. This job would lead me to transfer to upstate New York. I definitely took it. I then met my now husband, Dan. He is like Hosea in the Bible! He's never even smoked a cigarette, let alone pot. He wasn't a partier, he didn't sleep around, he wasn't into pornography, and the list goes on. He had a job at IBM and was a computer programmer. The Lord told me on our second date that I was going to marry him. I was shocked because he was nothing like anyone I had ever met before.

We have been on this journey together ever since that time and we will be celebrating 35 years of marriage this coming September. I will admit that the first 11 years I walked with such poor views of myself, not believing I deserved to be happy or to have a family. I was suicidal, in and out of hospitals for six years, and diagnosed with manic depression. I still had self-hatred and unworthiness. I felt my husband and children deserved better. When I was in my 30's, I decided to go back into the darkness of the business world and sexually entertained men again. I didn't believe I was a good mother to my two children and was planning to take off to California. This went on for one year. It broke my husbands' heart, he tried to help me, but I was unreachable. He realized he needed to remove our two children from my influence, and began the proceedings of a divorce. At the time, I co-owned a flower shop business, and one of my customers came in and asked if she could pray for me. I broke down in tears because I knew I had completely turned my back on God.

She took me to church with her where revival was happening and I finally began to experience real deliverance and healing. The Lord was moving upon and through the church powerfully, which is also when my daughter, Leanna (who had just turned 10 years old) had an encounter with Jesus. Leanna found the courage to speak up about how she herself had been going through seven years of sexual abuse from a relative. My husband and I bonded together and fought for our daughter. The Lord began to teach us about generational sin and iniquity. We didn't go through with the divorce, and while it was very painful at the time, it was so worth it. We have never been the same since.

I can honestly say today I walk with total abandonment to Jesus and I am NAKED AND UNASHAMED!

I love who I am and the glass box has been shattered and I AM ALIVE!!

A few years ago, when my daughter realized that my story growing up coincided with human trafficking, she requested that I take her on my journey through healing. Up until that moment, I had never realized that I was trafficked. I just thought it was some horrible choice I made, and was a twisted world view of my identity and who I was. Realizing that

I didn't have to identify with the term "prostitute," and that I was prostituted, or rather trafficked, was powerful and even more restorative.

My relationship with my family has changed to where we have a deep appreciation and admiration for each other. I love being a mom now (and grandmother) and am no longer afraid to receive love from my daughter or son. We can argue yet know we are still valued. We know we can count on each other for prayer and support. We are able to speak into each other's lives – as long as it's not out of control or manipulation. We are quick to forgive and repent for wrong actions or heart attitudes. We love hanging together – especially with good food and wine!

Two of my favorite scriptures are:

"I am the vine, you are the branches, if a man remains in me and I in Him, you will bear much fruit for without me you can do nothing!"

John 15:5

I call this my life verse.

"I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful! I know that full well!"

Psalms 139:14

The reason I am sharing my story so publicly is because I want so badly to give hope, to help others see true value in themselves.

Let us not judge and believe those on the streets, strip clubs, and in prostitution are a hopeless group of people.

They too can have a great future and a hope. Even though I had a lack of education and came out of a life of abuse, drugs, alcohol, prostitution, shame, guilt, fear, hate, rage, anger, control, manipulation – I am now living a life where many doors have opened for me. I have worn many more hats and now am called a wife, mother, legal assistant, director of non-profit, bookkeeper, manager, singer/songwriter, poet, speaker, encourager, and beloved of the most High God! And with success stories of others who have been a part of my life who step into freedom as well, together we will win this war against human trafficking (slavery)! When we isolate ourselves and walk alone, it leads to defeat! We must fight this war together in unity with love, patience, truth, justice, mercy and faith. It affects all of us, even if we choose to turn our backs or to hide. It still affects us all! Let's be part of the solution. We were created for such a time as this! We can change the course of history! I imagine it. I believe it, and I pursue it! FREEDOM! FOR ALL!

I believe that I have a voice for war cry.

There is more slavery today (27 million slaves) than at any other time in history. Let that sink in for a minute. More slaves today than any other time in HISTORY. I believe the very core of this fact is the breakdown of the family, and until we see the family unit restored and valued this evil will continue. We must bear arms together to fight against this injustice, not the way that the world battles, but the way the Lord battles. There's a generation that's gone before us who have accepted pornography, who've accepted the abuse of women and children, that think it is okay to use human beings for their own

pleasure, without considering where that other person has come from or what they have endured or who they even are. Do we want to be known as a generation of takers? I sure don't.

- I believe for a new generation of young men and women who will say "no," that buying other humans for their own pleasure is not okay.
- I believe for for the RISE of a new generation who will delight in seeing people set free, seeing people treated valuably, and not as a sexual object or sexual commodity.
- I believe a new generation is rising up to war against greed, the love of money, and possessions. A generation who will stand up and say no to pornography, who will stand up and say no to strip clubs, who will stand up and say no to purchasing another human being!

This is why I work with Traffick911 and go into juvenile detention centers. This is why I feel called to let my story come out through *Honeychild*, so that my voice will give others a voice. It's time for us as believers to truly walk in love, justice, mercy and grace.

- Let us not build our own kingdoms, but truly let go and surrender to the One who has given us all authority for our children.
- Let us value and protect their innocence.
- Let us empower our children so that they can see their own value and worth, to know they were not created for the expense of others, but for a loving Father who desires nothing more than to delight in us, and we in Him.

Our creator wants to speak life, love, innocence, worthiness, and truth into our souls, as he did so long ago. Let us take up our true identity, as sons and daughters of a loving and benevolent King!

Please join us in the fight and support either by prayer, financially or volunteer at

www.honeychildfilm.com

www.redeemedministries.com

www.traffick911.com

www.pact.city

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – It is...Some – by Marcy Lytle

First comes marriage...then the baby carriage. That was some old saying I remember hearing, and it used to be more than a saying. It was a good rule to adhere to. But not so much these days, as marriage is now preceded by living together, as well. And sex comes before any kind of commitment at all...

But who can blame our kids?

They've been given a double standard by even those of us in church that call ourselves Christians. We have the same rate of divorce as those "outside" the church, and our kids see that marriage is too hard to handle, so why should they even try? Living together is a good workout and experiment to try, and then they'll get married...maybe. And the reason for many, many divorces is because one spouse can't resist the other sex – the one who is the other woman – or the other man. Sex must be really cool. Besides, every movie and television show promotes it as being that which satisfies, feels good, and makes one popular. And pregnancy? Sometimes, young girls dream of having a baby, one that will need them, love them, and cling to them...all because they don't feel needed, loved, or wanted at home.

No, it's not ALL our fault.

But it is some...

In fact, we've all accepted the fact that our kids are going to grow up and have sex before they're married, so we do teach them abstinence, but we prepare them for the "whoops" in case they can't resist. And we hope our kids do get married, but if they at least find a "good" man or woman, and they want to live together first, we'll love them and accept them no matter what. That's good, right? And then if they do get married, and we fork out all of our savings to pay for that wedding, we hope they stay together. But if they do part...and get married again...and part again...and get married again...we'll sigh and say, "Oh well, that's life."

And we become a bit more cynical, skeptical, and critical of the whole institution of marriage, of our own spouse, and of life and the next generation, in general.

I know that marriage is hard, staying pure until marriage is nearly impossible, and getting pregnant can certainly happen even after only one mistake, and of course – we've ALL sinned in one area or another – only some of us get caught and it shows. Others of us will deny it until we die.

I know that pointing the finger is bad, it's detrimental, it does no good except to push our kids further away, and so it's not the way to go. But neither is accepting, denying and sweeping it away hoping the wind won't shift and blow it all back into our face.

I know that times are different, everyone's situation is unique, and God is forgiving and loving, and all of life is confusing at times. I get that. I've been confused myself, more than once.

However, there must be something we can do to reinstate the sanctity and purity of a life without sex until marriage, marriage before babies, and marriage that lasts a lifetime...or is it not worth it or not true anymore?

I've realized in my little life I've lived so far that usually picking at the action never changes the heart, pulling at people's senses and emotions never results in lasting change, and ridiculing and chiding only pushes us all further away.

What I have also realized is that when change took place in my own life, it came when I realized my own lack of something (peace, joy, purity, contentment) so much that I became disgusted with the way I was living and asked for help. Until I saw the need for change or realized how the way I was acting was destroying myself and those around me, I never even opened an ear to the possibility of a different way of thinking or living.

If we who are older have become disappointed in those who are younger and what they're doing or not doing these days, then maybe we who are older need to pray. Maybe we just need to pray that the next generation comes to know the love of Jesus – not rules and regulations and rituals – at an early age so that they aren't searching so far and wide. Maybe we need to share with them our own stories of struggles and fears and failures, and how He came and rescued us and gave us identity, hope and a secure future in him. Maybe we need to grow up ourselves in our own commitments and clean up our own attitudes and what we watch and see and do, not out of guilt or shame, but because we ourselves know the truth – that he is all we need and enough for all that is and will be. We need to say it. We need to believe it. We need to live it.

I don't believe that the next generation doesn't look at us as examples. I just believe they've turned their heads because we haven't been good ones, for the most part. We've pointed the finger but not the way. We've instructed with lessons instead of lived our lives. And finally, we've shaken our heads instead of extended our arms.

No, it's not all our fault.

But it is some...

FRESH THYME – It's MY Turn! – by Marcy Lytle

Sitting at a four-way stop yesterday, I realized how much I love it when it's my turn. The thought that the other cars will sit still when it's my turn and let me pass in front of them is such a good feeling. When it's my turn at the grocery store and I get to unload my cart, while others are still waiting behind me, it feels so good that I'm next. And when we are waiting in a long line to exit a parking garage after a play or a concert, it's great to finally get a chance to pull out onto the road, on the way home, because it's our turn.

Even from the time we're little kids, when we finally get the concept of taking turns, it's so exciting to be next. We love it when we raise our hand and it's our turn to answer. It's more than thrilling to be waiting in line for our turn to kick a ball or get a drink at the water fountain, and finally we're the one in action. Siblings who finally get a turn at using the bathroom shared by all four kids feel so special when they get in there, shut the door, and the mirror is theirs...

It's a simple concept, taking turns, but one so hard to learn...even as adults.

When our friends get their "big break" at work and a nice promotion, we secretly squirm because we long for our own turn at greater things. When she gets a nice new house with space and new paint and a big yard and a walk-in pantry, we can't stand the thought of our waiting another year or two or three for "our turn" at the bigger house on the block. And when that family finds out they're expecting another child they really weren't planning on having, our hearts sink when we've been trying for years and it's never been our turn...yet.

The whole concept and attitude of "It's my turn" can be quite disastrous, for example, in a marriage. Maybe he's cheated one too many times, our kids have gotten on our last nerve, and we deserve "a turn" but never get one, so off we go – abandoning those we love because we feel as though we never got our fair shake at life and liberty. Parents who carry a sense of entitlement to their time, their money, and their own desires often justify "their turn" at fame and wealth and power when a promotion that's too good to pass appears, because they deserve it – even at the expense of their families. Or maybe we as individuals have never realize our worth and that we are loved, and get the concept of being accepted as we are, so we demand and push and pull for "a turn" so much that we step on others' toes to get ahead, or demand our way in a conversation of choices.

I watch little kids at play and taking turns seems to be one of the hardest things they deal with as toddlers. They want to play the game their way and spin the spinner constantly, instead of allowing their sibling a turn. They demand to watch their television show because it's "their turn" this time, since she got to pick last time. And I remember struggling with my two kids each time we got in the car to remember whose "turn" it was to sit in the front seat, and who had to be banished to the back.

So what is the root of all of this madness to have our turn now, and the thrill that comes when it actually is our turn to go, to exit, to win, to obtain, to...?

I think it's discontentment.

From the time we're born we are discontented, so much that when we cry we demand milk and we get it. In fact, we want it now and we get it, because that's what babies do. They cry and we try every way in the world to satisfy, so that the incessant crying stops. The toddler stage occurs and the tantrums and demands don't stop, they only get worse and meaner and uglier. However, we as parents know that we must teach our kids to take turns, to prefer another, to give and not to take, and to rejoice and be happy for that's kid's birthday when it's not our own – while we watch her open her gifts – and we have none.

It's a hard thing to be content in this world that glitters and glows with all things bright and beautiful, things we want and desire for us and ours. **We hope that our kids learn the lesson of contentment before they leave home, but so much of the time it's we who haven't learned it**, we who still want and demand "our turn" at self-gratification due to our inability to wait and breathe and see...that we have and are enough.

I don't know of any particular verse to quote, or any quote to share from another source, but I do know that the attitude of demanding it be "our turn" can be detrimental if that attitude isn't rearranged as we grow old and grow up.

It's a hard thing to learn to rejoice with others when they rejoice, when we feel as though we've been passed over in the rejoicing department. Oh, it's easy to mourn with those who mourn, because we feel so sorry for their loss. *But the rejoicing part? When we've been waiting in line for years for our turn?*

I suppose Romans 12 is a good passage to read, the one that includes the directive to rejoice and mourn with others. But honestly, if we don't let go of entitlement in favor of knowing that God sees all, is aware of all, and is a good father, we will never be content to let others take their turn, while we continue to wait.

It takes a willingness to trade our discontentment for contentment, and then to nurture that contentment until we're happy and satisfied to be, awaiting our turn when the time is right, when there's an open door, when that test says "yes," or unexpectedly we realize it's our turn "to go" and we do.

It is your turn? I'm so glad for you. Are you still waiting behind a line of which you cannot see where it starts or where it ends? I'll pray for you. Did you miss a turn and now you're devastated and loss? I'll mourn with you.

And if we both have to sit in that line a while longer, we'll roll down our windows, enjoy the sunshine, and talk about the good things in life while we wait for the line to move once again...and it's our turn to go.

FRESH THYME – Master’s Degree – by Marcy Lytle

Driving down the road through a school zone, my husband I spotted a crossing guard waving at every single car that passed by. We both smiled and wondered at first if he knew the folks he saw, but then we realized he was waving at everyone – even us! He really enjoyed his job, one that many people would say was a small job, one with no prestige or honor, and one that certainly requires no degree of any kind, especially not a Master’s Degree, like so many of us strive to achieve when going to college.

This made me think of the perhaps mundane, thankless, low-paying jobs out there that truly do require a Master’s Degree of a different kind! I think people who truly enjoy their jobs that the “world” sees as lowly tasks are the most pleasant people in the world to be around! They have truly learned the value of finding out their strengths, rejoicing in them, and using them to their fullest potential. And that is a Master’s Degree from none other – the Master himself.

Here are seven jobs that I’ve noticed include people who are amazingly pleasant, and maybe you’ve noticed these people as well. It lifts my spirit when I see them, watch them interact with others, and take their job as seriously as a surgeon does when operating to remove a delicate tissue so he can send a person out the door healed and whole, and on their way. These people who smile, greet me, and bless me do the same for my soul and I leave a better person for having encountered them!

The ticket taker at the theater – Sometimes those with physical disabilities are awarded these jobs. They take a few seconds longer to tear the tickets in two, but there is one lady I know of who greets us each time with a, “Hello, lovelies!” as she tells us the theater number, points in the direction we are to go, and tell us, “Enjoy your date!” I’m smiling just thinking of her!

The crossing guard – This is the guy I mentioned above. These are the parents and grandparents who care enough about the kids to start them off safely at the beginning of the day, and see that they arrive safely when the day is over. In fact, these guys and gals may be the only smiling faces some of these kids see. And their waves are as important as being waved at by the President in his entourage through a city.

The Kids Director anywhere – Be it at church, at a daycare, or even at our kids’ schools, these people deserve all the kudos we can give them. We know they’re not doing their job for the big bucks, because although they do the job worthy of celebrity pay, they are often the most abused, unnoticed, and criticized people in the job force with barely enough salary to get by. They care for our children tirelessly, and prepare and prepare and prepare, all while dealing with grumpy parents who think their children are angels – when in fact – they’re little devils in uniforms.

The lady who cleans the bathrooms – You know her. She doesn’t speak your language, but she smiles when she exits the bathroom knowing that you’ve been waiting for her to finish her task – that of cleaning up the filth of others. She’s the one who scrubs the toilets, takes out the trash, and freshens up the place where you arrive to make it all dirty again. Who wants to do that job? Someone does. And I’ve encountered numerous young women who seem to take

pride in their cleaning skills, their ability to make things nice, and they always have a smile for me when I see them.

The Drive-Thru kid – Yes, there are lots of them who are inept, unable to think on their feet, and those who certainly can't count back money if you hand them a penny. However, there are many who take their job seriously and smile, thankful that they have a job, and they're darn sure going to make the best of it, so that they might someday get promoted to manager and who knows, even own a franchise themselves! There's one in your town, and they make you happy after you exit, because they're so proud of what they do with their "Master's Degree" handed to them with a plan for a future...

The laborer – This is the one who's part of the crew that shows up to build that addition, lay that floor, or paint that wall in your new house or your renovation. He brings his lunch, is skilled and quick, cleans up and gets out of your way so that you can get back to your life and your business, while he stands in line for his pay to go home and feed his family that includes mothers, uncles, and six children. He's extremely good at what he does, but he doesn't stand a chance of "progress" because of limited status in society.

The Clerk behind the counter – I know the story of one lady who's in her 30's and she works tirelessly to help take care of her disabled siblings and mom, while her life and dreams of education are put on hold to serve them. She has a beautiful smile and an attitude that's contagious, as she unpacks boxes for shelves, assists customers with purchases, and rings them up when they're finished. Her pay is limited, but she stays the course because she has to...she loves her family so much. Oh, and she too has a physical ailment as well!

All of these people are in the "service" industry, because that's the kinds of jobs that pay the least in this country in which we live. These jobs don't require a Master's Degree from a university, which then includes a fine paycheck, but rather they come with a Master's Degree of exaltation and accolades...if we give it to them. If we thank them, applaud them, and notice their smiling faces and jobs well done, maybe it will lighten their load. Who knows, maybe we will have an opportunity to bless them if we look for it. And the least we can do is pray for them, for God to see them in their place of service and to reward them for being a faithful servant.

That's a Master's Degree worth pursuing for all of us...not just these seven.

FRESH THYME - Quit Squirming – Marcy Lytle

It happens often. I'm asleep but not quite, and I know I need to get up and "go" but I don't want to. I'm sleepy. I know that if I don't get up, I'll lay there squirming until I'm completely awake, I'll make my way around the bed in the dark to relieve myself, and then I won't be able to go back to sleep. But still I squirm, I lay there hoping maybe it's a dream and I'm in all reality in deep sleep, but it's never the case. What is always the case is that I need to quit squirming, get up and go, and lay back down to sleep.

What a thought for an article, right? I kept thinking about this thing we do called squirming in uncomfortable situations instead of just taking care of business. Squirming is usually a term we use to describe our kids when they won't sit still in a quiet room, at the table in a restaurant, or while they stylist is cutting their hair. But **squirming is something we adults do, probably more than our kids!**

God speaks to us about some attitude or thought process we're sliding toward, and we start squirming, crossing our legs and turning our back to his sweet voice asking us to stop sliding and start climbing toward his thoughts and his ways.

We hear that same voice nudging us to speak to that person behind the counter about His love, and we begin squirming while we're in line, fidgeting with our purse, making other conversation about the weather with the lady behind us, instead of standing still to hear what exactly He wants us to say.

We enter into that argument with our husbands, the one where we're going to be right no matter the cost, and words and anger and accusations start spewing out of our mouths over dinner, when we should be gazing and giving and grinning at him in adoration. We being squirming in our seat because we know it's time to stop, to ask forgiveness, to shut our mouths, but the anger has writhed itself into our body until we're squirming so violently, we almost get up and storm off...never to return.

We can think of many times a day where we squirm in our seats when our boss walks by and we're texting instead of typing, or we squirm when our kids catch us gossiping to a friend instead of encouraging them, and we sometimes squirm until our body is tired from the twisting when we read His word and it cuts to the bone about an exact need and how he wants to supply it, but we don't like his method of sending us peace in the middle of the trouble instead of taking us out of the trouble altogether.

Are you a squirmer? I think I've been once since a small child. My mom was constantly telling me to sit or stand still. We had a seamstress who sewed me the most beautiful clothes, and when I arrived for my fitting, I squirmed. I just couldn't stand still long enough for her to pin, tuck, and measure. It went against my nature to stand there and be still! So more often than not, when we left the nice lady's house, there was a reprimand on the way home about how disrespectful I was for squirming.

All kids squirm, because they haven't learned or matured into sitting quietly. They are still being taught the principle of waiting their turn, telling us they need to "go" before it's too late and

they've squirmed their way to wetness. They wiggle because they're bored and full of energy, and we've required stillness too long.

But eventually they learn to sit still and listen, and take in their surroundings and reflect upon what they're hearing in silence, so as to absorb and learn. They grow into functioning kids that know to stop their play (or get up out of bed, in my case) and visit the bathroom before any squirming begins and accidents happen. And they develop ways of channeling their energy into exercise and play at the right times and not the wrong times, so that life goes well with those around them, and peace instead of chaos rules.

Today I woke up thinking of squirming, because I did it again while I was sleeping. We all do. We don't want to get up in the dark, stir our bodies to some semblance of being awake, and visit the bathroom so we can relieve ourselves of that which is causing us to squirm, i.e. waste.

We all take in things throughout the day that are good for us, and bad for us, in the same way that we eat. And in the same way that our bodies process all of that food and drink and then discard the waste, our spirits too are checking out all of what we've invited into our minds and souls as we've listened, observed, and learned during our day.

It's up to us to recognize the squirming we're doing and to get up and go, so that we can rest once more again.

Sound like a silly analogy? It's not.

Squirming is due to being uncomfortable due to something that's "not right" that's causing us to wiggle around. And just like we grab our kid's hand and march them to the bathroom before an accident occurs, we need to stand up and go too, before it's too late.

Squirming is annoying to those around us, it brings unwanted attention to us, and if we squirm too long, leaks occur. That's the raw truth.

So the best thing to do about squirming is to get up and go, sit there until every drop of waste is relieved, lay back down and give thanks that your body, your mind, and your spirit know when they're too full, too overloaded, or headed away too far and something's gotta give...

A BUNDLE OF

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May 2016

TIPS

Seven for You - Station Sanity – by Marcy Lytle

My daughter has three tiny kids, ages 4, 3 and 1, and when they arrive for an extended period of time, I like to have things for them to do – some sort of order for the evening – so that they stay occupied and I stay sane. Okay, truth be told, *stay* might not be the right word, but you get the picture. I like to set up stations for the kids to move to, sort of like schools do for preschool students, and I enjoy setting them up in different places around the house.

Before the kids come, I go through the toys I have, I visit The Dollar Store, and I visit other stores as well to scour their sales or clearance items that might be good to pick up for the stations. Craft stores are another stop as well. Next, I think about seven different activities I can set up that these tiny ones (except the 1 year old, he has to be held most of the time to keep him from eating or sitting in paint) can enjoy as we look on and assist as needed, or enjoy watching.

Here's how it's going to look tonight when they arrive.

1. **Paint booklets at the table.** These are super inexpensive, and you've probably seen them. Each page has paint squares at the bottom and all the kids need is a cup of water and a paintbrush. It's not messy (except for a little water) and they enjoy creating with color.
2. **Puzzles on the floor.** We have several puzzles the kids enjoy putting together, so we place them on the floor, pieces laid out, with one puzzle for each child. Yes, they need to learn to work together, but remember we're going for sanity here as well, so it's nice for them to each have their own pieces to interlock and wait for our applause!
3. **Games in our bedroom.** For some reason, the kids love coming in our bedroom to play. The matching game is a fun one, even though they don't really get the concept of turning the pieces back over to await their turn again. That's okay. It's delightful to hear them squeal when they "make" things match.
4. **Water tubes in the backyard.** My sister told me about these. They're at the dollar store and at other craft stores this time of year (I found these at Hobby Lobby for a buck, on sale). We fill a tub in the backyard with water (spray the kids with mosquito spray!), show them how to suck the water into the tube, and let them push out the water onto your grass or plants!
5. **Bubbles to chase.** This little machine was on the aisle at Ross and I like it because the kids don't have to mess with the bubbles themselves (we know how that plays out – they spill them all and bubble time is over) and the bubbles keep coming non-stop – what fun!
6. **Snacks in muffin tins.** The larger six-muffin tins are worth the investment for your kiddos. Not only is the food corralled into sunken cups so it doesn't roll off, the kids love seeing six colorful food items all their own, organized for them to pick and choose. You might include grapes, pretzels, turkey, cheese cubes, goldfish, and a cookie!
7. **Reading books or making shadows in the dark.** Now this was a hit for sure! Either head to the back of your car with flashlight and blanket, and read together, or lay in bed with lights off, and use these cool finger lights to cast shadows on the wall. They too are an easy find this time of year. I got these at Five Below.

You can vary up the stations each time they visit, or you can keep them the same if the kids like them all. In fact, the kids might insist that they are the same each time – kids like repetitive fun!

Each one of the activities keeps the kids occupied for about 15 minutes and if you multiply that by 7, you've got a good chunk of time that passed that was fun, learning took place, and television was nowhere to be seen.

Station sanity – it's the newest thing in parental/grandparental development...

The Dressing – The Wrist Watch – by Marcy Lytle

I think watches are one of the most fun accessories to wear – if you enjoy costume jewelry. There are so many cute styles to wear for the spring/summer season, and owning several in different styles and colors are a fun diversion from just wearing bracelets on your wrist. We looked around and found some really fun wrist time pieces for you at super affordable prices to accessorize with, while the weather warms up.

[The Aztec Watch](#) – This one is from New York & Company and it's got a stretchy band painted in such pretty colors. I saw it hanging at the NY & Co Outlet store and loved the look. It's even on sale right now, so you could get one for you...and one for a gift!

[Black & White](#) – Isn't this a cute one? It's from H&M and under \$20. Nothing is more classic or prettier than just black and white, and this piece will look so cute with your sundress, your capris and tees, or dressed up for a wedding.

[Polka Dot](#) – The band on this cute watch from Target is reversible! It's a reliable Timex brand and it's super casual and chic. What a great accessory for those fun outings at the lake, dinner outside on a patio, or a fun day out shopping and sightseeing.

[Blue Mosaic](#) – This might be my favorite this season, and it's available at World Market. Can you picture this watch on your wrist, paired with casual coral, pale yellows, or crisp white? This hue of blue and the mosaic face are so elegant and pretty.

[Elephant Wrap](#) – Another unique piece is also at World Market, and it includes an elephant on the face, with an antique map behind it. I love the multi-strapped band and the neutral color which makes this watch one that you can wear just everywhere!

[Tan Leather](#) – This perforated leather band in summer's neutral hue is perfect when paired with all of your denim! If you like denim shorts, jeans, or a cute short denim skirt, this watch is for you – it's classic and true – from Macy's.

[Bicycle](#) – Look at the old bicycle on the face, and see if you don't fall in love! This is called the Penny-Farthing bicycle watch and we found it on line. What a pretty piece to own – and one that is timeless – to dress up your wrist and bring a bit of nostalgia with you wherever you go!

It's so nice to have a valuable, silver or gold timepiece for your wrist. But what fun it is to have several less expensive ones to change out to match your outfits – especially this time of year when color and whimsy are in abundance. Happy shopping as you find that perfect watch, or two, to add to your wrist this season!

Selah's Style - Spring Performance – by Selah Irwin

I'm a fashionista.

My mom is a dance teacher.

This Easter we combined our talents and created amazing costumes for the Santa Clara Community Dance Team's spring performance. With 60 members on the team, we had to shop for endless hours to make everything just right.

It was quite a challenge due to the fact that we have sizes ranging from toddlers to teens. We wanted to create the look of a jug band.

There were multiple classes and styles of dance combined into one routine. We decided to give each class their own look.

Here are three of the kids from the youngest class. We used two styles of overalls for the girls and jeans with suspenders for the boys. They danced on upside down metal wash tubs. They looked so adorable!

Each individual in the advanced jazz class had their own unique costume. Using the colors white, blue and denim coordinated the costumes while allowing each dancer to have their own pizzazz!

It is a little difficult to see in this picture, but the lyrical dance class wore jean dresses and the hip hop class wore jean capris with vests.

Here is a picture of me and my friend Olivia. In this photo, you can see the hard work and detail we added to really give it a jug band feel. We chose hats, ties, suspenders and socks to complete the look.

The costumes turned out great and the performance was amazing!

I can't wait to do it all again next year!

Check out my Blue steel!

The Fearless Kitchen - Be Eggcellent – by Christina Vetter

I'm going to shine some light on an unsung hero of the kitchen – the egg. These white little ovals are drastically underappreciated. While they have definitely earned their right as a breakfast staple, they are capable of so much more. I even had an entire section of culinary school devoted to them. They can make sauces, binders, appetizers, a meal on their own, and so much more.

While I love the versatility of eggs, I can't ignore the nutritional benefits they carry. Packed with protein and wonderfully low in calories and fat, in my book they can do no wrong. I know many health experts have been knocking the yolk in eggs because of the cholesterol, but as long as you don't medically need to be on a low cholesterol diet, I wouldn't worry about eggs. Save the worry for when you feel the need to sink your teeth into a giant juicy burger. That being said, if you do find yourself needing to watch cholesterol, egg whites are delicious and are a whole separate workhorse on their own.

Our house is a particularly strong egg loving house because we have them in plenty. We have five chickens that call our house home and in the warm months, they bless us with four eggs daily. This may not sound like a lot but it adds up quickly. Not wanting to waste a single egg, I try to incorporate the delicious protein into as many dishes as possible. This month I want to cover some of the basics. **Easy Peel Hardboiled Eggs, Spaghetti Carbonara, and Quiche Cups** are some oldies but goodies in the Vetter house. I don't have room to share as many dishes as I would like, but this will at least give you a good variety as a starting block.

As always, I'm interested in your take on this classic ingredient, so if you have anything interesting or especially delicious, please share it in the Comments section below. Happy eating THYME readers!

Easy Peel Hard-boiled Eggs

Servings varied

Difficulty:



Hard-boiled eggs seem so simple, yet it's one of the most often incorrectly cooked dishes in the kitchen. Even if you manage to cook the yolk perfectly, getting a clean peel out of the shell can be a challenge. This recipe is fool proof – perfectly yellow, solid yolk with an easy to peel shell. Each step is critical, so set a timer and follow this precisely.

Ingredients:

6 Eggs

1 Tbsp white vinegar

Water

Directions:

-Place eggs in a medium sauce pot.

- Cover with 1 inch of cold water. Add vinegar to water.
- Over medium high heat, bring water up to a gentle boil.
- The moment it starts to boil, set a timer for 8 minutes. (Make sure your eggs aren't bouncing in the water. Lower the heat if the eggs are moving too vigorously.)
- Meanwhile, fill a large bowl with a generous amount of ice and cold water.
- After the eggs have boiled for 8 minutes, remove from hot water, and place in to ice water.
- Allow eggs to cool to touch before peeling. To peel: remove from water, lightly crack entire surface of shell, and peel the shell off using the film between the shell and egg white.
- Serve immediately, or refrigerate for later use.

Spaghetti Carbonara

Serves 4

Difficulty: 

Eggs are the super star in this hearty Italian dish. Mixed with the milk and cheese, they make an amazingly creamy sauce. Don't worry about eating raw eggs, the heat of the pasta brings them up to a safe temperature. Also, contrary to what I normally recommend, avoid using whole wheat pasta for this dish, the flavors compete with each other instead of compliment.

Ingredients:

- 1 lb spaghetti
- ½ lb thick sliced bacon, or pancetta if available
- 5 large eggs
- 1 C parmesan cheese
- 1/3 c milk
- 1 C frozen peas
- ½ tsp salt, more for pasta water
- ½ tsp black pepper

Directions:

- Bring salted water to boil for pasta.
- Meanwhile, cook bacon until crispy. Remove bacon from pan and set on paper towels. Pour out grease.
- Add peas to pan and cook until warm. Transfer to medium bowl. Roughly chop bacon and add to bowl.
- Add eggs, cheese, salt, milk, and pepper to the bowl and mix together.
- Cook pasta according to package directions. Once pasta is cooked, set aside ½ C of pasta water and drain (leaving pasta wet).
- Immediately add pasta back to pot and pour egg mixture over hot pasta. Quickly toss well to avoid curdling, adding pasta water until smooth and creamy.
- Adjust salt and pepper as needed.

Quiche Cups

Difficulty: 

Makes 12-15 cups

Quiche is great for serving eggs in a more upscale setting. They're beautiful, tasty, and can feed a crowd. This recipe uses the traditional quiche ingredients, minus the crust, and packs it into a convenient, single serving size. A true treat.

Ingredients:

½ lb lean bacon

6 large eggs

¾ C heavy cream

1/3 C thinly sliced green onions

½ C shredded cheddar cheese

Large pinch each of salt and black pepper

Directions:

-Preheat oven to 350F.

-Over medium high heat, cook bacon until crisp. Crumble into small pieces, using a knife.

-In a large mixing bowl, whisk eggs and heavy cream together until smooth and light yellow in color.

-Add crumbled bacon, green onions, cheese, salt, and pepper. Mix together well.

-Line a muffin pan with paper cup liners, and fill each cup about ¾ full of egg mixture. Repeat until egg mixture is gone.

-Bake in oven 30-35 minutes, or until a tooth pick comes out clean when inserted in the middle.

-Allow to cool 5 minutes and serve immediately, or allow to cool completely before chilling in refrigerator.

TRIED AND TRUE - Dinky Doody Breaks – by Marcy Lytle

That's what I think about when I buy something that's so cheap it lasts maybe until the time we get home and take it out of the bag. I think they're dinky, doody, and they break. Silly words, I know, but I think they describe those items well that aren't worth the buck we spend on them.

I'm all for bargains, and believe me – I shop for inexpensive items often. But sometimes, the dinkies at the stores should be passed over in favor of spending just a few more bucks to get a good quality product, one that lasts for multiple uses.

Here are a few things I've found that are dinky, doody and break...or just don't work well.

Cotton “square” shirts on hangers. If the shirt already looks “boxy” and it's 100% cotton, and it's as thin as tissue paper, chances are that when you wash it the first time it will shrink up so much that you'll be lucky if it covers your chest. Look for shirts that have shape, feel thick yet breathable, and are long enough to shrink a bit and still fit nicely.

Nail polish. I've found that when I buy nail polish that's super cheap it often separates, is watery, or chips after a few hours. For a few more bucks, if I invest in a quality nail polish, it goes on smoothly and lasts longer. [OPI Nail Lacquer](#) is a great choice.

Thin rugs. Yes, they're a bargain, but they're super cheap, and yes they wear out after just a few months of walking on them. When looking for a throw rug or an area rug, save up and spend the extra dollars, or wait until the one you want goes on sale. The thicker the rug the better it feels under the feet, and the longer it lasts!

Plastic containers. If you're not careful, the cheap version of these will get too hot in the dishwasher, the lids will contort, and they won't fit the bowls. And that's annoying! My favorite [plastic containers](#) come with the lids attached and they last and last. And they work great!

Paper plates. You probably know this one. Those thin paper plates are good for nothing except crafts! You'll need several together for one trip to the buffet bar because they're too flimsy to hold any weight at all. Spend another buck and opt for the nicer plates that won't fold over when food is set on top.

Dolls. There are fake Barbies, plastic babies at the Dollar Store, and all sorts of dinkies out there. They might be a dollar, but most likely their heads will snap off, if your child moves the arms they'll break, and crying will ensue. Look for sturdier ones at your department store, and you'll be glad you opted for it...and not that.

Garden tools. I was a slow learner and bought (more than once) a cheap digging shovel or snips, and either the handle broke or the snips got sticky and wouldn't open. Picking a recognized brand, like [Black & Decker](#), is always a wiser decision.

Garbage bags. Maybe that box says there are a 100 bags versus the one at the better store that only has 45. But most likely the cheaper bags are thin and tear when you take out the trash and the bag is full! Opt for ones you can stuff, not ones that fall apart.

Candles. I had a friend who makes candles once tell me that the cheap ones just have the perfumed scent poured on the top so that we want to buy because they smell so nice, but the perfume soon burns off when the candle is lit. Nice candles are expensive, but they smell up a room repeatedly when burned, and they're worth the extra bucks. My favorite ones are from [Milkhouse Creamery](#).

Electronics. Steer clear of these in the cheaper versions. Cords, light bulbs, plugs, etc. are best bought in a hardware store instead of on the discount aisles. It's not worth wondering if it's made cheaply when it comes to safety.

What have you bought that is dinky, doody or breaks? Leave us a comment below!

HOME

Practical Parenting – Observe Them – by Mandy Major

Be like a child

This phrase is used a lot in the church as a response to just trust and not ask too many questions.

But here's the deal.

Have you sat with a two-year-old lately?

Have you spent 10 minutes with a young child this week?

If you haven't, my challenge to you is to spend some time with some kids this week and notice:

1. **They ask a TON of questions.** “Why can't I? Why is that lady bald? Why is the sky blue? What happened to her? What are we having for dinner?” The list goes on and on! Children are naturally inquisitive and they are little sponges soaking up learning every moment!
2. **They have no filter and no limitations.** One thing I find refreshing about children is you know exactly where you stand with them. They say what they think and they have no understanding of social norms.
3. When children are learning to do something new, **they practice over and over and over again until they get it right!** Yesterday, I watched my friend's son climb up on top of a box and jump off of it 20 times!
4. **They desire limits.** When a child has no limitations or rules, he doesn't feel safe.

So the way we have come to accept the phrase “Be like a child” within the context of the church is this sweet *pat on head* concept to just trust and accept and be quiet.

That is not the way I know any child to be.

When Jesus said to be like a child, I think he was challenging the norm of the time. I think he was encouraging us to challenge the norm around us, as well, to shock some socially limitations and ask questions. As a matter of fact – to question everything! I think being like a child means to constantly be discovering new things, wondering, puzzling, asking...

**Maybe being like a child is not so much caring about tomorrow,
but living in the right now.**

Children are masters of living in the present.

This reminds me of a verse in Matthew that tells us to not worry about tomorrow because tomorrow has enough trouble of its own.

When the disciples asked Jesus who the greatest in the kingdom was he called a child to him, sat that child in his lap, and told his disciples to become like a child.

*What was that kid doing there?
Did his parents bring him?*

Were his parents there listening?

What drew him so close that Jesus saw him and called him?

I think that kid was curious...or bored and walking around... looking for something to interest him! That kid was just there, and present. And it was probably a small child (under 3) too, because older kids would have been working or in school or even married!

I think we need to spend more time watching little children.

I think we need to observe what they get, those things that we have forgotten.

What keys of the kingdom do they hold?

Unless we become like little children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven...

I Don't Do Teens - The Value of a Dollar – by Marcy Lytle

Teens ask for dollars for the movies, dollars for new clothes, dollars for gas so they can meet up with friends, and pretty soon our pockets are empty and those dollars disappear like drizzle that falls on hot cement in the summer. The money falls out of our pockets into our teens' hands, and then when they leave for college or to get married or live on their own, they often never realize the value behind that dollar.

How can we teach our kids about money before they leave home?

Put them on a budget. Sit down and discuss their monthly “needs” that you are willing to supply, along with a few fun dollars that you're willing to give. If they have a part-time job and they make enough from that, then use their funds only. Help them with categorizing like clothes, movies, gas for car, giving, etc. They can put cash in envelopes, or just keep a spreadsheet. This helps them see where money goes and is spent, and helps them make wise choices...apart from asking you for a handout daily.

Teach them to bargain hunt. No, they don't need Brand name clothing, nor do you...unless you can afford it. Teach them how to find staples to mix/match in their clothing, where to find coupons and look for sales, and how to maybe shop with a friend when there are buy one/get sales. And most of all require them to stick to their budget when shopping. Maybe consider rewarding them when they do, with a movie gift card!

Send them to the grocery store. Once in a while, give your teens a chance to shop for the groceries for the family, within a budget. What an eye opener it will be when they see that cheese and meat are so expensive! Let them learn to estimate the cost of things, put together meals that are affordable, and see how much it costs to feed a family.

Consider a bank account. When your teen is old enough, set them up with an account to manage, with your oversight. As they learn to deposit and withdraw with a debit card, show them how to check it often, not overspend, and to spend wisely.

Percent, percent, percent! Teens that know percentages are teens that are equipped! When shopping, it's imperative that teens know how to figure 30% off (about 1/3), 25% off (1/4), etc. Encourage them to read labels and tell you what the new cost will be with the discount. Perhaps considering loaning them some money with 20% interest and show them what it's like to borrow, and how you end up paying more money when you're done. Train them to figure tip on meals when they eat out! If you don't know these things, take a class on line together to learn them.

Encourage them to give. Giving is a part of living, as a Christian. Instruct them how to set aside an amount for giving to others, to their church, or to a charity. Read to them the blessings of giving...and receiving. Give together as a family, where you match what they give.

These are just a few suggestions. You can think of more. Basically, include your teens in money activities where they can learn to figure, to give, and to save.

They'll thank you one day...maybe when they're 30...that they learned the value of a dollar!

Life as We Know It – Tune In – by Erica Simmons

Remember the old dial car and house radios, and how we had to work the dial into the right position just to get the radio station to come in clearly, to eliminate the static? That's how it is with the Holy Spirit at times. We have to take the time to get in the right position to hear Him. We have to get into the right place to eliminate the static of the enemy.

This static comes in many forms as a parent as we strive to do our best for our children. As parents, we have to learn to tune in to what is going on with our children. A big part of that is learning and knowing our children and ourselves.

Knowing Ourselves

A couple months ago, I explained to a Subway Restaurant manager that I had twins turning 16 the next week and asked about her about hiring them, as they would not be expecting to work many hours during the school year, but perhaps more in the summer. She agreed and the boys took applications to fill out and were told to come back on Saturday.

On Saturday, she explains she can only hire one of my sons because of conflict of interest. Since Jeremiah would be getting his license first and could drive himself to work, Jordan let Jeremiah be the one hired. Once Jeri started to work, my family started wondering when Jordan was going to get a job. This led me to *ride him* about getting a job.

I then took the time to tune in and find the source of my sudden pressure on him.

The Holy Spirit led me to my worry that Jordan was just not motivated enough. This was because he does not get the grades he should, which plays such a huge role in getting into college, which leads to a fear of what will his future be. However, it is not my job to live in fear or worry but in faith and listen to the Holy Spirit about how I can parent Jordan's flaws and put him in the position to hear from God about his future.

That is what the enemy wants. He wants us to live our lives in his territory.

I apologized to Jordan and worked to not let the static that my family creates interfere with hearing the Holy Spirit. I have to know my triggers and immediately get in the perfect position to avoid stepping out of His will.

Knowing Jordan

A few years ago, something happened regarding Jordan. When I first heard it, I knew in my spirit it was not true. Many I love and trust told me that there could be reasons and that he may not want to face up to the reality of his actions. We dealt with this for months and then found out that someone had been lying. To this day, it is a deep hurt for Jordan that I did not believe in him.

I learned a HUGE lesson.

No one, NO ONE knows my children better than I do.

I don't care how spiritual they are, how much they love God, others do not know our children better than we do. As parents, God has given us precious resources and we have to guard and protect them no matter what. Parents have been there from day one, in the good times, dealing

with the bad times, knowing what has gone on behind closed doors, and we are the ones with ALL the knowledge of our children.

When it comes to dealing with the issues of my children I tune in to the Holy Spirit.

When something happens that triggers one of my fears, I tune in asking the Holy Spirit to help me discern what I need to know.

Once I find what I need, I may then reach out to those I trust with ways to deal, but I no longer look to them to help decide what is truth. This is especially true with family, who have their ideas of how things should be and feel they can share their opinions. I have learned to closely guard what happens in my home and warn the boys about talking about it outside of our home to other family members. It has served me well and I believe it's the foundation of a good open relationship. It gives me a great sense of pride when one of my sons comes in and says, "I need to tell you something." They are not always easy conversations, but we are having conversations. There was a situation just this week. After he told me his side of the story, I tuned in to the Holy Spirit and felt all was well, and simply explained to Jordan how he should have dealt with the situation. Now he knows my expectations in similar situations going forward.

Knowing Jerimiah

I have been the boys' parent for 16 years now and it still blows my mind how different they are in some key areas. Where Jordan is more open, Jerimiah is more closed off, secretive and sneaky. Almost a year ago, I shared the story where he took a gifted car for a drive and was stopped because the brake light did not work. We went to court and he was sentenced to do community service. The deadline was upon us and we were rushing to get it all done. He went to the nursing home and did his application and orientation and submitted the time he wanted to come in. Jerimiah reported after school the next day and the person supervising him had been called to a meeting. That was bad because we had a limited timeframe to complete the hours around his work hours. Therefore, I made the decision that he would miss a day of school and do some hours.

Next, Jerimiah let me know he was on his way after dropping Jordan off at school. I was at work and it crossed my mind that he did not let me know he had made it or that it was okay for him to stay. I did not tune in, even though the Holy Spirit nudged me to, and called him on my way back to the office to see how things were going. He lied and told me how he was working the rummage sale and that he loved me and he hope I had a good time out at lunch.

Later, I asked Jerimiah how many hours he was able to get. I was so angry when he told me he just drove right by his school and came home for the rest of the day. He got no hours and he has an entire day of absences.

I try to trust the boys even when they do things that require me to draw the boundaries in and slowly let them out again, but Jerimiah has had the boundaries drawn in on him so many times. In his case, I did not tune in and follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Obviously, I don't go over to the other ditch and not trust everything my boys say, but in all things I look for opportunities to teach them lessons.

I realized that Jerimiah has more than a passing interest in deception, it is THE thing with him. I sat him down and explained how deception will destroy any relationship he ever wants to have. I

explained to him that he has to look past the immediate gratification of getting what he wants in the moment to the bigger impact of his choices. This is a conversation that will be ongoing with him from now on. I am also learning not to quickly dismiss those nudges of the Holy Spirit.

Parenting, like wine, gets better with time.

As I learn more about immediately tuning in to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and how to eliminate the static of the enemy, I discover I handle things with the boys better the first time around. I still have my moments where I might react and then tune in, but that beats not ever tuning in at all.

Everything Home - Produce is Here! – by Mikaela Cain

A row of parked cars lined both sides of an abandoned parking lot. A few people got out of their cars, but most stayed put, waiting for the drop. A truck slowly drove up the asphalt road, and parked. A man emerged from the truck, nodded, and walked to the back of his truck. He opened the tail gate. It hit the bed of the truck with a slam. Slowly, he pulled a plastic crate overflowing with greens.

“Produce is here!” He yelled.

Women emerged from all corners of the parking lot, chatting as they stepped forward to receive their weekly farm, fresh delivery of in-season produce. The man’s wife checked off our names as we picked up our crates full of local goodies.

Getting the [produce box](#) was a highlight of my week when I lived in Redding, California. I ordered the boxes initially to support local farmers and businesses, and because I wanted to eat organic produce. But, I had no idea what an adventure these produce boxes would take me on!

I have ordered boxes in Redding and in Austin, where I live now. Both deliveries stocked the bins with two greens, two or three veggies and one or two fruits. Occasionally, we were surprised with herbs. Everything was in season and a local treat.

Outside the Box

In Redding, I ordered from [Abundant Harvest](#). This Texas girl got to learn about fruits and veggies that I didn’t grow up eating. Some of the produce I had never seen before—like persimmons, pattypan squash and bok choy. I enjoyed discovering new recipes. I developed a new enemy in **persimmons** after spending an hour trying to grate them for a cake (it turned into mush). Not only were persimmons extremely difficult for me to work with, I really didn’t like the taste. I love **butternut squash**. Even though I’d seen it in the squash section at grocery stores, I hadn’t thought about trying it. I doubt I ever would have without someone putting it in our Abundant Harvest box. Now, [butternut squash soup](#) is a go-to recipe for our family. We make it every couple of months. Abundant Harvest also provided suggested recipes utilizing some (or several) of their box produce. That was a fun way to get outside of my box and try new things.

Inside the Box

In Austin, several companies deliver produce. After quite a bit of searching (mostly reading Yelp reviews), I chose [Greenhouse Farm Delivery](#). Unlike some of the competition, Greenhouse delivers right to my apartment door! It is only about ten dollars extra for this advantage. They also offer a wide range of other organic, farm-raised or grown foods to add to my produce box. This includes meats, eggs, breads and dairies.

My hope when I signed up was to add on as we could afford more local, organic groceries. Although this box was less exciting to me than the one in Redding (mostly because we grew up eating the foods in this box), I still had the pleasure of learning what was in season and what to avoid.

Knowing the Box

One of my goals in life is to eventually know and approve of the source of everything I buy. It's a huge goal, but not an impossible one. Knowing and approving of the produce I purchased was one step in that direction for me. Although I signed up for humanitarian reasons, I was blessed and surprised by the education and fun that came along in the box.

"Produce is here" means a big, bundle of local fruits, veggies and fun!

A Night to Remember – Words to the Wise – by Marcy Lytle

It's the month of Mother's Day, and we all know that Moms are the best. They take care of us, they feed us, they work hard to keep us clothed, and they teach us all sorts of things, including how to be wise and make good choices. Listening to our moms is one of the first wise decisions we can make and one that will serve us well throughout our lives.

Listening to the wisdom found in the Bible is doubly important. If we listen to our moms and the Word of God, we are obeying well, and good things happen to those who obey.

Let's look at some of the wise sayings from the book of Proverbs:

Preparation: *You'll need a tray with the following items laid out for all to handle and see – jewels, a branch, a small blanket, a crown or garland, an heirloom treasure, and a chain necklace.*

Proverbs:

8:11 Wisdom is more precious than rubies, nothing you desire can compare with her. *(Pass around the jewels and talk about their value, and how more valuable wisdom is.)*

3:18 She is a tree of life to those who embrace her. *(Pass around the branch and talk about how when we stay connected to Jesus, like branches are to vines, we are wise and we live well.)*

3:24 When you lie down you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. *(Pass around the blanket and give thanks for the peace that God provides, even in the dark, when we are wise and trust in Him)*

4:9 She will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a crown of splendor. *(Pass around the crown for each to wear, and declare that making wise choices makes us feel like a ruler over our own hearts and thoughts.)*

24:3 By wisdom a house is built...its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures. *(Pass around the heirloom and talk about why it's valuable to the family – but it's nothing compared to wisdom.)*

1:8, 9 Listen to your father's instruction...do not forsake your mother's teaching...they will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck. *(Pass the chain necklace around and ask each to put it on. Discuss obedience and how it looks well on children who obey).*

9:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of **wisdom**, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

This last piece of advice does not mean we are to be afraid of the Lord, but rather to look up to Him with obedient hearts that hear him and do what he says, especially through the instruction of our parents.

Let's pray together: *Father, thank you that you are wise, and you have given us wisdom in your Word, and in the words of our moms. Help us to honor your Word and our Moms by obeying and loving all that they train us to do. Amen.*

The Family Practice - *Play's the Word* – by Rachel Toalson

“Come play with me, Mama!”

“Mama, watch!”

“Can you help me build a LEGO Minecraft fortress?”

Sometimes I don't even know what they're talking about. When the 9-year-old takes out the Pokemon cards, I have no idea how the game works. I throw out my cards and let him decide what he's going to do with them, because the rules are complicated, and, I suspect, he changes them to suit himself (he usually wins).

I'm not always good at playing, though. There are times when my kids ask me to play, and I've answered a whole long string of nos, every single time. Because there's too much to do, because I'm too tired, because I would rather read than figure out how to build a library out of wooden planks.

There are times when my kids ask me to be with them, and I'm just not able to be with them. There are times when they ask me to join them on the trampoline for a minute, and I'm trying, instead, to make sure the tomato soup on the stovetop doesn't burn.

Kids don't understand this sort of thing. Work instead of play? Weren't we all made for play?

Yes. We were. But somewhere along the growing-up way, we lose it. Somewhere along the way we start thinking that it's irresponsible to play. Somewhere along the way we forget what it feels like to play.

My family's word for this year is play. Every decision we have made so far has been made with that word in mind. Will we play? How could we play? What sort of fun adventure might be waiting?

When my husband took a worship leader position at a church, it was with play in mind, so now we get to the church half an hour early every Wednesday evening so we can play on the church playground with the kids (you've never felt sore until you wake up on the morning after you tried to freeze five boys in a game of freeze tag where you're always “it”), and we designate Sundays as our Family Fun Day and visit a local museum or the zoo or a state park or family.

It's not always easy to choose play. Life is busy. Play is...well, play (which we equate with unnecessary). But when we go places as a family, when we execute our Family Fun Days imperfectly well, when we swing on swings and climb across monkey bars and slide down slides that we're probably way too heavy for, just for the thrill of it, we connect with something that is unexplainable and rich and life-changing.

I'll admit that there are some kinds of play that are easier for me than others. I'm not a big fan of playing cars anymore, even though as a kid I made elaborate tracks in the dirt behind my house. I'm not a big fan of playing superheroes or playing Pokemon or playing a game like Monopoly that's going to take a thousand days to finish. But I am a big fan of playing kickball out front and seeing who can jump the farthest off the swings and building something amazing out of LEGOs. And these things are play for me as much as they are for my children.

Play brings us back to life. We begin to find our hearts again. The world can make us so very weary, but play, the way it fills us with warmth and adventure and joy, can pull us back from the

ledge of exhaustion and infuse our whole lives with hope. Play is good for us. It's good for our families.

We can make ourselves feel guilty about playing, of course. Because there are always things to be done—bills to be paid, work to finish, dishes to wash, laundry to fold, dinner to cook. But if we're not living a life of play, we're not living much of a life in the first place. And, in the second place, our family is missing life in the fullest when we're not playing together. Play can wrap tight bonds around family members and grow us closer together, because we share laughter and activity and, mostly, joy.

If we're not playing, we're dying. So let's get playing.

Some suggestions for embracing play as a family:

1. Have a family game night. Most Friday nights we sit around our table and play some of our favorite board games. Some of our favorites include Bounce Off, puzzles, cards, SET, Uno, Quirkle and Jenga. None of those cost a whole lot of money. They don't even have to cost anything. Be creative. Some of our favorite game nights have been when we played a homemade game of charades.

2. Designate one weekend day a month as a Family Fun Day. Let each kid pick what the activities are for the day (within reason—we put a limit on spending and a limit on how many places we're going for the day.) Rotate who gets to pick the day every month. Or surprise them with your own choice and make it a "treasure hunt."

3. Take ordinary circumstances and turn them into play. On the way to the library, pretend you're all in a story book and that you're traveling to some place exotic. Story can breathe play into a life, too, because it exercises the imagination. Or take the long way around to a place you need to go, like the store or the post office or their school. Have kids guess where it is you're going. Laugh. Love. Play.

YOU

Under the Influence - Tiredness is Not a Friend – by Marcy Lytle

She's got a coffee in her hand morning, noon and night.

He's downing another energy drink so he can stay awake.

They're exhausted and unable to communicate well, so they stay angry at each other.

The kids want to play video games because they've been at four different lessons/practices this week, on multiple nights.

We're a society that's tired, on a treadmill that's running too fast, and on a wheel that's not ever slowing down.

Being tired seems to be a way of life, so we learn to cope, carry drinks in hand, tune out the world when we do have a few minutes, and have trouble actually going to sleep when the lights are out because our mind's a whirl...

If I've learned anything as I've gotten older it's that tiredness is not a friend. In fact, she's an unwelcome guest in my home because she causes unpleasant evenings with me and my husband when she shows up.

When I've had a hectic day, I've let my mind go from here to there and everywhere, and when I've been going constantly never breathin or looking up to see the sun, or stopping to hear a bird sing...watch out. He arrives home and I start spewing orders on how I need help with this and that. Before long, I'm blaming him because we haven't had time to relax and I wonder why he hasn't noticed and planned something. And by the time bedtime rolls around, I've look at him a dozen times with disdain and said unkind things, and I'm ready to turn off the light and be done.

It's hard, in a world of constant movement, to slow down so that we are not tired. It seems quite impossible, in a home with tiny children, to ever get a break and rest. And it's downright absurd to meet deadlines, arrive with the kids over there, and get dinner on the table without collapsing before 8pm...only there's homework to be done, floors to be cleaned, and oh yes – that friend who needs a call because she lost her job today.

Some days are just exhausting, and there's nothing we can do about it. However, many days we end up tired and it's our own fault. And those are the days we need to wake up and purpose that today's going to be different. We're going to make the effort to:

1. **Notice.** We're going to look around when driving the kids to school and see the pretty colors of the middle of this season we call spring, and we're going to linger as we look at the faces of these kids with jelly left on their cheeks, and we're going to observe the hands we love to hold and grab them to squeeze tightly at some point during the evening.

2. **Breathe.** We're going to sit down, get off our feet, lay back and close our eyes for a few, clear our minds of our to-do lists and their give-me demands, and we're going to breathe in deeply and exhale completely, several times in a row.
3. **Rest.** We're going to ask the entire family, in fact we're going to require it, to sit down, put our feet up, lay our heads back, and do nothing – no television – no phones – no toys – no books – and listen to the silence and the stillness.
4. **Picnic.** We're going to pack up and head to the park for a couple of hours of sitting on a blanket with basket full of goodies, fly a kite, throw rocks in the water, or read books of our choice...together as a family...until the sun sets and it's time to go home.
5. **Pray.** We're going to learn the art of laying down our burdens at his feet, acknowledging the fact that He's a good, good father – it's who he is – and we can empty our backpacks of worry, fear, and exhaustion. We can lay those down and walk away free to trust, free to live.

That's just five little things we can start doing today. And when they become a part of our routine, we might find that we imbibe a little less coffee and energy drinks, speak a little kinder and softer to those we love, and invite this one and that one to sit down and visit, while we listen to each other's hearts and dreams once again.

Strengthening Your Core - Those Pesky Leaves – by Marcy Lytle

This spring we had more leaves on our back porch than we did in the fall! They crunched under our feet, they got nasty over time as it rained, and they stuck to our shoes when we came in to the house where I had just swept! They were annoying! So of course, we had to get out the blower, the vacuum, the rake, and the big leaf bags to gather them and discard them until...our back porch and patio area was clean again!

Those leaves show up throughout the year on the ground where they don't belong, unless they pile up for kids to play in, unless we gather them for art projects, or unless we just want to admire them for the colors they bring. Otherwise, those leaves have to go!

As I was cleaning the leaves, I thought about how all sorts of things fall into our paths on a daily basis. They come across our lives unexpected, as the winds shift and blow, and there they land. If we don't sweep them up, they pile up until the path we're walking is not even visible any more. And the work required to sweep them away, once they're piled high, is just too much to tackle alone!

So what are these pesky leaves that pile up around us? I can think of five shapes and sizes and colors...

Delays. These are the times when we're clipping along at life's quick pace and something falls onto our path to cause us to pause... It might be that we're almost through with college, almost finished with a project, almost have the house clean and then someone needs us, someone makes a mess, or something slows us down. We just can't do anything but wait for the wind to shift and clear our path once again.

Demands. These are the leaves of duty and chores and obligations that are placed on us because we're wives, moms, providers, nurturers, etc. It seems no one can get along without our help, so we're doing, baking, giving, fixing, comforting or all of the other *-ings* we do and we find ourselves beneath the pile and can't climb out.

Diagnoses. Life is busy and full and fun and fast, and then we're sick with the flu, he's got a broken leg and we have to help him out, or she's got a cavity that needs attention. All of life's fun turns are now nasty detours that weigh us down and pull at our emotions and put us behind on the track of the good life, much like a wet blanket of leaves stares us in the face as we wait for it to dry so we can then rake and remove it.

Disappointments. These fall daily, don't they? We can choose to sweep them from our porch as soon as they fall, or we can let them gather and gather until we have to get out the machines to blow them away. Perhaps we prayed and he still lost his job, or we hoped for that answer and God gave a different one. Disappointment falls in all colors.

Daggers. These are those hurtful moments in life when someone offends us, a friend spreads untruths about us, or our kids spew out hatred toward us when disciplined, and the hurts cut to the bone. These are the leaves that fall over sticks and thorns and rocks, and we want to leave them there. It's too difficult to uncover and remove the things beneath the surface that hurt.

I despise the leaves that show up daily in the fall...and then again in the spring...because it requires work, constant effort, and endless sweeping. However, the yard looks so pretty, I feel so satisfied, and my porch becomes inviting...when the leaves are gone. When they're all bagged up, the garbage truck rolls by, and the trees that shed them start putting on fresh green leaves again, I smile and feel good inside. I look up and see the sun shining through the emerging leaves and I feel the wind as it blows through and causes the new leaves to rustle...but they don't fall. It's the new season of growth where the leaves are attached to the trees to make them full and beautiful once again.

If it's the season of falling leaves on your porch, you really have two choices. You can let them lie there until they become a nasty mess, all wet and stuck together and piled up. Or you can daily rake them from your porch with thanksgiving, praise, and a little muscle so that your path is always clear to follow and clear to welcome others as they walk toward your door.

Healthy Habits - Thanks, Mom! – by Ginny Hurley

I grew up in the days before it was fashionable to live a healthy lifestyle. Burgers, fries, pizza, Twinkies, and lots of other goodies were making their glorious advances.

My mom was the only one, out of all my friends, that said, “Those are not healthy!”

Cokes were a no-no and we hardly ever had dessert! Once in a blue moon, we got to go to Char King and get a hamburger! I LOVED the number 1, and couldn't wait until Mom decided we could go again.

Now, after years of watching the tides change on food and fitness, I want to share a few of my mom's ideas that I recall now with her wisdom.

1. You don't have to finish everything on your plate.
2. Eat SLOWLY and chew your food.
3. Green is best, colors are great.
4. Put your fork down a minute, and let your food digest.
5. Buy fresh first, then frozen. Both are good!
6. Too much salt is too much.
7. Take small bites.
8. ENJOY your food!

These truths are still true, I've come to discover.

Sometimes though, when certain foods are prohibited, they are just the ones our emotions say we need! Treats can be just that, an occasional special food that we really love, like donuts and ice cream.

Don't try to stop all the things you love, immediately. You will discover that spinach really does taste good, and salad is very filling, especially when you know something really amazing is on the horizon!

THANKS, MOM!

Beauty for Ashes - Just Give Your Gifts – by Pam Charro

So, there I was, awake again in the middle of the night.

It was not a new scenario, as nighttime seems to be the time everything in my life needs to immediately be fixed. And, since I was recently given new responsibility in my church, it made sense that I should be a bit stressed out about it while I could be sleeping (and while there was absolutely nothing I could do about it at the time).

So I did what I usually do for a while, **worrying** that maybe I wouldn't be able to do the job well enough and **wondering** what would happen if I failed, and just **feeling badly** and tossing and turning and **not sleeping**.

It finally occurred to me that maybe I should **pray and ask God** for the ability to do the task well and to view the situation differently, since the Bible does say that he is concerned about every area of my life. It has taken me too many years to keep in mind that my situation is not a coincidence and that God stands ready to assist me when I ask for help!

That is just what I did, and he told me this:

"Just give your gifts.
The outcome is not up to you.
All that I ask is that you do your best to intentionally bless me and my kingdom.
What happens afterward will always work out for good,
so don't worry about your performance."

Really, that's all I have to do is be myself and try?

And it will be good enough?

I'm not sure why that is such a struggle for me to remember, but what freedom!

He gave me what I have and he will either add to it if more is needed or move me on to something else.

Either way, I bless others, I am blessed, and I have God's approval.

And that really is all that I want.

CREATED FOR LIFE - MAY BLESSINGS – by Ginny Hurley

MAY HIS FACE SHINE UPON YOU
AND GIVE YOU PEACE

MAY THE REVELATION OF HIS LOVE SURPRISE YOU

MAY HIS DREAMS COME ALIVE IN YOU

MAY FREEDOM RULE IN YOUR HEART

MAY ABUNDANCE OF JOY CHASE AFTER YOU

MAY YOU KNOW WHOSE YOU ARE EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY DAY

MAY YOUR DREAMS BE REALIZED HERE ON EARTH

MAY YOU FEEL HIS ARMS AROUND YOU DAILY

MAY YOU RECOGNIZE THE GIFT OF GOD WITHIN YOU

MAY YOU SEE WITH YOUR OWN EYES THE REALITY OF HIS GOODNESS

MAY YOU LOVE BECAUSE YOU ARE LOVED

MAY THE GIFT OF GRACE EXPLODE IN YOUR BEING

MAY EVERY SHADOW BE FILLED WITH LIGHT

MAY YOU AWAKEN EVERY MORNING WITH AN ANITICIPATION OF SOMETHING
GOOD

MAY ANGELS SURROUND YOU AND PROTECT YOU

MAY LAUGHTER FILL YOUR HOME

MAY ABUNDANT INHERITANCE POUR INTO YOUR LAP

MAY YOU DELIGHT IN YOUR CHILDREN AND YOUR CHILDREN'S CHILDREN

MAY SONGS COME TO YOU IN THE NIGHT

MAY BRILLIANT ANSWERS DAWN IN YOUR MIND

MAY FEAR EVAPORATE INTO NOTHINGNESS

MAY EVERY OBSTACLE VANISH BEFORE YOU

MAY THE ARMIES OF HEAVEN COME TO YOUR RESCUE

MAY DELIGHT AND HOPE INCREASE IN YOUR LIFE

MAY COURAGE RISE UP FOR EVERY NEED

MAY RIGHTEOUSNESS BLOSSOM LIKE A GARDEN

MAY FAITH AWAKEN ANEW

MAY THE KISSES OF HEAVEN BE FELT ON YOUR CHEEK

MAY YOU KNOW HOW LOVELY YOU ARE

MAY YOUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST GROW DAILY

MAY EVERY BLESSING POUR OVER YOUR LIFE

MAY HIS ETERNAL LOVE AND TRUTH DEVELOP TO THEIR FULL POTENTIAL IN
EVERY WAY

HAPPY MAY!

MARRIAGE

In This Together – The Big Stuff – by Sara Stennett

Choices tend to be crippling at times.

I mean, going out to eat at a restaurant with a menu larger than two pages can be terrifying for me. [Sidebar: I find that nowadays, going out to eat seems to happen less often, with kids and budget, so the stakes have risen when it comes to the need to make the “right” meal choice.] As I pour over the menu, I agonize over this seemingly paramount decision: if I get the grilled salmon, will I be sad that I didn’t get the salad? Should I pick the “safe” option (the sandwich I order every time), or do I need to open my mind and tastes to something else on the menu?

My husband is so accustomed to listening to my deliberations that he usually lets me state my arguments for the top few options then says these wise words,

“Go with your gut.”

Translation: What does your most compelling instinct tell you?

And he’s right because every single time, if I stop weighing pros and cons, nutrition facts, whether or not “I already had chicken for lunch” and such, my “gut” knows what it desires the most.

I have always appreciated this part of my husband. His no nonsense approach to life is so refreshing. He always finds my tendency to overcomplicate dinner choices to be a little silly, albeit endearing and adorable. He doesn’t grow impatient with me and respond with an eye roll or by barking, “Just decide already!” as he has probably been tempted to do. Instead, his response is more of a piece of sage advice that could be doled out by a life coach. I mean, as much as we tend to hem and haw over choices, deep down inside, if we quiet ourselves, don’t we strongly sense what the answer should be?

But what happens in our marriage when our “guts” are different? What if my deep down sense of right on an important issue differs from my husband’s? When it’s time to decide whether or not to have one more child, to move across the country, or to start a new business?

It’s one thing to flesh out the pros and cons in making a small choice like which dress to wear or which route to take to the gym, because those are relatively low stakes decisions that I can make without God or my husband’s input. But when it comes to important issues that shape my marriage and family, I can’t just go with my gut. I’m part of a team now, so it has to be a team decision. I laid down my life to follow Christ, making him Lord of All. And I have also entered into a covenant commitment with my husband vowing that the two of us have become one. And yet, it sure can be tricky getting our two minds to be in sync on the big things.

Never has the triangle illustration [the diagram with God on top and the husband and wife on either side, demonstrating that as we each draw nearer to Him, we will also draw closer to one another] been clearer to me than when Rob and I were toiling over the decision to stay in Colorado or move to Austin. He was advocating taking the leap of moving away from all of our family, our great community of friends, our church community of 20+ years, and the amazing school our children attended in order to work

at a smaller church in a very crowded (and hot) city. As you can tell, I was not convinced. Although I had been feeling stirrings that change was coming, Austin felt like too big of a sacrifice. And so, on our flight home from a weekend in Austin, we discussed it the way we discuss most decisions we make together. We used logic and reason (seasoned with our personal passions), and after some circular discussion time, we promised to both spend some time in prayer and fasting to seek clarity from the Lord.

I knew that if I agreed to move without feeling peace in my heart, I would wrestle with it and the reluctance would turn into bitterness the second that road turned rocky. I also knew that if he felt God stirring his heart to pursue this opportunity, I had to seek God.

**Sometimes it is hard to tell whether our opinion is coming from our head
(what we think or feel to be right)
or our heart
(what the Holy Spirit is saying).**

And as hard as it was to get clarity in making my own decision, it was even harder to know whether Rob felt like we were supposed to move from emotion or Holy Spirit conviction. Time spent seeking God apart from one another is what really brought us into agreement. It seemed like the more I prayed and humbly sought after God's heart for our family, the more my heart was pulled to push through my hesitations and go to Austin. After about a week, we talked again and He said he felt stronger than ever that this is what God was calling our family to do, and I agreed.

In talking with my friends, it seems like this predicament comes up all of the time in our marriages. The wife really wants another baby but the husband does not. She doesn't want to beg or nag, but cannot shake that desire. The husband, on the other hand, has little to no desire for another child and makes that clear. Instead of letting this be a tug of war of power or emotion with one another, what if both agreed to table the conversation, agreeing to let it breathe, under the condition that both would seek God for His will to be revealed and written on our hearts? I am confident that His desires for our family are better than mine. Not only that, the Holy Spirit moving is more powerful than our attempts to win one another over.

So next time one of you feels strongly about wanting to change careers or churches or buy a house and the other isn't on board, here are some practical ways to navigate it:

1. **Agree to disagree, for now, at least.** You have to respect one another's right to an opinion or belief, even when it isn't the same as yours. Validate one another, at all times.
2. **Let it go.** Releasing the burden of persuasion will breathe life to your marriage by discontinuing nagging or circular discussions. You will no longer exhaust your thoughts and emotions, which will bring peace in your home. You have to trust that if He put it on your heart, He can put it on his heart too. And vice versa.
3. **Seek God.** Ask your husband to commit to taking the matter to God with an open heart during his prayer time. Do the same yourself. God has the power to change hearts and minds – yours and his alike.

Honoring the Lord with our marriages, our families, and our lives, is the only true way to seeing His hand move. I know that in seeking His face individually, we can come

together as one to follow His heart. But we have to be able to be open and honest with one another too, even being okay with the possibility that we won't initially see eye to eye. Communicating our individual needs, dreams, and desires is critical to a healthy marriage. And whenever our desires differ, we don't coil back into our own corners, we walk through it by giving one another space for thinking and seeking God.

When we let God be God by making room for Him to reveal Himself in the midst of our marriage, He draws together these two flawed individuals (who left to their own devices would seek to only appease themselves) and the true miracle of marriage takes place:

He is Lord...

And the two become one.

Date Night Fun – Quick Connections – by Marcy Lytle

May is a busy month, isn't it? There are graduations, end of school activities and parties, vacation planning, weddings to attend and gifts to buy, and oh yes – Mother's Day – plus an array of other things on our to-do list that far outweigh any time to ourselves or with our spouse.

But, wait!

Date night doesn't have to be crossed off the list for May. There are ways to make quick connections several times throughout the month, until we have time for a full night out again.

Here are a dozen ways to connect this month, amidst the chaos, even if you only have an hour or less:

1. Riding just before sunset, to observe the beauty of the sky with the windows rolled down.
2. Chilling on the porch with [drink in hand](#), doing nothing but stirring and sipping.
3. Waking up and staying in bed for 15 more minutes while you snuggle and embrace.
4. Sitting on the sofa instead of in two chairs, holding hands, listening to [one song](#) together.
5. Talking on the phone for no reason except to see how each other's day is going.
6. Taking a few minutes to connect over a coffee and [pastry](#) on a Friday night.
7. Bringing each other a surprise sometime this month – tickets, flowers, or a gift card.
8. Falling head over heels in love again by locking eyes across a room full of people.
9. Giving him/her that hour you usually spend reading the paper or cooking dinner.
10. Helping each other on a [project](#) instead of doing your own thing.
11. Jumping, running, dancing – together – for even 15 minutes – for no reason but joy.
12. Kicking a ball around the yard, even with no kids in sight...

It just takes purpose and practice to notice ways we can connect even when we're busy. We don't have to let an entire month go by without connecting for date time, just because we don't have a full night available or extra funds for spending. We can be creative and loving, look up and observe, and reach out and do it.

Those are all action verbs above, which require just a tiny effort on our part. Think of your own actions, like *making*, *noticing*, *preparing*, or *sharing* – and see if you can come up with a dozen more quick connections!

After 30 Years - These Things We Do – by Marcy Lytle

Way back when we got married, there were still full front seats in cars. In fact, it was the norm. I remember both of us seeing couples sitting together, her in the middle, and he behind the wheel, and stating, “We’re going to be like that forever.” When given the space and opportunity, we wanted to sit right next to each other, no matter how many years passed in our marriage, not separate into two recliners across the room.

That was a few decades ago, and cars now have separate front seats, so that opportunity is no longer there to sit together. However, there are several things we still focus on, make happen, and work to keep alive and going, for the sheer pleasure of being together, purposefully showing each other our love and commitment and how we enjoy each other’s company!

Here are a few:

- We go to bed at the same time at night. This enables us to talk, drift off watching a show, or have romantic time before we fall asleep.
- We hold hands in the car. I’m sure he should keep both hands on the steering wheel, but when he reaches over to grab my hand I take it – hold it – and love it.
- We hug hello and good-bye. I’ll admit, sometimes I’m busily engrossed in work or making dinner or folding clothes, but I try to stop what I’m doing and hold him. And he does me, as well. I can’t tell you how it lifts our spirits!
- We sometimes eat in the car. Away from the noise of the restaurant, the screaming kids, and the distractions of waiters, we opt for our food in the car, parked by a scenic view, just to sit and be and talk...or not.
- We eat breakfast out back. We don’t do this near often enough, but sometimes we take our food and we slip out back and eat it by our flowers, near our fire pit, or just to feel the morning breeze. And it starts our day off well!
- We stay up front on double dates. Another thing we noticed was older couples separating as they aged, on double dates. The girls sat in the back, with the guys in front. That’s okay sometimes, I suppose, but not on a date! I want to be near him so I can reach for that hand that reaches for mine!
- We go together. If he has an errand to run in the evening, or I have some shopping to do on the weekend, we do these together instead of separately, as much as we can. I don’t mind searching for that tool he needs to finish a project at home with him, and he never minds the clothing stores, because he enjoys looking at the décor and holding my hangers or getting me another size (he’s a champ!).
- We read to each other. We’ve read many books together, but our current one is Max Lucado’s *Traveling Light*. The chapters are relatively short and to the point, and so good. It gives us a conversation topic when we’re through so that then...
- We pray together. Not always, and never enough, but we try to pray together and confess our faults to each other, as we pray for our friends and ourselves, and praise Him for all of his blessings to us and ours.
- We let it all out. It might get loud at times and we might say too much, but we don’t hold grudges and we share our frustrations. We try to do it without accusation and attack on

character (and we don't always succeed at that!), and we both try to be open to listening to the other one's heart and concern.

Every couple has their own set of things they do to connect, to reestablish their coupling, or to boost their togetherness – at least they should. It's really easy to drift over the years into separate chairs, different bedrooms and completely opposite lives. I suppose that works for some. But I married my husband because I loved being with him, and I want to nourish that, keep it alive, and enjoy it more each year.

That's why we do these things...

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – Hey, God – by Rachel Critz

“How often do you read your bible?”

That is a question I remember hearing a while ago at my youth group.

The next question was, “Do you feel like you read a good amount, a little bit, or not at all?”

Unfortunately my answer was, “Not at all.”

I struggle with opening my Bible and putting things aside to actually take in some of the scriptures I read. But I noted how nearly half the youth group lifted their hands when I did, giving me the realization that maybe it is not all that bad I do not get into the Word, because other people do not read it either.

The option of listening to the Bible on the bible app was offered, so I tried it. Within two days, I was back to my usual routine of not opening the bible.

People say it begins to change how you view things if you continue to read the Bible. While this is true, I am not a big fan of reading. So since I listen to music every day, I decided to change from what I usually listen to, to Christian music.

Let me be honest. I was so bored. I could have switched to my other playlist but if this is all I could get from the Word today then I would continue to listen to it.

Eventually, I found myself listening to it without thinking about it when I turned it on. I began to remember the lyrics to songs and recognize new songs played at church on Sunday morning. This helped it to become easier to see that I don't have to open my Bible to become closer to God.

It is very good to learn the Word and read when you feel the motivation to do so. This is not a loophole to not read it. It's just that there are more ways to connect with God outside the Word.

I can easily talk to him through worship. For others it might be prayer, giving advice to others, serving others in need, or... opening the Bible.

There are so many different ways to connect with God without having to put everything in our day on hold for it. Maybe just by sitting and doing homework, we can just say, “Hey, God,” and have a little conversation while we study.

Romans 10:17 says,

“...So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”

Do not feel bad about yourself if you know you do not put enough time into God's word. He knows your heart better than anyone in this world; in fact, he knows you better than you know yourself.

Find *something*, though, to show Him you want to know Him better, maybe just by switching to the Christian radio station instead of what you usually listen to.

God does not let effort go unnoticed.

Saddle Up - Keeping It Fun, Fresh and New! – by Melissa Critz

As I gather my cap and sunglasses and head to the fridge to grab some carrots, I notice the time on the clock. It's Tuesday and a sweet young lady, senior in high school, comes to the house to ride for a bit. We don't call it a riding lesson, but I do throw in some techniques and help her learn new things in regards to the horses. We both have a good time as we ride together. Before each Tuesday, I start thinking of things that we can do such as an event like straight barrels or working on lead changes.

This particular Tuesday, I was going to introduce her to cavalettis. Well, we don't have true cavaletti's which are hooked to an 'x' at each end in order to make the bars have the potential of being at differing heights. But we do use the poles for trotting over and across and for other things like the box. While my husband and I were at Lowe's recently, I persuaded him that I needed four 4" 10-ft long PVC pipes. He looked at me funny, but I explained to him why. He helped me gather what I needed, and we headed home with many bags of mulch and my four poles.

These days, my horses aren't hauled anywhere for any competitive reasons. I don't even have a trailer. The horses stay at our place and I ride them for pure fun. However, it can get somewhat 'old' (or maybe familiar is a better word) when it's the same ole five acres to roam around on. I do have three barrels set up for playing around with like a straights or cloverleaf event like my horses used to do for competition. So it's nice to find something else to have fun with that isn't too costly and easy to set up and use.

I dragged the poles from the truck to the round pen behind the barn. I set up the four poles as a box (shape of a square) and went back to help with the flower bed work of adding many, many bags of mulch and more. I didn't get to go try out the poles until my young friend arrived for her riding time.

We both gathered the horses from the front pasture and headed to the barn to groom and tack up. I explained to her that I finally had some poles to use! After saddling, I had her warm up Elijah with trotting and loping while she worked on her posting, riding without stirrups, and more. We then headed to the poles. I showed her how to use the box – walk the horse in, turn a circle on the hind end, and walk out the opposite side. After some time with that, I set up the poles in L-shape so that we could work the horses laterally. Then I set the poles up in parallel like you would cavalettis and had her trot through them.

You know what?

She had a fantastic time!

I didn't know she would enjoy it so much – just four poles. But those four poles brought something new to try, something new to think about, something new to achieve.

Aha!

I hear my saddle partner...

Sometimes I know I get caught up with the mundane, the familiar, the too-normal. I know I need to change things up a bit and then whatever it may be seems new again or challenging again.

My heart was so blessed to see that smile on this sweet girl's face and know that she had been so blessed with something fun and new. It made my heart happy.

I started thinking of how I could apply this to other things in life. Does my schedule (oh, yes, I have a schedule and boy howdy - don't change it up on me!) need some changing...something new...some upheaval? Do I need to maybe just find one thing that could make it feel fresh again? Bring a smile to my face or someone I know?

I realized that we all need to be more aware of how we can be flexible enough to do that one thing to make something boring be fresh again. Could it be the daily delving in the Word? What could spruce it up? Could it simply be a new bookmark – one that is made by one of our children? What about that daily exercise? Maybe instead of the gym, we can find a trail to walk outside and walk and listen and pray and observe. What if the view out a window is boring? We can buy a simple potted plant that makes us smile each time we see it – or even better, buy two and give one to someone that will bring a smile to their face each day as well.

So I just encourage you that in the boring sameness to look for a way to bring life again, to bring enjoyment back, to bring that smile once again.

And remember...

**He loves you and He too wants you to smile and
enjoy all that He has for you daily.**

Firmly Planted - BROKEN VESSELS – by Dina Cavazos

Going through my collection of garden paraphernalia I found a pair of matching candle lanterns a friend had given me awhile back. As I wiped off the thick layer of accumulated dust, I saw that one of them had a crack in the pale yellow glass. *Bummer!* I like my garden stuff to be intact, not broken or damaged.

My first thought was to give it away and keep the “good” one, the “perfect” one.

Who wants a broken thing in a beautiful garden?

But then I heard the whisper...

Aren't you a little cracked? I haven't thrown you away.

My life has been full of brokenness. I've gone down wrong paths and made bad choices....I'm weak and inadequate in many ways. But the Word, that powerful agent of Truth, says,

He gives power to the weak, And to those who have no might He increases strength.

Isaiah 40:29

I've experienced the truth of this word. My own strength has carried me a long way, and I'm sure, dear readers, that yours has too. God lets us go on trying and striving and wearing ourselves out, permitting some victory; but, inevitably, we come to something we can't control, conquer, or logically solve. Inevitably, we must come to the realization that our strength can only get us so far and will accomplish only so much. What we are crying out for in most difficult situations is supernatural power, isn't it?

When I'm broken before God, when I admit my weakness and inability to do anything of consequence without Him, that's when His power comes. One power has to rule.

Do we want to rule our own lives in our own power, or do we want to allow the supreme, all-wise, all-knowing power of God to rule?

This is a decision I, and all of us, must make every day, many times a day—constantly, as we learn to yield ourselves to the Spirit and allow Christ our Life to live through us. The Holy Spirit is the source of power that activates in our weakness and the strength that sustains us as we admit our insufficiency.

The reality of a power greater than our feeble efforts brings hope to any situation. With faith, and trusting in His timing, the Lord of the Universe is able to bring down the mountain and transcend impossibility. That's the reality we want to experience, isn't it?

There's a lot to be said on this subject of weakness and power. The Lord strengthens us in our weakness, but He also uses us despite our weakness.

When I'm aware I'm walking in a strength not my own I give Him glory, but when I see Him accomplish things even when I have *no* strength, I give Him even more!

I'm keeping the cracked candle lantern as a symbol of my brokenness. The candle will shine brightly through it, reminding me that even in my weakness and total imperfection, God's power works mightily in me....and what is true for me is also true for you.

Be encouraged in your weakness.

You'll become more firmly planted as you let this truth renew your mind:

*But we have this treasure in earthen vessels,
that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.*

2 Corinthians 4:7

Moving Forward - Important and True – by Pam Charro

I was a little sad one day last week.

I can't remember exactly why, but it just wasn't my day. Small things here and there had been going wrong all morning. I felt the familiar heaviness of discouragement and realized that I was replaying negative past experiences (some of them WAY past).

I was in a rut.

So I had one of "those talks" with myself:

"Okay, Pam, step into my office and let's find out what's going on here. Sure, this thing over here was kind of yucky and that over there didn't go perfectly, but has anything today really been the end of the world? What's really bugging you?"

I had to admit to myself that nothing devastatingly wrong had really happened, but I was just allowing my mind to be negative.

It is such a familiar habit that often I don't even realize I'm doing it until I have already squandered several hours, or even an entire day.

I told God, "I'm sorry for wasting so much precious time wallowing in negativity. You deserve so much better! What can I fill my mind with instead?"

His answer was quick and perfect:

"What's really important and true?"

And, of course, I knew the answer. What is important and true is that I know the Lord and will spend eternity with him. That I will not have my sins held against me for all of eternity because a sinless One loved me enough to die in my place. That nothing dirty or negative can stick to me because I have been made holy. What is important and true is that I have been given a hope that can never be taken away, no matter what happens to me in this short and temporary life.

Wow.

How can I possibly feel down when I think about what is really important and true?

Real Stories - Any time and All the Time – by Carole Gilbert

I stood on a busy corner in Harlem, New York City and wondered how I ever got there. It was the busiest corner with the main Harlem subway entrance and exit and our group was with a neighborhood church trying to witness for God. They had us divided between the four corners.

I knew why I was there and I knew who put me there, but was I really ready?

We had been prepped on what to expect and trained on what to say but I was just a mom on a mission trip with my last child right after he graduated. I was about to start my empty nest with my husband and had never been on one of these trips. I always felt my kid's mission trips were a time they could be independent from me, but this trip was different.

God had told me to go and little did I know what He was prepping me for.

People were coming and going and our job was to give information about the neighborhood church and ask if we could pray for them. This Harlem corner was known for its personnel of prostitutes and drug dealers, so we were extremely noticeable. I tried to share, as did the youth in our group, but mostly it was overwhelming.

Then came Mary Ellen.

She was about my age and acted strangely and fidgety and was going from one person to another. She was looking for drugs, but I spoke to her anyway. For some reason, I felt overly bold and started my visit with her by asking if I could pray with her. She stopped and looked at me and said harshly that she didn't want what I was offering. She informed me she had lost a child and God couldn't love her! She was so angry!

I didn't know how she lost her child and I had never been through that experience, but I did understand the pain of losing loved ones and that's what I started to share. I reassured her that God was forgiving and loved her no matter what she had done or was still doing! I shared more about my past experiences, the bad ones of losing someone and the sinful things I had done so similar to hers, and then I started to share the good ones of how God had been with me even when I didn't deserve it or think He would even want to be there. I shared the peace and comfort I felt when I realized He did love me and forgave me.

As I kept on talking, she became still and listened. She started asking questions and her face started to ease from the anger. After what seemed like forever, she looked at me so deeply and said, "I'm ready to pray."

Mary Ellen and I stood there on that Harlem corner and began to pray. A couple of ladies from the church came beside us and prayed also. This church's goal was to love, help heal, and disciple any who would let them, and they had been going to that corner for years. I would later learn from the church director and Mary Ellen's own husband that he'd been bringing her there for a long time hoping someone with the church's group could get through to her and relieve her from the guilt and shame she'd allowed to take over her life and make her so bitter and angry. Her husband had trusted Jesus years before.

**With Mary Ellen, the seeds had been planted and watered,
just happened to be there on harvest day!**

What tears and hugs we shared after that prayer, tears of peace and comfort and hugs of joy and relief. I imagine these are the same feelings our God feels when we accept and trust His son, Jesus.

All of us brought home something from that trip that added to our lives. One of our youth said that was the first time she'd ever given her testimony, that day on the busy corner intersection in Harlem.

I had been so busy for so long with my marriage and raising our children. I had tried to let God lead me, but this corner in my path of life was to turn me toward telling others about Him. It was time for me to share even deeper and about deeper situations and events in my life. That trip was a turn in God's direction for what He had planned for me, plans to speak boldly and openly about what God had helped me through.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says,

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

This explains to us that our God comforts us in our troubles so we can in turn comfort others in theirs. Our lives are a testimony, the good and the bad, and someone needs to hear! Mary Ellen needed to hear that day that God had comforted me through similar situations, and that he had given me just the right words to comfort her.

That trip was to be a milestone for me.

How could I not share the good and the bad?

How could I not tell others about the peace, comfort, joy and relief of knowing my God and the forgiveness He offers to all who will believe?

I realized I would be sharing my testimony often and openly. God would later have me write it all down in a letter to my children. I would tell them all the situations and events from my life as I had shared that day with Mary Ellen plus so much more. It would later be published in a book titled *Unraveled, Time to Tell* by pen name Lisa Lynn. It would explain the pain I had kept from them and why but also explain why I turned to God for guidance all those years and raised them to know about Him and Jesus.

There are others from that trip I still pray for, but Mary Ellen holds a deeper spot in my heart because I look back at her and still feel the tearful joy I felt that day knowing my pain eased her pain and helped her see Jesus!

Where is your mission trip?

Where does God want you to plant a seed or do some watering?

What pain can you ease for someone?

It doesn't have to be Harlem, NYC. It can be in our own backyards, our own communities, our own homes. And our testimonies are easy to know and share. It's simply our lives before knowing and trusting Jesus and asking His forgiveness, the situations and events surrounding and leading to that moment we trusted and asked Him into our hearts and lives and what He's

done since, how He's changed us. And it doesn't matter if the one we're talking to is receptive or not. God knows our obedience and He does the rest.

Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 9:37-38,

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

This applied then and it applies today. Let's be bold and ready for the opportunities God has planned for us to help Him in His harvest. Anytime and all the time is harvest time.

Bio:

Carole and her husband raised three children and now have three grandchildren. They are active in their church and enjoy traveling. Even though Carole's hard life growing up was a "lifetime ago" she feels blessed every time she can help someone by sharing it. Her autobiography is titled *Unraveled, Time to Tell* by pen name Lisa Lynn. www.facebook.com/carole.lisalynn.gilbert unraveledtimetotell.com.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - The Goldilocks Zone – by Erica Simmons

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12:2 NIV

For over a year, I had been struggling with a spiritual conundrum. It's something that I had been taught for years I should do as a Christian and I was not doing it. Each month I struggled with what to do. It was not the fact of doing it that was the problem. It was the why and what of my heart's motivation. I was able to find biblical principles on either side of the equation. I usually went to a trusted friend when I struggled with something, but for whatever reason I held back whenever we spent time together.

So on it went, until recently...

I know we each hear from God in our own way, and for me He has brought so much clarity to me through the classes I have taken at my church. That's what happened in this case, as well. The class was called "Prayer that Produces." Sitting there on the very first night as the presenter shared what God had put on her heart, I felt the chains of bondage, over not only the issue I had been struggling with for so many months but in other areas of my life, just fall away. So what amazing words was she saying that brought me liberation? It was not the words that she shared, it was "what" she shared. She simply shared truth.

The truth is: **God just wants relationship, that's all.** The truth she shared was not too harsh (full of judgment) and not too soft (giving way to excuses), it was just right. It fit into the locks of my chains of lies and deceit perfectly, and set me free. You see I, like Goldilocks, was hungry and tired. I hungered for the truth in this and many other situations and I was weary from the back and forth battle of trying to figure out what God wanted me to do.

The crazy thing is this was not the first time I had heard this message, it was not even the first time I heard it in relation to an issue I was struggling with specifically.

So why did this truth suddenly make such a huge impact on me? I think it was the dismantling of some unspoken ideas I had. The presenter first spoke of how prayer is not some series of steps that we take to get our prayers answered. THAT is what I was doing with my entire Christian walk. If I did this, this and this, He would do x, y and z.

A kid's video exemplifies how silly my thinking was. To set up the video, Spongebob builds a bubble blowing stand, and Squidward comes along and he can't blow a bubble to save his life. Yet Spongebob, of course, blows beautiful and very artistic bubbles which drives Squidward crazy. So in order to be able to do the same, he asks Spongebob how. The video is his response. [Click here to watch.](#)

[Bubble Video](#)

How silly was that? Yet, I can honestly say that what I believed at the time was just as silly.

God wants me, and desires that my heart wants Him and His heart. It is that simple. And even when things don't turn out the way I want them, He still simply wants me to find His heart for me in the situation. Good, bad, or ugly He wants me to find Him in it and to trust that He loves me.

How can I do that?

One way is for me to apply [Romans 12:2](#), to not act like the world acts when the good, the bad and the ugly happen, but to let my mind be transformed by letting God renew my mind with His truth. The enemy can misuse even God's word even to strong Christians, and I turned to His word the entire time I struggled with my issues. It is not His word alone that changes lives - it is the TRUTH of His words.

So in tough times, I will let God renew my mind with His truth. And in doing so, I will be able to know His good, pleasing and perfect will is in ANY situation I am facing.

This is where we will find our Goldilocks Zone, the place where we can be satisfied and rest no matter what is going on. It's the place that is *just right* for God to touch and change our hearts.

Why is it that when the bad happens to others, we never say "Why not me?" or when the good happens to us, we never say "Why me?"

My new goal is to ask "Why me?" - not in the "Woe is me" way – but "What is it that you what to teach me about YOU?"

And I hope I can ask that as I go through any situation...in the Goldilocks Zone.

FRESH THYME - The Art of Friendly – by Marcy Lytle

Kindness is always in fashion, and friendliness is a staple of life...isn't it?

Sometimes, it seems that simple ways to be kind and friendly to others are not so simple anymore. I'm not sure if it's a result of kids growing up without one parent at home, so they're alone and never taught these things. Or maybe, we just live in a society that doesn't care to connect with real people, when we can hide behind our screens and text if want...or not. Having friends requires that we be friendly to others, but what does that mean, anyway? It seems to be a lost art...so I'd like to paint a picture of what friendliness and kindness looks like when it comes to making friends.

It means asking questions and not just answering them. I'm pretty sure about 90% of new people I meet are happy to answer questions I throw at them about what they do, how many kids they have, or they're even happy to receive a compliment, like "That's a nice dress you're wearing." However, most people don't reciprocate with the same kindness of interest in the other person.

It means thinking of them when you hear they're in need and responding. If a friend has a test next week, is dealing with a dying parent, or just got over a week of the flu, it's friendly and kind to remember this and pray for them, ask how they're doing, and offer to bring a bowl of soup over or keep their kids for an afternoon.

It means noticing if they're missing from an event they attend regularly. Sure, there are some people who could care less if they're missed, but most folks enjoy a text or a call that says, "Hey, we missed seeing you! You add so much to our group!" We don't have to pry into their business, but we certainly can let them know their spot looks gloomy without them.

It means initiating an outing. Don't wait on everyone you know to play and call and invite you to dinner, out on a date, or for a shopping spree. There are planners out there who can do it all, but why not plan and invite your friends yourself? Planners get tired and enjoy someone else's ideas sometimes. Initiate, don't always just wait to receive.

It means encouraging them when they've done well, or when they've failed. Jealousy and competition has no place when it comes to friendships. If she's just gotten a promotion at work, go up and give her a high-five. If she was just passed over for that promotion and someone else got it instead, comfort her with words like, "There must be something better for you!"

There are many ways to be friendly, and all of the above may seem like a "given," but it's not. We are all busy, all stressed, all have our plates too full, and all secretly hope someone will be a great friend to us...while we are doing nothing to be a friend to others.

If there's a bitter tone to this article, it's not meant to be there. It's just an observation that I've noticed in this chaotic world in which we live – that of seclusion, fear of intimacy, and lack of concern or interest in anyone but ourselves.

Friends come and go in our lives, they move near us and then away; and sometimes they stab us in the back and I get it – friendship is risky. However, friendships are delightful when they're two-way, they're full of life and love and preferring the other one above ourselves, and when they're valued.

What's of value to you? I hope it's kindness and friendliness on your part, and I hope those to whom you reach out will reach back and form kinships that last a lifetime.

If you're the friendly type and you've been burned, erase those marks of disappointment and start with a new slate of kindness prepared for those who need it and want it.

If you're the one that's been waiting and soaking and receiving all of the time, try squeezing your full sponge out on someone else by offering them the same kindnesses you have received.

I wish I knew how to paint the art of friendliness on canvas, but I don't. But I can take my brush and add a few strokes of light and color there, to brighten this world in which we all live.

FRESH THYME - The Cookie Jar – by Marcy Lytle

There's one person in my family who always lifts the lid of my cookie jar to see what's inside when he comes over. I am so sad when I see his face on the days when nothing's inside. I feel like it's part of my job to have the jar that's labeled "Homemade Cookies" full to the brim with chocolate chip, oatmeal, or some other delicious sweet treat for those who visit my kitchen.

However, that jar is more often empty than it is full. I don't always have the time to make homemade cookies, most of the time it's just my husband and me here at home (and we don't need them), and other times I just forget to fill it.

And then the kids arrive. He peeks inside and places the lid back down, resigned to leave my house longing for the next time when there "might" be cookies inside.

Did you know that cookie jars became popular in America around the time of the Great Depression? Isn't that interesting! The lack of funds caused moms to make less trips to the bakers and more trips to the kitchen to make home-baked goods. And the "golden period" for cookie jars was from the 1940's to the 1970's. I'm guessing that a lot of young couples don't even have cookie jars in their kitchens any more today.

- We're too health conscious to have sweets available under a lid that we pass by multiple times a day.
- We're too self-conscious about the extra 5 pounds we carry so we don't dare tempt ourselves.
- We're too busy to roll out cookie dough unless we have to do it for some special event.
- We're too crowded in our kitchens for counter space to set a cookie jar.
- We're too strict with our children's diets in fear of an allergy or obesity.

I get it. Cookies are tempting, cookies are addicting, we can never just eat one, and cookies take time and effort to bake.

However...

- There's something warm and inviting when there's a cute vintage cookie jar sitting on a counter with a lid waiting to be picked up, just so we can peer in and see if something fresh awaits.
- There's something cathartic about mixing the dough, rolling it out, cutting those circles and smelling those aromas of chocolate, nuts and dough merging together in a hot oven.
- There's something satisfying about sitting down with a warm cookie and a glass of milk when we're so busy we can't see straight, but we're relaxed after the last bite.
- There's something sweet to behold, other than the cookie, when our kids arrive and their eyes light up when the lid is removed...

And the cookie jar is full.

Here's one of my favorite chocolate-chip oatmeal cookie recipes:

- 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ c flour
- 1 tsp baking soda
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups old-fashioned rolled oats
- 1 cup butter softened
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups packed light brown sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 1 T milk
- 2 cups semisweet chocolate chips

Heat oven to 350. In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, baking soda, baking powder, salt and oats.

In a large bowl, beat the butter and sugar with a mixer until well blended. Beat in the eggs one at a time, then the vanilla and milk. With a spoon, blend in the flour mixture and the chocolate chips.

Drop heaping tablespoons of dough about 3 inches apart on an ungreased baking sheet. Bake for 10 minutes on the middle rack, then rotate each sheet and bake for 2 more minutes until golden. Cool the pans on wire racks for 5 minutes before removing the cookies to racks to cool completely.

FEATURE STORY

Moms on the Porch

I have a friend who had five children, or maybe six, I lost count. She once told me a funny story that made me laugh. She enjoyed her “time away” from the kids so much that even going to the grocery store was a treat. On one occasion, she bought herself a candy bar and a coke, and when she arrived home, she crept onto the front porch, parked behind a big chair and ate her coke and candy bar in peace, alone, in silence, before going into the house where her husband was managing the crew while she was gone. She lingered there as long as she could, before her groceries went bad and her husband wondered where she was.

I’ve recalled that story and shared it many times with my many friends who are young moms, who are super tired from sleepless nights, endless laundry loads, and sticky hands and fingers that have now left their prints all over the house – the one she just wiped and cleaned five minutes ago. The story is meant to make the mom laugh, but clearly there’s a message behind the funny story.

Moms get tired. Whether you’re a mom of one or multiple littles, your life has changed and is no longer yours. It belongs to the ones who barely reach your knees, to the ones who call you “Mommy.”

Moms need breaks. You need them often because without them, you go insane, and you fear you might do something you regret – to the first person who comes near you.

Moms need accolades. Being home or even going back to work and trying to “do it all” isn’t easy, and there’s no “boss” to throw a bonus your way or send you a note of recognition.

Moms require sleep. However, moms don’t get sleep, and the little sleep they get is in small increments, or sandwiched between two whimpering children who are scared of the dark or won’t stay in their room.

Moms feel out of control. The house she so loves and decorates and cleans just doesn’t stay put, it loses its appeal because it’s hardly recognizable anymore, and all the pretties are now all the stickies.

Moms lose their identity. Whatever title she had prior to children is now covered up by the title of Mom. She knows it’s an honorable and high calling, but she also wonders if she’s anything more than a food factory and home manager.

Moms avoid mirrors. The cute outfit, the stylish haircut, and the perfect makeup job are now whatever she can find that’s clean to wear, locks gone wild, and maybe some lip gloss if her daughter hasn’t eaten it already.

The list is endless about moms and their woes. That’s why the mom on the porch story is one that so many moms can identify with. The candy bar that she knows is full of calories and the coke that’s full of sugar is as satisfying as slop to a pig – and she just wants to roll and squirm and squeal with delight while she’s enjoying every bite. She doesn’t require weeks away from

her kids, but she does grab minutes away where she can linger and breathe, and think complete thoughts and feel the cool breeze that is untainted with scents of poop diapers.

The month of May includes Mother's Day, the one day a year that's about you. It's a day when you should lay aside all guilt about what you eat and crave, about the windowsills that haven't been wiped down since the month before child one was born, and about that fitness outfit you bought when you bought the jogging stroller, that sits in the garage. It's a day when you deserve a break to be yourself, find yourself, and feed yourself – instead of them. And it's a day when you need to hear the applause from older moms like me, the ones whose children are grown, and we now observe you who are still in the thick of motherhood.

It's true. They do grow up and leave home before you know it, even though right now it seems they'll never leave your side for even one minute. They do say hurtful things, roll their eyes as soon as they learn to walk, criticize what you wear, frown at what you cook, and leave muddy footprints on what you've swept.

If you're weary in your motherhood because you're tired, overworked and underpaid for the 24/7 job that you do that goes unnoticed by literally everyone you know...make your plan now.

Write out your grocery list, leave him with the kids, get in your car and tell him you'll be back about 30 minutes longer than the actual trip will take you...while you sit and remove the wrapper...pop open the can...as you sit with the other...

moms on the porch.

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

June 2016

TIPS

The Dressing – Handwear – by Marcy Lytle

I guess it's a word I've coined, but I'm calling this month's fashion tip *handwear*. After all, we have headwear, and footwear, so why not *handwear*? Hands are noticed, first thing. If our cuticles are nasty, our nails are chewed off, our skin is flaky and dry, and these two appendages look as though they've been digging in the dirt all day, we need help. We need some fashion ideas on how to dress up our hands – the last place some of us worry about when getting dressed to go out.

However, I've noticed that even in a t-shirt and jeans, with flip flops and a baseball cap, if the hands are dressed, the lady looks polished...and that leads me to the first tip...

Polish. I don't pay for manis and pedis, because I just don't care to spend my money there. I also don't like the time it requires to paint my fingernails, much less the time it takes to let them dry, and then they start to chip in a couple of days. Who has time for that? So what I do is this: I paint my nails – one coat. It dries quickly, and it lasts a couple of days. Then I paint another coat, and I do this a third time a couple days later. This way, multiple coats don't have to dry all at once. I also saw on [The Chew](#) that painting over chipped nails with sparkly nail polish covers a multitude of sins... And don't buy your nail polish at The Dollar Store. Opt for one that doesn't already look old and separated in the bottle, and go for a color you can wear with everything – like a neutral shade or a coral or blue. [Sally Hansen](#) is a good drugstore buy!

Ring it up. A statement ring – just one – can dress up the dullest of hands. There are so many options now, and adding this one item – a colorful, large ring – is akin to adding a necklace at the top of your shirt. A ring just sings! Check out this [crisscross ring](#) from Charming Charlie – that elongates the fingers and dresses them up! Or what about [this one](#), in a pretty pop of color for summer?

Not your ring finger. Once you choose a ring, wear it on your pinky, your pointer, or even your thumb. Dare to be different! There are even rings out there that span [over two fingers](#), and they're really cute! Don't wear a ring on every finger, that's too much. And you can even wear rings up on the top part of your finger between knuckles one and two! Don't opt for rings that turn your skin green. Go for something that says who YOU are, that reflects your personality.

Clean and clean. If you choose to not wear polish, then by all means keep your fingernails clean. And if you chew your nails to the quick in every scary movie you watch, stop chewing, and start snacking on popcorn instead. Unpolished nails can be appealing if they're evenly cut, kept clean, and buffed until smooth. Pop on some clear polish, if you want, and a simple silver band, like the one pictured above – and you've got a very elegant look!

Stack them. These pretty [stacked rings](#) from Macy's look great and dress up your hands for sure! There are stacked rings everywhere, from thin and demure, to silver with Aztec shapes, to bold ones with large stones, etc. You can pick what suits your fancy. And they can be very inexpensive, or you can shop around and find something a bit more pricey; whatever fits your budget! But go for it, dress up those hands!

Nail Art. I'm not into rainbow-colored, animals, neon, etc. stickers on nails, but something simple in a solid design might be pretty on one or two nails on each hand. Check out this very [inexpensive kit](#) from Target with lots of options – 120 stickers! Keep them in your drawer to use when you feel like going out on the town with a bit of an edge...

Smooth and silky. Nothing looks more awful than dry, cracked hands and fingertips. And it feels awful, as well! Opt for a lotion that goes on silky, not watery. This [lemongrass and basil lotion](#) from World Market smells great, is in a pretty tube, and works wonders on dry hands. Buy two, and keep one at home, and one in your purse or car.

Handwear is sometimes the last thing we think about when we're getting dressed, or we look down and realize our nails are in bad shape, and we've got 10 minutes until time to leave! In order to avoid that scenario, carve out a time daily to note your handwear and make it nice. Maybe it's right after your shower at night, while you're eating breakfast in the morning, or while you're watching a show with the family. Keep your rings, and all of your finger and hand accessories together in one place, so that you can search, grab, and decorate at a moment's notice.

Seven 4 You – Make a Musical – by Marcy Lytle

We just saw a musical, one of my favorite things to see. It was called [She Loves Me](#) and it was about a young guy and girl who fell in love through writing (in the 1930's), but had never met. Curiously enough, she went to work at the same store where he worked and in person, they couldn't stand each other. The story was entertaining, but the music just made the story come alive and soar...

So, that got me thinking about how to incorporate singing into the story of our lives, so that we too can soar!

Here are seven ways to consider making your life a musical instead of a boring play...

1. **Sing with the birds.** Some days, I don't even hear the birds singing at all. My mind is too preoccupied with my to-do list or my work. But they're always singing early in the morning, if I choose to listen. This reminds me to sing, first thing in the morning, because a new day has dawned!
2. **Sing with the children.** Kids like to sing. They make up songs. Gideon, my daughter's little boy, sang all the way to the park last night, as we pulled him in a wagon. He sang simple lyrics like, "We're going on an adventure to the park, park, park." That song made us all smile, and we couldn't help but sing along.
3. **Sing for joy.** It's the time when you feel like singing the least, but when the car won't start, the kids get sick, you hit your toe on the side of the sofa, and your dog brings in a dead bird, try singing FOR joy, not because of joy. Singing really does the heart good when the heart is feeling sad.
4. **Sing for your supper.** That's part of the lyrics to a song and you can [listen to it here](#). The sentiment expressed is to do something for someone else and you'll be blessed. So maybe you won't actually "sing" for someone, but you can "sing" for them by encouraging them, giving to them, or praying for them – and you will be blessed in return!
5. **Sing a new song.** Do you always listen to the same style of music, the same old songs, over and over again? Try singing or listening to something new. Are you always singing the blues? Try singing some good news! Make it a habit to put on music that you've never heard before, to broaden your horizons, and lift your mood.
6. **Sing in the shower.** I suppose a lot of people do this, but most of the time I'm in a hurry and my mind is too full to sing. However, singing in the shower, either before bed or first thing in the morning can be the difference between having a good night's sleep and a great day, or restless tossing and turning and a frustrating day.
7. **Sing like a canary.** That phrase refers to someone who tells or sings all they know to the authorities, about a wrongdoing. In other words, they rat on the evildoer so he can be nabbed. When you feel beat up, abused, or the receiver of wrongdoing, try singing out to the Lord and releasing it all to him. And then listen...he might just sing back a song of deliverance to you!

I love to sing, I love to listen to singing, and I love to watch others sing in a musical. It would be so fun to host a party where everyone has to sing their entire conversation with each other. I

wonder how many would come, would participate, or would stay away because of fear of being heard?

Singing is always pleasant to His ears, singing always lifts the soul, and singing is a gift we've all been given – even if we can't carry a tune that's pleasing to the ears – it's always pleasing to the heart.

Selah's Style - Red, White & Blue – by Selah Irwin

I realize it's only June, but the 4th of July is just around the corner!

You only have a month to plan your perfect party apparel.

I am going on the hunt for the most absolutely, positively, undeniably best red, white, and blue ensemble!

First stop, my house. Look what I threw together from my very own closet! This outfit fits the theme amazingly. You might as well start singing The Star Spangled Banner! The Hello Kitty shirt works because it has fireworks and everything Independence Day related. How could you not wear American flag pants on this day? You could just wave me on a flag pole!

Check out the cute selection we found at Target! Don't these outfits just scream patriotic! If you are not stocked up on clothes for the 4th, Target seems to be the place to go!

Justice Store did not have a huge selection, but the shirts they had were super cute! I like that they blended the owl and peace sign into the theme. Very creative of Justice to take a bold leap out of the box!

If you happen to be spending the 4th at a lake, beach, or any other wet environment, Old Navy is a great place to pick up a perfect bathing suit. They even had flag flip flops!

Oshkosh had fabulous sundresses. If you're beat from the heat, sundresses look quite neat! They keep you cool and you don't look like a fool.

Whatever you decide to wear I hope your 4th is filled with fun, laughter and lots and lots of fireworks!

The Fearless Kitchen – Terrific Trios – by Marcy Lytle

Who has time or energy or desire to bake hot desserts in the summer, slaving away over the stove, and heating up the oven which then heats up the kitchen and makes you want to dive into a pool, instead of enjoying the fruits of your labor? I don't! There are lots of ways to enjoy desserts and snacks without going through the heat that we so enjoy in the cooler months, when we bake breads and pies and cakes.

We've come up with six desserts/snacks that are only three ingredients, require no baking at all, and look so pretty on a plate! I bet you have your own combos of three too, so be inspired, turn off the oven, and enjoy your treats, instead of standing on your feet!

Toasted lemon cake, fresh raspberries, and honey: Buy a pound cake or lemon cake already baked at your farmer's market or at your store, slice it and toast it. Top with raspberries and then drizzle honey over the top. Isn't it beautiful? It tastes as good as it looks.

Pretzels, peanut butter, and mini chocolate chips. This is my favorite go-to snack and truth be told, I sometimes just eat this for lunch! Place some peanut butter in a small cup, chocolate chips in another one, and start dipping and rolling. Dip the pretzel in the peanut butter and then roll in the chocolate chips. You know this one is good!

Graham crackers, strawberry cream cheese, and fresh strawberries. This is one of my favorites for summer. It's easy to pack too, for picnics. Just take a graham cracker and spread it with the strawberry cream cheese. Top with sliced strawberries. The kids are sure to love this as well!

Fresh peaches, vanilla ice cream, and toasted almond slices. Peaches are in season here where I live, so I go for the fresh – so full of aroma and flavor. Dish up a scoop of ice cream, top with sliced peaches and your almonds that you toasted in the microwave (watch them carefully so they don't burn!).

Pound cake, lemon curd, and Cool Whip. This looks so pretty layered in individual cups, with pound cake circles on the bottom, lemon curd, then the Cool Whip, layered a couple of times, with a dollop of the white stuff on top. Great for your backyard gathering!

Chocolate cookies, ice cream, and sprinkles. You can really use any cookie. Just soften the ice cream a bit and spread between two cookies all the way to the edge, roll in sprinkles, then wrap and let them freeze again until ice cream is hard.

Tried and True - June Bugs – by Marcy Lytle

Here in Texas where I live, we have these annoying bugs that show up this time of year, called June Bugs. They don't bite but they hang out by porch lights and fly right in when the door is open, or worse – they hitch a ride in on your clothes. They're crunchy and brown and they're disgusting...

There are other summer maladies we all experience and so here are a few tried and true solutions to avoiding them!

Mosquitoes. They carry viruses, they bite and leave a bump, and those bumps itch. And there are all sorts of sprays and lotions out there. The one I like the best comes from Sunshine Farms – it's all natural and smells great and works too! It's called [Skeeter Spray](#).

Heat. We carry chocolate covered peanuts to the theater to eat, and they get melty and gooey by the time we arrive, which is not desirable! The heat causes our cars to become infernos, and it's helpful to keep [a cooler](#) and ice packs handy for toting back and forth to the farmer's market, to the theater, or just to carry cold waters for thirsty stops.

Stressed plants. The pretty blooming flowers we planted in April, the ones that profusely made their appearance in May, are now starting to droop. Some of those flowers are annuals – ones that only bloom for a season and are gone. But there are perennials that bloom all year, even in the heat. One of my favorites is Lantana. Geraniums also weather the heat well. As do [Vincas](#). Just be sure to read the labels on the plants, and place them where indicated. Then set yourself a watering schedule so that your plants are never neglected and stressed.

AC bills. Here in the heat, our summer electric bills are enormous and not fun to pay. My husband used to own his own AC business and he suggests turning the thermostat up, but not off, when we are gone during the day. Turning it off allows everything in the house to absorb heat and the AC actually works harder when we turn it back on. Turning it up allows the house to stay at a relatively medium level of heat and the AC doesn't have to work so hard at night. Also, learning to acclimate ourselves to a higher temp when we are home is a way to save, as well. Use ceiling fans and even box fans to circulate air, cook outside on the grill, or [eat more salads](#) so you don't use your oven!

Cool clothing. No, we do not wear sweaters in the summer in Texas. No, we don't get cold at night because it's still 90 degrees when we go to bed. So how do we stay cool? Loose cotton clothing is the best, but some don't like to buy it because it wrinkles. Consider the skirt. It's so versatile, it's cool, it can be worn for dress up or for a long walk, and it's pretty. That's my goal for this summer – to find some [cute skirts](#) and wear them often.

Cold drinks. There are lots of Sno-Ice trucks in my town, because we have to stay hydrated in the summer. If we don't, we experience heat strokes, and those are dangerous. We carry waters with us, we keep iced drinks in our hands when we sit outdoors with friends, we stop for a smoothie, a Slurpee, or an iced mocha, and we drink, drink, drink. This is the key ingredient to staying on top of the heat. You could even make some at home with this [cute sno-machine!](#)

Feet that breathe. Wearing sandals is a must once summer comes, and there are a million varieties out there. But wearing sandals can wreak havoc on our heels, toes, and all things feet related, while we're trying to keep them cool. Peppermint foot lotions or sprays are great – especially this one by [JR Watkins](#). It has to be applied morning and night, in order to work the best. And guess what? Sandals look great with skirts.

Summer's here, that season for vacations, fun outings, and no school for the kids. But with summer we get the heat and all things that "bug" us as we step out into the sunshine. We have to be diligent to keep ourselves protected and avoid the stresses that come with the heat, so that we can actually enjoy all that summer brings.

Soon enough, it will be another season and another set of bugs...

HOME

Practical Parenting – Mother’s Day Recovery – by Mandy Major

I spent last weekend away from my family.

Not a big deal, until I tell you that last weekend was Mother’s Day, and my 12 year wedding anniversary.

When my husband and I picked May 8th as our wedding date it was really about making sure family could get to our wedding. We didn’t realize we picked Mother’s Day weekend until on day two of our honeymoon, it dawned on us that we’d have to call our mothers! So big planners, we are not.

Four years ago, I surprised my husband Blake with a hunting trip package that just happened to also fall on Mother’s Day/anniversary weekend. The trip sort of came together when our good friends from Michigan decided to join in. So the guys were off on their hunting trip, the kids were with my mom, and we girls headed down to the beach, on Mother’s Day.

Here began a beautiful tradition.

I tell people I’m leaving for Mother’s Day and I get all kinds of looks. Let me just tell you though, going away for Mother’s Day is genius! It is a total break from the norm of life and an added bonus is - the family might actually miss you!

This past weekend before I left I had but one request from my children, “Please have your room clean when I get home.” When I got home and walked up the stairs past their room (yes they share – a whole other story for a later date) it was actually clean! Win for my kids! I was pleasantly surprised and told them so.

Two days later I actually walked into their room and do you know what I found?

Everything that was on the floor was now stuffed into the closet, into random bins, and yes, behind the curtains!

I dumped out every bin and everything that was stuffed into corners and the pile was three feet high! To be completely honest, I lost it. The words, “What the hell” may have even exited my mouth. I called my wonderful husband and asked him if he had inspected the room after the kids “cleaned” and I showed him the pile. He couldn’t hide the laugh in his eyes when I told him I’d found some of the items hidden behind the curtains!

So began the lesson of how to tackle the overwhelming pile of crap. We sat down and made little piles: Legos, doll clothes, human clothes, trash, art supplies, and pens. The little piles were then put into their correct home and slowly the huge pile got smaller.

Back to the weekend...

While I was with my girlfriends we floated the Brazos River, and were the only people on it. The guy who dropped us off told us that the exit sign had been washed away in the last flood. He then gave us directions on when and where to exit... something about 20 minutes past the pipe and there would be a nice beach on the right, and something about private property signs.

I don't know how the rest of the world floats rivers, but in Texas we float with an ice chest, usually full of beer. It being Mother's Day weekend and no responsibilities, we of course had to have the whole Texas river floating experience!

Yes, there was beer, the river, no phones, and no exit sign.

We passed "the pipe" and then realized we'd have to exit the river soon (in 20 minutes, with no clock!) Up ahead we spotted "private property" signs and what could be considered to be a beach. I mean, there was sand. It was across the river and we frantically paddled over to it. Then across the river I saw a much "nicer" beach with no private property signs. My friends listened to me, (because I'm always right of course.) Yes, we were totally lost and ended up miles from where we should have gotten out – at the private property beach – because I didn't listen to my friends and at least check out the "beach" for a road.

Back to the pile...

As I was helping my kids actually clean their room the "correct" way, I realized so often that the "pile" is our lives. It seems so much easier to just to stuff all of our junk, instead of sorting it out and throwing away the things that don't add to our lives.

If I had just listened to my friends that day on the river instead of insisting I was right (an issue of junk my friends dug out this past weekend) we would have had a totally awesome day. Instead, we had to hike up to a road lugging our tubes and ice chest, and then climb a fence to get help!

So as I'm teaching my kids to actually organize their room, I am teaching myself to examine the corners of junk I have been stuffing too...as we uncover, discover, and recover from Mother's Day weekend...

I Don't Do Teens – The Father's Pursuit – by Marcy Lytle

It's June, it's Father's Day, and we will honor, love and tell our dads how much we love them by showering them with gifts, visits, and kind words. But what about our kids who don't have a father present in their lives, or our kids who have fathers but they have no relationship, or kids who hate their fathers because of abuse or neglect? We all know teens that fit into one of these categories, and they might be our own children. Divorce happens, fathers leave, fathers who are wounded don't father well, and fathers sometimes hurt their children.

It's the norm more than the exception, unfortunately.

So what's a parent to do with our teens in the month of June, when Father's Day comes around, and there are no fatherly activities of joy to be had?

We point them to the pursuit.

Psalm 23 says goodness and mercy will follow us, but it actually means they will chase us down and capture us. That's the kind of love the Father has for all of us, the kind that's like a shepherd that leaves the 99 sheep to go search for the one who's missing.

Sometimes it's hard for all of us on Father's Day, especially if we all have wounds from our earthly father. But here are some truths for you, as the parent, to grab hold of and share with your teens, as the kids who don't know what to do on Sunday, June 19.

He first loved us. He created us in His image to enjoy His presence and His abundance, and He loves us – His creation – and we are made beautifully and perfect in every way. (Ps 139:13)

He still loves us. It doesn't matter what we've done, how we've acted or felt, or who we've become, His love never changes when we fail or don't measure up to someone else's standards. (Ps 136:1,2)

He will always love us. He will never leave us or remove his love that pursues us. He's always after us, always for us, and always wants to hold us next to his chest and love us. His love is eternal. (I Chronicles 16:34)

His love covers all. When we mess up, his love covers and removes and never remembers again. He doesn't harbor anger, punish us until we shape up, or condemn us for our mistakes. He covers us with grace and mercy. It's who he is. (I Peter 4:8)

His love is pure. He doesn't love us to get something out of us that we don't want to give, or to use us for his pleasure and then dump us on the side of the road. He is holy, pure, amazing, and the definition of love. We can trust in his undeniable love for us – no strings attached – all we have to do is believe. (I John 4:16)

His love is complete. We can search all of our lives for satisfaction, acceptance, worth, and purpose, and we won't find it outside of his love. His love completes us as we walk with him and enjoy him as our Father who provides all good gifts for us to enjoy. (Romans 5:8)

Grab hold of this concept of the Father's pursuit this month, for yourself, and for your teens. Then sit down and share it with them, wiggle around in its truth, and laugh with joy at the sheer amazement of it all.

And when Father's Day rolls around, enjoy Him. He sure enjoys you.

The Family Practice – Lovers of Stories – by Rachel Toalson

The house was practically shaking on its foundation.

And it's not so unusual in a house like mine, with so many boys, but this was different. This was story time. This was sit-quiet-and-listen-to-me-read time.

So, of course, with the anger rising in the back of my throat, I gritted my teeth and bit out words: "Sit down. Be quiet. Or it's early lights out."

And it worked, because boys can tell when their mama is getting overwhelmed, and every now and then, they actually think it prudent to do what I say to avoid the mama meltdown. It lasted about seven minutes, and then a boy was jumping off the chaise, and another one was standing on his head and two more were wrestling in the middle of our library floor.

Before I had children, I knew that we would have an important time in our house where we all sat together and read stories. I knew, because my mom was a librarian, and I had grown up on stories. I have fond memories of her reading books to my sister and brother and I, and I can point back to every book that shaped my life significantly. I love stories because I was exposed to them as a kid. I knew I wanted the same for my boys.

So when the first was just a baby, we incorporated our story time, which included an extended read-aloud time, when, even at six months, we read chapter books to our son. We continued the practice even as we added one boy after another.

I used to expect that my children would sit still and quietly through the 10 minutes of chapter book read-aloud time and the 10 additional minutes of Silent Reading time. And yet, without fail, the boys would step out of the bath and begin their wild rumpus. I'd read still, practically shouting over the activity. I started thinking maybe there wasn't even a point, because the boys were doing all their own things, anyway.

But then, one night, my 6-year-old was twirling in circles until he fell down, and I read a passage about a dog getting shot in the side of the face, and he gasped. I thought maybe he'd hurt himself, but then he looked at me with wide eyes and said, "Is the dog going to die?"

He was listening.

So maybe he was twirling in circles until he lost his balance and fell.

He was listening.

Story time didn't look like I expected it to look. But it didn't mean that they weren't getting exactly what they needed from those stories.

See, kids can't often do what we expect them to do, because they're kids. They don't have the

skills we have as adults, at least not yet. They don't have the ability to sit still for a whole ten minutes, because their bodies are so full of energy that their state of rest looks like my state of activity.

So what if they're moving while we're doing our reading aloud time? So what if they're fidgeting in their seats and reading out loud to themselves during our Silent Reading time? So what if it doesn't look exactly the way I think it should look? We're still having family time gathered around the magical interior of a book.

Reading aloud to our children has great benefits. It introduces them to words. It sets them up to be lifelong lovers of story. It teaches them about worlds that are different from their own.

And most of all, it fosters connection. We get to share a story and discuss it and feel, together, the emotions it pulls from the depths of our hearts. We get to process through plot lines and consider themes and talk about our favorite characters. We get to learn more about empathy and hope and struggle and perseverance and love and truth. This connection cannot be underestimated.

So even though it doesn't look like the quiet reading time I always thought stories would accomplish in my house, we press on, because boys are listening and connection is assured.

Some ways to read more as a family:

1. **Think of different times you can incorporate reading time into your family time.** I read to my boys while they're taking a bath, in addition to the formal story time we have as a family. I read to them at lunch. Sometimes we linger over a story after dinner is finished.

2. **Make reading fun.** Use voices (Don't worry. You'll get better with practice). Let kids read character voices. One of my kids' favorite series to read with me is [Mo Willems's Elephant & Piggie](#), because they can always read one of the voices (great practice for early readers!).

3. **Use audio books.** Some of our favorite trips are ones where we've listened to a story together. We always have an audio book at the ready for any down times or quick trips to the grocery store, or when I'm cooking dinner. Story captivates.

And, eventually (when they're maybe 8 or so), it calms.

Everything Home – Covenant on Canvas – by Mikaela Cain

I love walking into our bedroom and enjoying our recent home! It's a collection of three canvas frames, a wedding picture and both of our vows on either side that reposes above our bed. I've been dreaming about getting our vows on the wall since we were engaged, when I saw the idea on Pinterest. This year, we agreed to forgo Christmas presents to each other in lieu of getting these slightly expensive home decorations. The canvases were totally worth it. We were really pleased with the outcome. The three canvas set gives us a visual reminder of our covenant and one of our favorite days together.

We decided to get the vows and started researching the different shops that do work like what we were looking for. We found several shops on Etsy (and other places) with slightly different styles. We liked some of the trendier artwork, such as white-washed wooden boards with burned words, and I liked colorful calligraphy (Grant, not so much). But, at the end of the day, what sold us on [Red Barn Canvas](#) was her simple, classic but still fun print work. We want the canvases to last. Our vows are here to stay as long as our marriage—as long as we both shall live! We felt that her work could be tailored pretty easily, and her style will—hopefully—pass the test of time. If (can I say “when?”) bare canvases go out of style, we can simply take them off of their wooden frames and mount them into whatever style frames we like at the time.

We also appreciated the range of colors and styles that she offered. Kristy Hodge, the owner of Red Barn Canvas, worked with us to find the perfect hue of blue. She sent us the vows on various colors, several times, until we landed on dusty navy. She replied promptly and graciously. We highly recommend working with her if you're looking for customizable canvas art and text.

The collection transformed our bedroom. Now, of course, I want to change the rest of the room to match the style and color change. I'm picturing a new headboard, bed-spread and more! I already snagged some new curtains, but will have to wait for the rest!

It wasn't difficult to decide to put the art above our bed. The bed is the place of rest, intimacy and awakening. It's wonderful to remember the minute details of our covenant during these times. Although we've only had the canvases up for a week now, I've already been caught off guard several times remembering a phrase in his or a word in mine. We've broken several of our vows already—only three and a half years in—but that's all the more reason to have them up where we can see them. God ordered the Israelites to keep holidays and symbols around their houses, camps and country—when they were established as a kingdom. This was so much more than just to celebrate; it was to remember. God knows we humans forget stuff! The vows on canvas are so much more than a beautiful addition to our home. They are a reminder of our promises to each other and to God.

I look forward to finding more ways to grace our walls with visual reminders of promises, encounters, dreams and calling. The more we keep who we want to be before us, the easier it will be to live out of who we say and want to be. The wedding picture reminds us of one of our favorite days together (and, really, in both of our lives!). Keeping the high moments in front of us invites constant celebration and thanksgiving. It reminds us of our first love, which is helpful

when we're feeling frustrated, or struggling, and is warm and comforting when we're feeling connected and enjoying one another.

The canvases are a visual reminder of our promises, a celebration of our joyful times and a standard to move toward. The fact that Red Barn Canvas company did such a great job making them beautiful and well suited to our taste and style, well, that's is just a wonderful additional blessing.

A Night to Remember – The Good Answers – by Marcy Lytle

Every good gift comes from the Father above. Our kids need to know this truth. It's found in [James 1:17](#). They need to know that their heavenly Father is a provider of all things good, even when they are disappointed or have to wait, or never get what they want. They have to learn, as they mature, that what they want is not always best, but what He desires for them is always better than the best –it's downright good!

This month's family devo is for kids who are a bit older, kids who have more questions than answers, and a family who needs reassurance that God is good.

Preparation: *This devotion asks questions and calls for discussion among the family. Good verbal discussion and then good verbal prayer at the end. Have a delicious dessert prepared ahead of time for all to enjoy together, when the devotion is over.*

Read the following situations and ask the kids to think about reasons why God might not have answered these prayers the way the kids wanted them to be answered.

Sam prayed to win his baseball game, and he prayed that he would get a hit and get on base, and score a run. However, Sam didn't get a hit, and his team lost. Sam was mad at God.

Mariah prayed for her mom to say yes when she asked if she could spend the night at the sleepover coming up, but her mom said no. Mariah decided not to pray to God anymore, because he never answered her anyway.

Jeremy prayed with his parents for the floods in a nearby town to stop, for their friend's house to be spared, but the rains came in and their friends lost everything. Jeremy asked his parents why God "let" the house get ruined, and his parents had no answer.

Anna prayed and wished and hoped that her daddy and mommy wouldn't divorce, but they did. And she doesn't get to see her daddy any more. She thinks God must be mad at her and her family for something, but He won't tell them what they did.

Sometimes we understand later, why God answered the way he did. Other times, we just have to trust Him that he knows best, and rest in that truth. Let's look at each of the prayers above:

What if another boy named Matt, who played on the opposing team, prayed the same prayer Sam did? How should God choose whose prayer to answer, or does God even care about baseball games? *(God cares about everything that concerns us, but he answers the best way to make us more like Him. Every time Sam won a game, he was proud and rude to his brothers and sisters, demanding they serve him because he won.)*

What if Mariah's mom knew that at the sleepover there was going to be activities that would be harmful to Mariah, and she said no because she was keeping her from being hurt? *(Mariah may not understand now, but maybe later her Mom can explain to her why she said no.)*

What if Jeremy's friends needed to know the power of friendship, of the neighborhood coming together to restore their home, to build back all that was lost? What if that was the answer, and

not prohibiting the flood? Would God be good, then? (*God is always good, and works everything together for good, even if we don't understand His ways.*)

What if Anna's prayers for her daddy WERE heard and God was at work in her daddy's heart, but Anna just couldn't see it right now? Is God big enough to heal Anna's hurting heart and at the same time pursue Anna's angry dad who left? (*God works on the heart, and each person has to respond to his voice. Sometimes people don't, and kids and families suffer. But God restores the suffering back to joy, when we allow him to heal our hurts.*)

There are times when we tell our little brother "No!" when he's about to eat a toy, and it's because we love him and don't want him to choke. Our little brother doesn't understand at all, and he thinks we're being mean, but we're actually saving his life.

We have to trust in the truth that God's answers are always good, the best, and will help us if we just relax and trust him, no matter what answer he gives to our requests. We are not perfect, we cannot see the future, and we don't always want what is best...but He is perfect, he sees all, and he always gives his best.

He gave his Son. That was his best. So he freely gives all good things to those who believe.

Life As We Know It - This Too Shall Pass – by Erica Simmons

*Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way,
consider it an opportunity for great joy.*

James 1:2

It's Friday, Mother's Day weekend, and although I have left work after a long day of state testing materials intake, I get a call to join the gang at Mesa Rosa Restaurant. I am headed out when I make a discovery that changes it ALL. For almost a year, Jordan has been playing a game of deceit with me that is challenging the core foundation of so many things in my life. In response to my son, I wrote him the following letter.

Jordan,

You and your brother have provided me with a source of strength from the moment I found out I was going to have you. When I was faced with the hard choices, I only had to think of you two and know what the decision had to be. It had to be that I honor God, because what I want to leave to you, and for you both, is a legacy of loving God.

Some of the choices I was faced with, the world or the law said were okay, but in 1 Corinthians 10:23 it says, "I am allowed to do anything ---, but not everything is good for me." It says, "I am allowed to do anything but not everything is beneficial."

The Bible was written so many years ago that if specific instruction was given for every question [the world has] it would be too big, but He gives us instruction.

What my son did is not nearly as big as the way he handled it. He made a stupid teenage choice and I now am faced with a choice of my own. Three days of processing, and it all boils down to this: Do I believe what it says in James 1:2 enough to DO IT? Do I trust my Heavenly Father's words in not just James, but throughout His word?

Rabbi, who sinned? Was it this man or his parents that he was born blind?

Neither. He was born blind so that our Father in heaven can be glorified.

So the questions thrown at me at me about whose fault is it that we are where we are do not matter. What matters is that we both handle it in a way that our Father in heaven gets glorified.

The good news is He saw this coming. And because He is so faithful, He has been preparing me. He started years ago in so many ways, leading me to the right church home, to the right people in my life, to the right classes and carrying me through so many other hard times before.

I look back almost four years ago when our family went through THE toughest time we have ever had.

I look at me now, and I see the growth that has occurred in my life, as a Christian and as a parent, because of and through Him.

I now stand at this crossroad this day. Because before this moment I had not made a choice, I CHOOSE now to count this ALL joy...because I know of His faithfulness.

My life-as-I-know-it revelation?

I know this too shall pass.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core – Turn Around – by Marcy Lytle

You're sitting on a cold hard bench

Staring at a water wall that's dry

Nothing's flowing

Nothing's showing

It used to be so pretty, so beautiful

To watch the water flow

To hear the water fall

The sadness starts to cover you

As you realize there's a drought

Water's now a luxury

Maybe it's not for everyone

You're sitting on a cold hard bench

Staring at a water wall that's dry

You want to cry

You want to try

To make the water flow again

And then you hear a voice

It's behind you

It knows your name

It asks you,

"Won't you turn around?"

At first you think of leaving

The cold hard bench is unsettling

The water wall is dead

But you turn around instead.

You gasp

Your eyes widen

Your heart leaps

Your legs shake

What you see behind you is a river

It's flowing

It's running

It's sounding

It's calling

Your legs strengthen as you stand

You walk toward the water flow

Little did you know

It was behind you all the time

While you sat

Upon the cold hard bench

Facing the wrong way...

Under the Influence - Worry Darts – by Marcy Lytle

I worry about losing the ones I love, and maybe all moms worry about that, I don't know. But I don't ever worry about dying in a plane crash, it's just not a concern I have at all. However, others are super stressed out over flying and can barely breathe. I do worry about finances and how much things cost, and about our future, and how we are going to save for this or that. Other friends I have never give a thought to finances; they feel completely secure and safe.

I'm convinced that there are little worry darts that are aimed right at our weaknesses, where we are most vulnerable, and so that's where they land. Maybe we're weak and weary from just experiencing a car wreck, so then for the next several months or even years we are worried and afraid to get behind a wheel or ride in a car. It might be that we've just failed miserably as a parent and we're worried that our kids are going to grow up to be monsters instead of princes.

Whenever we fail, wherever we experience loss, whoever inflicts pain – all of these things – create little round targets over our chests with a huge bullseye in the middle that says, "Throw here. Aim and hit."

The Bible says worrying does nothing to accomplish any sort of peace at all. If we worry about our life, we can't add an [hour by worrying](#). In fact, worrying detracts from our life and causes us all sorts of ills.

Worry darts come in the form of thoughts, mostly. Our minds are usually so focused on our lives here and not on what's in our future there, that we are hit over and over again with "what-if" daggers. And those hits leave little holes that soon blend into one big gaping chasm of darkness.

Here's what I mean:

- When I haven't filled my thoughts with truth, there are gaping holes for lies to settle in.
- When I haven't switched my thoughts from fear to faith, by trusting in His presence, darts start to sting.
- When I haven't closed the door to shame and self-pity, darts come flying inside.
- When I haven't chosen to believe in a good God, darts of questioning arrive with a deep thrust.
- When I haven't given thanks but instead have grumbled, I've invited all colors of darts to land and stay.

Remember those stories of the knife thrower who gets the girl to stand across the room so he can practice throwing his knives, to prove that he has perfect aim? What a crock, right? Who, in their right mind, would stand in the firing line of any kind of destructive force aimed right at them?

Yet, that's what we do when we worry. We stand across the room and we invite the thrower in, we even load him with darts, and we let him take aim.

If we're covered in armor like truth, faith, and knowledge of who God is, the thrower just leaves, because he knows he can't penetrate. But if we're standing vulnerable and afraid, he aims, he fires and he strikes.

And there we stand, bleeding, crumpled into a heap, hoping for someone to come and extract the arrows, pull out the darts, or carefully remove the knives.

I often succumb to worry, I sometimes open the door to the thrower, and I even look him in the eye, afraid of all that's loaded in his arsenal.

The only way we can avoid the worry darts is to stand covered, shut the door, and state the truth.

What is the truth?

Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak, but He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.

Say it three times. Sing it over and over. Settle in your heart the truth of that little song.

And let the worry darts fall to the ground, short of their target.

Healthy Habits - Staying Hydrated...All Over – by Marcy Lytle

We all hear that we're to drink more water, because water is necessary for all sorts of health benefits, and keeping our bodies hydrated is one of those givens of life. However, when summer arrives we find ourselves constantly thirsty...all over.

My mom taught me early on to moisturize...moisturize. She's now 88 years old and her skin is so pretty and smooth. I wonder if it's partly due to her keeping it hydrated.

Let's start with the face. Morning and night, we need a good moisturizer to keep our skin supple and smooth. Moisturizer in the morning provides a layer of protection between your skin and your makeup, and it helps your face brace for the wind and the sun. Moisturizer at night is great because you've just washed your skin and it feels taut and dry. So applying a thin film of moisture settles in overnight, causing your skin to respond with a smile. My favorites are by [Oil of Olay](#) for morning and night, but look for one that fits your age, your skin type (oily or dry), and your budget.

The hands need help. From cuticles, to palms, to fingers, our hands cry out for hydration. The hands seem to be the last thing we remember when getting ready to leave. We get in the car and realize that our hands hurt, they're itching, and they look pasty! We forgot the lotion! I like to keep a tube of hand lotion in the car (heat can make it smell horrible so replace it often) or in my purse, so that it's available when I finally do remember. I love a hand lotion that includes the [scent of almond!](#)

Arms and legs are a must! These two extremities are usually bare in the warm months, and they definitely need to stay hydrated so that they don't flake, itch, and drive us nuts. I love a good moisturizer with a pigment of color to help smooth out the veins, the scars, the nicks, the freckles, etc. Some go for tanning booths or sun rays, but both of those are dangerous in too much quantity. Right after the morning shower is a good time to slather on the moisturizer that your skin will drink like a thirsty dog after a romp in the park. Be sure to remember your elbows, too! My favorite all over lotion (and it smells nice) is by [Jergens.](#)

Feet need peppermint. Seriously, nothing feels better in the morning and evening than a spray of peppermint foot spray. It's not moisturizer per se, but it's a fresh drink of heaven. Before you spray, moisturize your feet, rubbing lotion into your cuticles, around on your heels, and all over your feet. Let it dry, and then spray on the [peppermint.](#) You'll feel like walking for miles.

The heels are the worst. Summertime, when sandals expose our heels, create a whole set of hydration issues that are unlike anywhere else on our bodies! Cracked heels are just ugly! And if we're not careful, we'll end up with cracks that just plain hurt because they run so deep! I've tried lots of different lotions and none are "miracle cures." What works the best is consistency. [Moisturize](#) in the morning, as you think of it (or see your heels!) during the day, and again before bedtime.

Let's face it (no pun intended.) Our skin needs help in the heated summer months. Look for lotions and creams that aren't watery, fit within your budget, smell nice, and by all means –

work. Set them by the tub or the bed, or wherever you'll see them, and use them routinely so that your body will be hydrated, healthy, and happy.

Beauty for Ashes - Not So Humble – by Pam Charro

My daughter asked me this morning, “What is the definition of humble?”

I answered her, “Being humble means you agree with God about who you are. You don't think too highly of yourself or too lowly of yourself. What he says about you is true and you accept it.”

My own answer showed me how far I have to go in terms of becoming a humble person.

I don't mean to think that I feel the world will fall apart without me. But it's amazing, even to me, how much sleep I can lose wondering if there was anything I forgot the day before or how weird my voice sounded to that person when I made that comment.

I take my share of responsibility very seriously, and I know that's a good thing. But there's a huge difference between being responsible and obsessing over every move I make or don't make.

I realized yesterday that I was being particularly hard on myself about a situation, so I said out loud (in the car, with no *other ears around so no one thought I was crazy*),

*Pam, you are a jewel and a good friend and this world is better with you in it.
So stop thinking you have to be perfect in order to be accepted.
Look at all of the people you cherish - none of them are perfect.*

It seemed to really help me get a more objective view of myself.

And it felt good to affirm that I am okay.

I am not so humble ... *yet*.

But I do know that trusting God means knowing that if I try my best, it's okay.

Even if I fall short - He will make it good enough.

Created for Life - “Rest,” You Say? – by Ginny Hurley

*And He said to them, “Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.”
For there were many coming and going and they did not even have time to eat.*

Mark 6:31

This verse jumped off the page at me one morning as I was trying quietly to enjoy time with the Lord before school. I so love time alone to hear His voice and actually stop to listen to what He is speaking. I know He is listening and I believe with every ounce of my being that He is speaking all the time. The waiting and listening problem is on my end...

When the verse from Mark 6 became highlighted in my spirit, a warrior woman arose to the call. Me!

What did that just say?

My heart skipped a beat. “There were many coming and going and they did not even have time to eat.” What? That sounds like my life! Coming and going, running with food in my hand, and checking the time all through my day!

As I meditated on this verse, the Lord not only spoke, but He was loud and clear!

“Come aside!”

*Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you;
not as the world gives do I give to you.
Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*
John 14:27

My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.
Exodus 33:14

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
Matthew 11:28

*Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me,
for I am gentle and lowly in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.*
Matthew 11:29

I love that word, *gentle*! It makes the idea of rest even more inviting. Just thinking about a gentle, calm, and restful moment sustains my day and keeps my heart pure and hopeful.

My mom just came home and has entered the hospice time of her life. As we were visiting, she kept asking why I work and why I can't just stay home like she did. Her mom didn't work away from home and none of her friends did, either. They worked hard at home, especially her mom, but the concept of constant pressure to go, go, go, was not even in their grid just a few decades ago. People sat at tables for meals, knew all the neighbors, and considered dark to be time for bed. Who knew the time would come

when we wait two and a half hours at the DMV, or sit on hold for an hour while talking to an automated voice?

It actually made me angry that I had fallen for such robbery of my time, and that I had allowed myself to be a victim of such nonsense. *The enemy is a liar!* No one can rob me, and nothing can take my freedom without my permission! I realized I had placed myself under these things, instead of over the circumstances.

I do have to work. I do have to take care of responsibilities, but my heart and mind can be in PERFECT PEACE no matter what. He is WITH me. I don't leave Him home with my quiet time. He carries me through each moment, and stays with me.

The Lord's rest is putting aside the trappings invented in my mind. Oh, there is physical rest, but I believe He speaks of rest in mind, soul, and spirit.

*There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.
For he who has entered His rest has himself also
ceased from his works as God did from his.
Hebrews 4:9*

A WARRIOR RESTS FROM BATTLE
AND GATHERS THE SPOILS
FROM ALL OF HER ENEMIES!

PEACE, BE STILL!

MARRIAGE

In This Together – Change of Pace – by Sarah Stennett

Summertime is upon us. The kids are out of school, the weather is nice and hot, and the rhythm of life seems to slow down ever so slightly for these brief ten weeks. It's the time of year when even the simplest conversations lead to,

“So, are you taking any trips this summer?”

The answer for some is quite simple – nope, work is too crazy to get away. Still for others, there may be obligatory trips to see family sprinkled throughout the calendar, and these plans tend to be delivered with every bit as much enthusiasm as one would discuss a visit to the dentist. But, if you're like me, you've got a getaway on the horizon, a vacation you've been saving up for and planning since your trip last summer. The grandeur of vacation doesn't usually matter as much as the time and purpose of this getaway.

Okay, I guess I should pause right here. Vacations can seem elusive. But in order to see our family and marriage grow, they may be more vital than we credit them. While discussing our family vacation plans this year, my husband shared a nugget of wisdom recently passed to him. He said that **a change of pace and place are what we need to change our perspective.** When operating within the same jobs, same house, same routines, and same situations, our growth is often stunted. However, carving out time and money to steal away with our most loved ones is a catalyst to both personal and relational growth. I know that for us, those vacations are usually the best we can do on a shoestring budget often involving cashing in airline points or packing our own foods for both the road trip and the theme park when taking kids to Disneyland for two days. In this season of our lives, we just acknowledge that luxury isn't going to happen but we so desire to make memories that we make the most of what we do have.

There are two main types of vacations: a vacation with your spouse or a family vacation.

VACATIONS WITH YOUR SPOUSE

Getting away with your husband one night a year on your anniversary is wonderful and healthy, but what if you were to expand that to three, five, or even seven days? What would that do for you? For your marriage? For your family?

Last year, my sister-in-law and her husband asked for time off work to go on a vacation in celebration of their 12th anniversary. After lining up childcare for their three kids, they discovered that their tax refund was a lot less than they had anticipated so they thought they should cancel their trip altogether. After a little discussion, and some creativity, they decided to go ahead and take a trip but to do an old-fashioned road trip to the Grand Canyon instead, bringing along camping gear for lodging and simple road trip snacks. When they got back, they were more connected and in love than they had been in years.

It turns out that car time is a great time to:

- talk about life and dreams
- listen to audiobooks together (marriage-focused or fun reads, whatever)
- crank up 90s Rock really loud and scream along

And exploring the canyon together was invigorating. This trip felt more like one they would've taken as poor newlyweds in their early 20's, so embracing that in their mid-30's WITHOUT kids was almost like being a kid again.

I do need to take a minute to address the concern that weighs heavily on many of us. What about the kids? Who will watch them while we are gone? Although the simple solution is your parents, sometimes they work full time jobs, or are unable or unwilling to take them, for whatever reason. This is where we come to fully understand the "It takes a village" adage. Who are your people? Where have you built community? Pray that the Lord places people in the life of your family who are not only able, but also willing to help with the kids.

VACATIONS WITH YOUR FAMILY

And then there's the family vacation. Sometimes a classic road trip to Mount Rushmore or Yellowstone is more your style (or budget) than a Disney Cruise. What's the purpose? To relax and rekindle romance with your husband? I hope not. Wrong vacation! Family trips (especially with multiple kids under the age of 6) require lots and lots of planning and preparation in advance and even more grace in the moment. My husband and I have taken simple trips to his family cabin for a week with the kids as well as road trips to California to visit Disneyland and the beach. When we only had two kids, ages 2 ½ and 3 months, we even took a trip where we flew to Charlotte and rented a car to drive a large loop down to Florida and back, stopping to see the sights, visiting friends and family, and hitting up the beach, and Disney, too. We have yet to take a big vacation with all four kids, since last summer we skipped vacation in favor of making a fun road trip out of our cross-country move.

Each of these trips has proven to fulfill its purpose of:

- changing the pace and place of our family life
- giving us fresh perspective, together
- making awesome memories, of course

WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT?

How do we prioritize vacation time and money allotment between a kid-free trip and a family vacation? Well, we pray about it. Seriously, we do.

I believe that even the small things matter to God. And there is certain wisdom that comes with the season you are in, as a family. When the kids are really small, the best money spent is likely just the two of you, on a hassle-free romance-encouraging getaway for at least three days. The kids are too small to remember and your life is already SO full. As they get older, family vacations get easier and the kids value the experiences much more. Ideally, my husband and I would take a brief and modestly priced getaway in the same calendar year that we take the kids on a longer, more elaborate trip. And then, the next year we would flip it: shorter and simpler getaway with the kids and longer, more elaborate trips without them.

I believe that setting up this routine helps my kids see what our values are.

They know that our marriage and time with one another is important to us.

They know our family is important, and at the center of our family is our marriage.

Date Night Fun – All about that Shade – by Marcy Lytle

Temps are rising where I live, and I'm guessing they are where you live, as well. My favorite thing to do is eat outside, and the days to do that are limited now, as 90 degrees is our daily friend. However, date nights don't have to suffer due to the heat. We can find "shade" in lots of ways, when the sun is shining and hot, or when the moon is out and bright.

This month's ideas include all kinds of shade that bring us a respite from the heat of the day, or the heat of the moment...

1. **New shades for two.** When's the last time you bought new shades? On this date, make a trip to [the dollar store](#) and purchase a new pair of sunglasses each, for an afternoon out in the sunshine. While you're there, pick out a greeting card for each other, and then spend \$4 each for small gifts for the evening (a game, a puzzle, a candle, etc.) Now you've spent \$12 total. Drive through town using your 10 items and wearing your cool shades, stopping for ice cream at the end of it all.
2. **Shades of color.** Make a date plan to enjoy all things colorful. Divvy up four colors each. If you have, for example, blue, red, white, and yellow, you could both lie on a blanket and look at the blue sky and find cloud shapes, sip on [cherry limeades](#) at Sonic for red, enjoy some popcorn for white, and pick a roadside flower for yellow. Be sure to snap photos at each colorful stop!
3. **In between the lines.** Pencil shading can be so fun, when you do it together. The [adult coloring books](#) are everywhere! Or print out your own and clip them on a board, purchase some pencils, and start shading in! Pick a cool spot in the shade, in a park, where you also enjoy a picnic supper spread out on a blanket!
4. **Shady story.** This can be a fun date night in, where you watch a movie about something "shady," like a good crime drama. [Bonnie and Clyde](#), the original showing with Beatty and Dunaway, is a good one! Both of you can don a vintage hat, pop some corn, and settle in for a fun night together enjoying the film. [Here's a recipe](#) for a Bonnie & Clyde dessert!
5. **Under the umbrella.** If it's raining, or if the sun is shining high, take your umbrella with you on this date. Either walk in the rain or in the sun, covered by the umbrella as you hold it together. An umbrella protects from too much wet or too much heat. As you walk, talk about ways that you are "covered" or ways that you can cover others with your love. Consider stopping to purchase and read this book [The Umbrella](#), over a cup of coffee and pastries, and then play a game – covered in fun – as you end the evening.

The heat might be on outside, but you can always bring a bit of shade to the table, over his head, or where you sit together on your nights out for dates. Be creative, always. Enjoy each other's company, every time. And cover each other with love, forever.

Enjoy!

After 30 Years - The Better Choice – by Marcy Lytle

Disdain is a word, an attitude, an evil, that should never be allowed to enter a marriage, no matter how short or how long we've been married or how cool or how disgusting we think our husbands to be. Disdain means "feeling that someone is unworthy of consideration." And no human being, especially our husbands, deserves that look we wives can all give at times...the disdainful eye. At least a disdainful eye is just one part of our body, but when that attitude slips down into our hearts, we're headed for disaster.

It happens to the newlyweds, it happens after that 10 year anniversary, and it happens even after 30 years, when we look at him and see something "other" than who he is.

Here's what I'm talking about:

We've asked him for years to take care of this, or do that, and he hasn't seen fit to acquiesce to our demands and so we've **shut him out of our affection** – all because he hasn't performed to our standards – much like a dog trainer in a circus.

We've been stressed, overworked, underpaid, and frankly quite tired of raising his kids, cooking his meals, and cleaning his house, and we've blamed him for every wrinkle, every bulge, and every heartache and...for not rescuing us and whisking us away on a jet from time to time – so we **say "forget you"** and we find our pleasure elsewhere.

He arrives home from work and we feel jealous that he got to get away all day, earn a paycheck, and be awarded a bonus, and enjoy lunch out with friends. However, we've barely breathed or had a moment to sit, because kids or demands or aging parents have pulled us into depression – so we **refuse to even listen** to his needs because ours are so great.

He's not as cute as he used to be, certainly not as fit, he eats too much of the wrong thing, and he's losing his physical appeal, while we're still exercising, visiting the Farmer's Market, trying to improve our looks. So we find ourselves avoiding his caresses, **looking the other way** when he tries to kiss us, or worst of all – looking at that man over there and comparing our husbands to him.

Disdain is one of those attitudes that carries with it a backpack of years of disappointment, disgust, and demands. In other words, disdain isn't something that just happens, it settles in over time, and wiggles its way into our eyes, our lips, our hearts, our body language, and eventually separates everything that joined us together as a couple. It then builds a wall between us, one that's covered in ugly graffiti of words that "mark" our husbands as unfit, lazy, uninteresting, and ugly. The graffiti of labels we've called him covers that wall and before long, that wall separates us for good.

The best antidote for the evil of disdain is to nip it in the bud when it shows its ugly head, much like the Whack a Mole game that kids play. When ugly thoughts pop up (and they will), we take our mallet of commitment, truth, and love and whack them down right away. When stress and tiredness pop up next (and they will), we whack them both with purposeful times of rest and realizing we can't do it all. When depression over circumstances starts to surface (and it will),

we whack it back with the truth of our calling, our purpose, and focus on the One from whom all blessings flow (HIM).

I've succumbed to disdain many times, and I don't like myself or my husband when I do. It's a backpack I realize I'm carrying that's heavy with lots of pre-packed notions I should have discarded and left behind. And once I realize it – I **unload them one by one** – and lay the pack down. I **erase the graffiti of labels** and words I've written on the wall I now built, and brick by brick it comes tumbling down. I **humble myself at the foot of the cross** – that place where he and I both stand together – and I look at my own self, my own shortcomings, my own blessings and then it happens...

Disdain is gone. It's whacked down. I've turned off the game, and removed the batteries once again, so that the game is over.

It's really a choice we have to make.

We can live in disdain in our marriages and be unhappy or live in freedom to love him, because of the freedom we've been given to love and be loved.

I've done both.

And the latter choice is the better one.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – A Few Questions – by Rachel Critz

1 Samuel 16:7 says,

“But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

A couple weeks ago at youth group, we were all asked a few questions. The lesson was on perspective and stereotyping others based on how they look or what they do.

We were asked, “If a friend were to describe you to another person, what would they say?”

My answer was (because my friends have told me what they say about me), “Crazy, outgoing, people person, sweet, and great listener.”

Think about what you think or know what your friends would say about you in a positive way to other people.

Now, the following question was, “If a stranger were to describe you when she looked at you what would she say?”

My thoughts were: *tall, blonde, smiles way too much, and laughs a lot.*

And then the last question was, “How would you describe yourself in one word?”

If we are being honest here, I do not have a word to describe myself. As a teen, I am still trying to figure out who I am and what I like, between what I love, so I do not know what word would describe me.

It is okay not to know who you are just yet, as you are still growing up and discovering new things about life. The only thing you should know is that no matter what - you are a child of the King.

The next section we touched on at youth group was how we view others.

As teens, it is so easy to just take one look and already label her/him as who they could be.

Sometimes labels are okay if what we see is a true fact, like if someone has tattoos then they simply have tattoos. However, we should not be quick to judge a person on how they look or dress.

As Christians, we are not sent to change how a person looks.

We are here to help them see the beauty of their heart and who Christ is.

The skin color, number of piercings or tattoos, hair color, or weight does not matter on a person when it comes to how we should view them. I know I have stereotyped a few people before but hey, no one is perfect.

Matthew 22:39 reads,

“And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

To summarize, you are a child of God, along with every other person that walks this earth.

2 Corinthians 5:17 says,

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

So...how would you answer these few questions?

Firmly Planted - Fathers—Seen and Unseen – by Dina Cavazos

My father was a wise, kind, and gentle man. He wasn't a Christian— he was far too “logical and intellectual” for that—he preferred to say he was an agnostic, possibly because the word “atheist” would've stirred up my mother (and no one wanted to do that!) He chose “agnostic” because either (a) she didn't know what that meant, or (b) atheist was a bit extreme, and he was anything but extreme.

My father was full of wise sayings. As I went with him to feed the cows, check the fence, or look at the pond, he would say things like, “If you don't have something good to say, don't say anything at all”. Or, “Two wrongs don't make a right”, “A penny saved is a penny earned”. He never gossiped or said bad things about anyone, he never complained. He was always ready to help someone in need, rarely lost his temper, and gave everyone the benefit of the doubt.

My love of everything earthy came from my dad. One of my early memories is the wondrous and aromatic experience of pulling peanuts that we grew out of the ground, roasting them in-shell in the oven, and then eating them together at the kitchen table with that incredible fresh-roasted-peanut smell filling the house. Did you know peanuts grow under the ground like potatoes? This was common knowledge to me because of my father.

We had cattle that were pets to him. I remember walking among them as a child, with the simple warning, “Watch the bull.” Horror! As I think back to that insanity I realize that I could've been charged, trampled, and disseminated like compost into the ground. But those are the fears we acquire when we lack trust. Those are the fears about cows I have now....now that I'm not a child trusting in my loving and wise father, now that my adult sensibility rules.

When I was a child, I trusted my father. He walked with me until he knew I could walk alone and I remember enjoying many carefree hours of walking through fields of cattle, bulls, rattlesnakes, and other assorted dangers. **It was an early lesson that I could walk in the midst of trouble and not be afraid.**

As I write all these things, I'm encouraged that my Unseen Father—the Father of my soul, the Creator of my life eternal—allows me to walk in the midst of trouble because He knows it strengthens me and teaches me to trust Him.....my choice, of course. The more I know Him, the more I trust Him. For those of us who had fathers we could trust, trusting our Unseen Father might be easier, but for those who didn't, He sees the hole in our hearts. I believe He gives special graces to those who have had a distorted earthly model of a father. It wasn't His intention.

Towards the end of his life, my dad told me he read [East of Eden](#) by John Steinbeck and he finally understood that Christ came to save us. I didn't understand his explanation, and when I read the book myself to learn how it spoke to him, I couldn't. It doesn't matter that I don't understand, it only matters that he did. God, Our Father, has a way of speaking to each of us in a way we can understand.

But You have seen, for You observe trouble and grief, To repay it by Your hand. The helpless commits himself to You; You are the helper of the fatherless. Psalm 10:14

Saddle Up - Flies: An Irritant or Not? – by Melissa Critz

It's Texas and, well, it's hot. It's June, and it's to be expected. With summer heat come irritants like flies. We didn't have too hard of a winter, which is good on one side of the equation, but on the other side, it means that we have more bugs. Just bring on the sun and out come the bugs, especially the menacing flies.

As a horse owner, I arm myself with the much needed spray bottle of somewhat top-notch fly spray. Some barns have amazing fly mist systems and I have heard of adding ingredients to feed to help with controlling flies, as well. Being that I have a two stall covered area attached to an already standing storage building, I don't have the fancy misting systems, so I just stick to what I have known and used my whole life – the hand spray bottle. On a day that I headed out to work on my equines, I gathered all my grooming tools along with the fly spray and commenced to clean up both horses.

I often think about how babied domestic horses can be and how horses in the wild must handle it. They don't have someone picking their hooves or administering fly spray to their coats. They survive.

But is just surviving enough?

Back to the task at hand: After currying the coat and combing out the tangles in tails and manes as well as picking hooves, I grab the spray bottle and squirt it thoroughly over their legs and body. The tail swishing and stomping minimizes. They seem more content. It's a nice feeling to know that they have some respite. But it only lasts for one to two days, depending on several factors. It has to be reapplied or, yes, those beasts of a bug attack again in droves.

I wonder though if maybe there is a reason for the irritant? I'm sure there is some kind of purpose for these flies. I know that bot flies are not welcome. We used special combs to remove bot fly eggs when I rode horses in the Dallas area. We didn't want the horses ingesting the eggs by licking and adding to the parasites that already invade their systems anyway. Yes, we do have to worm horses with pastes about every two months to help rid their systems of parasites. *Lovely, right?* So I know that flies aren't welcome for the most part.

But is there another purpose?

Do they help keep a horse aware?

I am not going to start doing an in-depth internet search on this, but I just started relating this story to us as people.

What are the flies in our lives, and even though they are irritants, do they help in some way?

My first thought, as I know my Saddle Partner was prompting me to think on this, is that buzzing flies could relate to the Holy Spirit in each of our walks as Christians...

When Jesus came to earth as a man via the virgin birth of Mary, He was eventually baptized by John the Baptist. As Jesus came up out of the water, a dove descended

onto Him.

Matthew 3:16-17

“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’”

This is the Holy Spirit who the Lord gave to each of us as guidance and comfort:

John 14:26

“But the Advocate comes, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

The Holy Spirit nudges us. He is always with us. He is helping us guide our thoughts and make wise decisions by pricking us constantly. A lot like those flies.

But unlike those flies whose presence isn't desired (grab that fly spray bottle!), the Holy Spirit IS wanted. We need His presence. We desire His presence. We live by His guidance. It's not always pleasant to have those pricks keeping us aware of His discipline and presence, but we know we need them.

John 15:26

"When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father--the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father--he will testify about me."

John 16:7

“But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”

Romans 8:26

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”

We as Christians have been given a gift freely by our Father to help us as we live this earthly life before we join the Father in the heavenly realm. What a blessing!

Listen to His gentle goading in order to know His direction for you.

It may sometimes feel like those pesky flies that alight and seem to irritate, but thankfully He keeps us aware of Him by His Holy Spirit...because just surviving is not enough.

Amen!

Thank you, Saddle Partner.

Moving Forward – Spirit to Spirit – by Pam Charro

I never cease to be amazed at what God puts up with from me in my relationship with him. I distance myself from him and don't put time or effort in, and then I find myself trying to justify it.

I may know better but I still end up in these types of conversations with him:

You know, God, it's pretty weird trying to have a satisfying relationship with you.

I'm sure you can understand, even though I've heard that it's similar to a relationship with a human, only better. But I can't see your expressions or hear many words from you at a time, or feel physical touches or hugs or know that you are delighted with me unless I put a ton of time or effort into it. It's really not like anything else and it's very demanding. My friends and family can let me know something right away, encourage me with very little effort, or even just give a smile or a hug.

How can you expect me to be able to compare a relationship with you like anything else that I'm familiar with?

I was nervous saying those things because I knew I didn't deserve a response, but he answered right away:

Pam, the reason you have to put so much work into our relationship is because I am spirit.

You spent many years learning how to make sense of your other relationships as well, and even though they can still be confusing at times, all of that work has resulted in you being able to communicate fairly well with other flesh and blood most of the time. Doesn't it make sense that you would also have to put time into learning how to communicate spirit to spirit, and that it would seem unnatural at times?

It may not be as effortless right now as dealing with other people, but I promise you that it will be well worth any effort you put in. Because I am spirit, sometimes the lies about me may sound louder than the whispers of truth; but if you fight for our connection, you will reap huge rewards.

A relationship with me is the best thing you can ever have and I will not let your labor be in vain.

Thank you for your patient answer, Lord.

Real Stories – Why the Masks? – by Pam Throckmorton

“Do they love you or the mask you put on every day?” – Shimika Bowers

Do you ever feel frustrated, feeling you can't REALLY be 'YOU'?

Do you feel hidden behind a MASK that you're afraid to remove, thinking to yourself, “If they really knew me, they wouldn't like me?”

I believe we have come to hide behind masks for various reasons and the thought of removing them leaves us feeling afraid and extremely vulnerable.

WHY DO WE HIDE BEHIND THE MASKS?

As a young woman growing up, I felt driven to perform, to please EVERYONE (except myself). After all, isn't that what God required? I needed to be an obedient daughter, an awesome friend, a PERFECT mother, oh, and that seemingly unattainable Proverbs 31 wife! *Really, God what were you thinking?*

I'm not sure about you, but for years I tried desperately to be ALL things for ALL people. I'd say I was somewhat successful in 'playing the roles' in life expected by me; however, at what cost? It was EXPENSIVE for certain. I woke up one day & felt abrogated (disapproved, disaffirmed, and invalidated.) I came to the realization that I had hidden behind many masks trying to portray who I was EXPECTED to be instead of who I TRULY was.

As women, we often learn to play various roles others assume we are meant to play. The truth that God began to reveal to me is I am an individual created by God. He designed me to be **YOU**nique, to be myself!

The Word tells me in Psalms 139:13,14

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;

your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

If I actually believe what God said, then I can be ME without fear of OTHERS' expectations, perceptions, or presumptions. The only person I need to be concerned about pleasing is GOD, the one who knows me explicitly and unconditionally loves ME. Remember this:

He loves me where I AM, not just where HE DESIRES to take me!

STOP for a moment and get this truth deep inside YOU! He loves YOU where you are, not just where HE DESIRES to take you.

Masks are double edged swords. Sometimes, they can keep us from seeing who we really are; bitter, envious, jealous, proud (you know the list,) but they can also hide us from the reality of the beautiful, gifted, talented, WOMAN that God created us to be!

God has released me to discard the multitude of MASKS I have hidden behind for years. He has enabled me to see both the GOOD & the NOT SO GOOD parts of who I am. He reminds me daily of the woman HE created me to be and gives me COURAGE to go where I've previously been afraid to go.

I challenge you to follow pursuit and take off the MASKS that have COVERED the REAL YOU!

Pam is happily married to her best friend Steve (for 25 years,) she's the mom of two beautiful daughters, mother-in-law to two handsome son-in-laws, and more importantly, GiGi to three lovely princesses. Currently, she works as New Patient Coordinator for Texas Orthodontics in San Antonio, Texas, and as an Elite Independent/Presenter for Younique Makeup/Skincare. [Visit her website here](#) to shop for your makeup needs!

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - I Don't Want to be Thankful – by Marcy Lytle

Giving thanks is one of the best antidotes to discouragement, depression, and even fear. Starting to voice our thanks just causes our hearts to rise out of the ashes into the light and we often don't get very far in our list of thanks before we see things with a better view, we start to smile, and we feel like skipping instead of shuffling.

Why, then, are there some days that giving thanks is one of the hardest things to do?

Recently, I was a little sad over the fact that my kids are all grown, vacations to far away places are too expensive now for all of us, they have their own lives they're living and enjoying with others, and I just felt like having a pity-party. Have you ever thrown a pity party? It's where it's all about you, but it's not your birthday. The table is set and guests are invited, but they're not really your friends. They're shady characters with dark glasses, hoarders, greedy grabbers, shufflers and tricksters. You invite them to sit down and chant, "Woe is me," with you instead of singing the happy birthday tune.

What then happens at this pity party is anything but fun. Instead of opening gifts and offering thanks to our guests who normally show up and give, we sit and allow these *other* guests to pick at us and steal from us, until we've lost every sense of dignity and beauty that's left to see. The guys in shady glasses poke at our eyes and cause us to see nothing but half-empty cups. The hoarders look around our room and grab every pretty thing off the shelves and leave our cabinets empty. The tricksters flick the lights on and off, shoot bolts of electricity across the room so that we don't know what's going on or where anything is until...

The party's over, the guests didn't leave but rather took up residence in our empty guest rooms, and we've got a big mess to clean up, no gifts to enjoy, and we're hung-over from drinking all of the tainted wine our guests brought and poured down our throats.

That's the party I started to host on that fateful morning that my thoughts got the best of me. It happens to all of us, maybe once a day, once a week, or whenever we sit down and focus on what's missing in our lives.

I was missing the former good times of our family being together, prior to adulthood, and mourning the fact that my kids were now grown and experiencing other lives without me...

Of course, it's okay to miss my kids. But I didn't stop there. I began to mourn and slide into depression and thoughts that led me right down that slippery slide of destruction into a slimy pit of sticky clay.

But finally, I'd had enough.

I had so much to be thankful for and I could start right now and list those things and pull myself back into peace, or I could continue the tears and the sorrow.

At one moment, I didn't want to be thankful. I wanted to pine. I wanted to wail. I wanted to wish for what was. I wanted to mourn for what wasn't. I didn't want to be thankful.

Finally, I came to my senses and I got up out of my chair and made myself visit the music app on my phone and choose new songs of 2016 in the Christian genre. I stepped onto my cushioned rug in my bedroom, I threw off my shoes, and I lifted my hands.

Oh, I didn't want to. It would have been easier to fall across the bed and stay there for an hour while my tears soaked the pillow, my thoughts completely took me to places of self-hate and wondering if my kids even loved me anymore, and I could have even descended so low as to begin to resent them and their new lives apart from under the roof of my house. It sounds silly, but it's what we do, sometimes.

But back to being barefoot and hands up...

The music began to play, the lyrics spoke the truth about who God is, and after a few moments I began to give thanks. I began to see the blessings of my children, their adulthood, their spouses, their lives without me, and my life without them and all of the good things I have been given.

Those guests I had invited to my pity party left, one by one, and I opened the blinds, I let in the light that was shining all the time, and I heard a different tune instead of "Woe is me," and I began to sing. I began to dance. I began to give thanks, even though I hadn't wanted to, earlier.

And it happened.

The pity party was over before it started.

New guests arrived.

I opened the gifts they brought, one by one...

and I gave thanks.

Love Song to Heaven's Dad – by Ginny Hurley

Daddy is my warrior prince
He watches over me
Faithful and attentive
Risking all to make me free

Protector and Provider
Surrounding me with peace
My enemies quickly fly away
In clamor they just cease

I have a sense of purpose
Whenever Dad's around
Courage overtakes me
My spirit does abound

Hope and Expectation
Rise and take up flight
Because my Daddy loves me
He is my soul's delight

Risking all for love's sweet call
His eyes are straight on course
Never ever wavering
Releasing such a force

Pathways overgrown
Along my journey here
Are swept away completely
Melting every fear

Nothing is impossible
Holding Daddy's hand
He brings me to His freshest spring
He's giving me His land

What love is this so gently drawn
Within the veil so pure
My heart is full of joyful noise
His music's true allure

Doubt cannot remain within
One glance erases all
The hope of generations
Rises up to heed the call

Indeed the winds of angels
Blow swiftly through my heart
Calling out forgiveness

Freedom from the start

Today's the day for coming home
Listen for His voice
It's calling from the heavens
Go ahead and make that choice!

"Children's children are the crown of old men,
And the glory of children is their father."
Proverbs 17:6

FRESH THYME - Textual Healing – by Marcy Lytle

Yes, it's true. People everywhere are wounded from texts. Friendships are broken, relationships cease, and anger is rising – all from what we say, or don't say, with our phones in a text. I've watched it happen in groups, I've seen it occur with couples, and then I've even felt slight disappointments myself, all because of expectations when it comes to communication by text.

Sounds crazy, but it's happening in our world, and that's why we need textual healing. Textual healing is coming back to reality, to common sense, and to maturity, when it comes to that little handheld device we now use so adeptly with our fingertips...

Group texts can be the worst. This is where people of common interests communicate to several people at once, like families, mommies, the office workers, etc. It's efficient, so it makes sense. The only problem is that when you mean for one of your comments to go to one person, and you accidentally send it to the group, you're in big trouble. Or when one person makes a comment that stirs you up and you respond without thinking first, and suddenly a war breaks out – a war of words. Group texts are intended to be helpful, like asking other moms what they do when their kids are screaming all the time, or when families want to coordinate a dinner out and need everyone's feedback. But they become hurtful when arguments ensue, generalities are made, and accusations start up. That's when we need to step back, get off, and get out. Period. No more group texting with "that" bunch of people. Words that are "said" cannot be taken back or erased, so we have to be mature and careful if we dare to join a group and use that as our main means of communication.

Hitting "send" before thinking. You know, it's that moment when your finger somehow presses down before you are quite ready or quite finished, and then it's done. It's gone. And she's read it. You reacted to something she texted, you should have re-read your reply and reworded what you said, but you did the unpardonable. You hit *send* with that tone, that exclamation mark, those capital letters, and you regret it from the second it left your phone and showed up on their screen. You know right then that you will need to call and apologize, and you can only hope she erases the text and forgets it for good.

Reading between the lines. There are times when we've gotten a text from a friend and it makes no sense, she sounds uninterested, she seems in a hurry, or she says something that's a bit twisted. And like a corkscrew in a wine bottle, it goes that jab into our hearts. We "think" we know what she must mean, we somehow put together a string of her comments and receive the message that she's dissing every idea we've ever had, and we sink so low as to wonder how we ever called her a friend in the first place. Reading between the lines should never be done in texting. It's presumption, it's speculation, and it's not healthy or wise.

Unanswered texts. You're texting away, sharing your heart, relaying your feelings, and she's responding, being sympathetic and sending you all sorts of emoji's to make you feel better...and then...nothing. No more texting, she's gone, she doesn't answer, and you're left hanging. Was it something you said? Did she suddenly find someone else more interesting to talk to? How rude! It's like when you used to talk on the phone and someone hangs up – that's just not

acceptable! But what if...she lost service, one of her kids fell, or she just happen to think you were finished, but you weren't? Those rational thoughts never enter our minds.

After all of the above, every day, as much as we're all on our phones, we can end up feeling slighted, ignored, abused, and misunderstood – in need of *textual healing*.

So what should we do?

I'm as connected to my phone as anyone else, but it's healthy and wise to see our phones as objects that can be set down, left alone for a while, and taken with a grain of salt – when it comes to texting. We can all decide that group texts are meant for information sharing only, not for preaching sermons. We can make sure we calm down before we start rapid fire responses that result in early "send" messages. We can stop reading between the lines and assuming the worst, instead of the best. And finally, we can all ease up, lighten up, and give our friends grace to lay their phones down for whatever reason they have.

And it just might do us a world of good, heal us completely, and lift our heads, if we actually talk to people over coffee, meet up with friends at dinner, and hang out with newbies after work...face to face...and then leave our comments about all of those outings to ourselves instead of sharing with the world.

Textual wounding. Let's don't make this an illness that requires insurance, a building, and years of therapy.

Under the Influence – The Pause – by Marcy Lytle

I remember wishing someone would talk to me about it, although I never opened up the conversation. I wished there was more information to make me feel better about it, but most of what I read was so clinical. And I remember wondering why it occurred right in the middle of children growing up and out, and parents aging. The “it” I’m referring to here is menopause. I’m not sure if it’s a pause or a passage, or just downright pitiful.

I’ve been through it now, I’m on the other side, and I want to offer some practical encouragement to those of you just entering this dark hallway that leads to – well – let’s say it leads to freedom: freedom from the monthly visits, freedom from the worries of pregnancy, and freedom from wondering if you’re still young enough to wear short shorts. I call it a dark hallway, because it’s unknown territory, this time of menopause, and it so different for everyone. But honestly, there is light at the end of that hallway, as you grope along looking for the switch to turn it on.

I remember when I was first told that I was entering this phase of life, I was only 40 – quite young – but my mom and sister had both started early as well. I still had a six-year old son and I was in shock to realize that I was getting old! At least that’s how I had viewed those who were in menopause. And I had this notion that it would be over in a couple years, and I’d be on my way with life. However, I wasn’t prepared for all of the “symptoms” that came with this phase, ones that scared me, made me unrecognizable to myself, and made me wish for younger days again.

The pain in my breasts was like no other, except in the early stages of pregnancy. Even water from the shower head just hurt. Eventually that passed, and my hair started coming out in big sections and this too alarmed me. So off to the bookstore I went, with my husband’s hand in mine, because I was determined to find a book of all symptoms to read out loud to us both, so I’d know (and he’d believe) I wasn’t going crazy and turning into a hairless old lady by age 42.

And there it was – [the list](#).

I drew a sigh of relief to realize that I wasn’t alone, what I was going through was normal, and this too would pass. It gave me hope, it eased my mind that my husband now knew what to expect, and I was okay...for now.

Next came the irritability. If my kids even brushed up against me (whose kids DON’T brush up against them multiple times a day?) I wanted to slap them silly, and I’d run to my room, fall on my knees, and cry. I’d stay there until that anger that came from – where – I don’t know – subsided. I’d appear again to my family and all would be well.

Now that those years (they were nine, for me) have passed, I have met multiple friends who are just starting on their journey through the dark hallway, and I see the fear, the worry, the anxiety, and the frustration with sleepless nights, the isolation and the questions in their eyes. And I see that they don’t really want to talk about it, although I know they too are wishing someone would reassure them that life isn’t over, and they will live again, a complete woman with complete thoughts, with complete saneness.

So here's the rub:

I prayed a lot. I got on my knees and I told God I knew that menopause was normal, but my emotions were not. I asked him for help, and it came...daily...moment by moment.

I talked it out. I had my husband, and maybe you do too. Or if not, find a friend and make yourself voice your feelings. It will be hard, but it will be good.

I drank lots of water and upped my exercise. I had read that both of those help, and they both seemed to, and they both became part of my routine and still are.

I cried often. Crying releases tension, it helps unleash pent-up emotions, and it's okay to cry.

I realized we're all different. I didn't have hot flashes, but my friends did. Their hair didn't fall out, but mine did. And I barely have to shave any more, and that's a plus.

I feel accomplished. I made it. I found the switch. I passed through. I'm on the other side. It's over. And I'm done.

If you're in the beginning, middle, or near the end of that long passage, that pause in life, or whatever you want to call it, don't lose hope. Some women do opt for hormone help, and you'll have to visit your doctor for advice on that. I didn't use anything external to help me. I just walked through slowly and surely, falling and getting up, screaming and wondering why my round butt is now flat, and my flat tummy is more round.

Ladies, we are beautiful from the moment we are created, and we don't cease being woman, lose our identity, become suddenly unattractive, or emerge washed up and wrung out, after menopause. We emerge stronger, fuller, wiser, and taller because we made it.

The aging parents and grown children are two other issues that perhaps are still facing us head-on, but we know we will also walk through those hallways and find those switches, because it's what we do – with Him – in strength and dignity – that He gives.

Menopause. A passage or a pause, or a privilege? Okay, maybe a privilege is too far-fetched, but it's a common experience we all have and share, and there are many nice things about it – when it's all over – on the inside and outside of the women who ran the race and finished well – and lived to tell about it.

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

July 2015

TIPS

Seven 4 You – Keep up the Skills – by Marcy Lytle

I used to teach math, to middle school kids, and I remember trying to find creative ways to make a subject that seemingly most kids hated become one that kids at least tolerated. I heard way too often, “When am I ever going to use this?” when we were learning algebra, geometry, or working with integers. So since summer is in full swing, I thought I’d share a few ideas to help you keep up your kids’ math skills this summer, in sneaky ways they might not be opposed to at all!

Adding and Subtracting – take the kids bowling – only don’t let them use the screen that automatically scores for you! Bring along a spiral notebook and teach your kids how to keep score the old-fashioned way. When they get a spare, they add the pins from the next frame to the score. When a strike is made, the next two frames get added in. Don’t remember how to keep score yourself? [Here’s how.](#)

Fractions – get the kids in the kitchen – and print out a recipe that has at least five fractions. Ask them to either half or double the recipe, depending on how many cookies or how much pie you want to make and enjoy! If the recipe calls for $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of sugar, show them how to half that, or double it. $\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2}$ equals $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of sugar. Or $\frac{1}{2} \times 2$ equals one whole cup of sugar! Go through the process with them, then enjoy the baked goods!

Integers – Pick up your local newspaper and find the weather map on the back page. This is an activity that will work better for integers in the winter months, so you might want to save this idea until then. Ask your kids to tell you the difference in temps between the high in Minnesota, for example, and the high in Texas, on a given day. If it’s -10 degrees in Minnesota and 45 degrees in Texas, then the difference is 55 degrees! This trains them to realize what it means to add and subtract with positive and negative numbers.

Rounding – pull out the Sunday ads from the newspaper and go to work! Give your kids an imaginary amount of money – say \$100 – and tell them to find 10 items they buy that rounded to the nearest dollar comes under their budgeted amount. They will then need to keep a list of each item and round it. If it’s \$8.99 then they write down \$9.00 and so on. They have to search and think, estimate and rework.

Percentages – get out of the house and hit the mall! Step inside at least five of your kids’ favorite stores and find at least five different percentages to figure. 50% is easy so skip that one – IF they understand that 50% means half-off. However, look for these: 40%, 30%, 75%, 25% and 10%. Use little tricks that make it easy for them – not reading a chart that’s already figured. For example, 30% off is close to $33\frac{1}{3}\%$ which is about a third of the price. So if the dress is normally \$30, they get $\frac{1}{3}$ off, which is \$10. So the new price is \$20! This might even help you AND your kids brush up on percentages! If that task is too much, help your kids figure tip when you’re out to eat – 15% or 20% of the total bill.

Geometrical shapes – take a road trip! Let your toddlers and young ones pick different shapes of signs along the road as a treasure hunt of sorts. Look for triangles, squares, circles, and

rectangles – then describe what each sign means. This can be made into a game to see how many of each sign can be found along the way!

Measurement – time to reorganize bedrooms! Enlist the help of your kids in reorganizing a closet or bedroom. Have them measure specific spaces, then shop with you for bins, baskets or shelves to fit into those spaces. Present to them the importance of being precise when measuring, because even just a fraction of an inch makes a difference when trying to squeeze something into a tight space! They will feel so accomplished when the room is neat and tidy, and they had a part!

There are all sorts of ways to incorporate math skills into any given day. When our kids see that math relates to their world and enables them to shop, function, decorate and bake – they might be more apt to learn once classes are in session again. And brushing up on our own skills sharpens our brains, too!

The Dressing – Picnic Table Pretties – by Marcy Lytle

It's July! The month for vacations, celebrations, picnics, Christmas in July, and so much more! You name it, there's a time to celebrate it this month! It can be hot outside, but under a shade tree when the breeze is blowing is a great time to set up picnic pretties and dress up your table. Family members of all ages enjoy a pretty table that invites them to come celebrate with you, and it can be so fun to create and fix up that wooden or concrete table into a masterpiece in no time at all! Or...if the temperatures are soaring too high by now, have a picnic indoors!

Here are a few ideas of how to dress up your picnic table to make it pretty:

Color – Set this pretty idea first, and then build from there. If it's the 4th you're celebrating, of course you'll want red, white and blue! If it's just some summer fun, pick your favorite colors of the season – maybe sea blue and foam green – with a pop of navy! Or pick a pattern, like checkered red, which is easy to find in picnic table dressing. Once your color is set, hit the Dollar Store or other discount places, and purchase your paper goods – tablecloths, napkins, etc. Make a [simple fabric banner to](#) tie all of the colors together!

Height – Instead of setting up your table all on one level, create height. And since you're outdoors, use things you find in the park or your yard! Clay pots can serve as containers (just line with paper) or pot bases for trays or bowls, branches and foliage can be trimmed and set into vases down the middle of the table, even broken dry sticks can be spray painted and then placed in tall clear containers! And one cute way to display the menu is to [set up a chalkboard](#) and write on the food items, for all to see!

Movement – How about a [display of pinwheels](#) down the table that twirl as the wind blows? Or cute flags that flap in the wind? It's easy to attach streamers to the table so that they flow with the breezes. Even mobiles can hang from a branch above the table that move or perhaps make sound as they rotate. Be creative with this aspect of the picnic fun!

Whimsy – Think about the reason for your party and then search for that fun item that brings a bit of whimsy (something unique or odd) to your pretties. If it's Christmas in July, for example, you could add a [straw basket](#) with a sign "Noel" hanging on it. If it's sending off a graduate to college that you're blessing, place a focal graduation hat made of cardboard in the center with a pen for all to sign! Add something that stands out, something that requires participation, or something that makes people smile!

Theme – There doesn't "have" to be a theme, but honestly if you have a theme it helps so much in the decorating! Maybe you're having all foods that are red, white and blue. Perhaps you're presenting [food on sticks](#). Or if it's just a fun get together, maybe sunshine and blue skies can be your simple theme. So all of your food might be things that are fresh and found in the garden! You could even focus on black and white, if it's a "formal" picnic of sorts with black/white cookies, s'mores, and pumpernickel bread with a cream cheese spread.

Use the internet to search for ideas (like we did) and pick and choose things you like, add your own twist, decorate and enjoy! Snap a few photos of your July picnic and share with us! We'd love to share them with our readers!

Selah's Style - Swim and Sun Fun! – Selah Irwin

Water slides, pools, beaches, slip n slides...

For me, summer is all about being in the water!

This means you are going to need some bathing suit essentials.

You never know what treacherous summer obstacle you will come across, so you must be prepared for those moments!

I prefer razorback suits because they allow me to do all the fun water activities I like without the embarrassing wardrobe malfunction! I would be frozen with fear! It's best to avoid that by picking a respectable suit you can trust.

This adorable suit is so cute and it also has a razor back. This is a perfect way to combine fashion and function. You remember my friend, Lilly? Her photo was included in my article a while back. We bought matching bathing suits to make our summer a little more fun! Twinsies!

Sometimes, if you are at a water play area or water park you don't want to walk around in just your suit. It's a good idea to have a nice pink pair of swim shorts!

If you have no cover-up, have no fear! Your mom's closet is near! You can always borrow a tank top as a replacement! It does not matter what color. It works great!

I hope these tips help you pick a wonderful bathing suit for all your summer adventures. Have fun and splash on!

The Fearless Kitchen - Professional Poultry – by Christina Vetter

Typically I'm pretty strict about penny-pinching with our budget, but one area in which I'm willing to squeeze out some cash is going out to eat with my family. I just love trying new restaurants and dishes. I look at it as an experience more than simply a meal someone else has prepared. However, there's one thing that still bothers me: the high prices of some of the simplest of dishes.

If I have it, I'm more than willing to fork over \$30 for an incredible steak, lobster, or ahi tuna steak, but when a thin cut of chicken costs \$18, I just can't. Chicken is one of the cheapest meats out there and restaurants seem hell-bent on charging an arm and a leg for what usually consists of ½ a chicken breast dripping in some sauce, poured over a starch.

That's why this month I'm going to teach you how to make some of the most popular and often intimidating restaurant chicken dishes out there: Chicken Parmesan, Chicken Piccata, and Coq au Vin. All these recipes can be thrown together for a week night or served at a family gathering one Saturday evening. And they are all simply delicious! I hope that once you see how easy it is to make these dishes, you'll be less inclined to order the chicken next time you venture out to eat.

What other popular chicken dishes have always stumped you? Tell me in the "Comments" section below; I'd be happy to help.

Happy July and happy eating everyone!

Chicken Parmesan

Serves 4

Difficulty: 

Chicken parmesan is one of those comforting recipes that should be in every home cook's repertoire. Sadly, many unnecessarily let the restaurants take the job. There's no need with this recipe. It's easy and fast to throw together. Served alongside spaghetti and sauce, it's always a huge hit at the Vetter house.

Ingredients:

½ C oil
2 large chicken breasts
2 C Italian herbed bread crumbs
1 C flour
1 Tbsp garlic powder
1 Tbsp onion powder
1 C spaghetti sauce
1 C shredded mozzarella cheese
Salt and black pepper as needed

Chiffonade (or thinly sliced) fresh basil to garnish

Directions:

- Cut chicken breasts in ½ horizontally and pound thin with a meat mallet.
- In a shallow dish, mix breadcrumbs, flour, garlic, onion, and two large pinches of salt and black pepper each.
- Dredge chicken in flour and breadcrumb mixture until it's fully coated.
- Meanwhile, heat oil in a large shallow sauté pan over medium high heat.
- Once oil is hot enough (a pinch of flour should sizzle immediately), cook chicken 3-4 minutes on each side, or until both sides are browned and chicken is cooked thoroughly.
- Remove from pan. Sprinkle ¼ C of cheese on each chicken breast. *TIP: you may need to throw them under a broiler for a couple seconds to melt the cheese if the chicken has had a chance to cool.
- Top with fresh basil, and serve immediately alongside cooked pasta and sauce.

Chicken Piccata
Serves 4

Difficulty: 

Chicken piccata is one of those dishes that many of us order at restaurants, thinking we would never be able to duplicate it at home. Believe it or not, it is actually one of the simpler "restaurant meals" out there. Served along side rice pilaf or buttered egg noodles with poppy seeds, this dish makes a great dinner any night of the week.

Ingredients:

- 2 large chicken breasts
- Flour as needed
- Salt and black pepper as needed
- 2 Tbsp butter
- 3 Tbsp oil
- 1 C low sodium chicken broth
- Juice of two lemons
- ¼ C capers, drained
- ¼ C minced parsley

Directions:

- Cut chicken breasts ½ horizontally, and pound out with a meat mallet or flat surface of a rolling pin.
- Meanwhile, heat butter and oil together in large, shallow pan over medium high heat.
- Generously season chicken with salt and pepper, and dredge with flour.
- Once oil in pan is hot enough (a pinch of flour should sizzle immediately when tossed in), cook chicken 3 minutes each side, or until both sides are browned and chicken is cooked thoroughly.
- Remove chicken from pan and keep warm.

-Add chicken broth, lemon juice, and capers to pan and bring to a rolling boil for 8 minutes, allowing liquid to slightly reduce. Add parsley, and cook for another minute or two. Taste and adjust for salt and pepper as needed.

-Add chicken back to pan and turn once so the juice has a chance to soak into the meat.

-Plate chicken pieces, pour sauce evenly over 4 plates, and serve immediately.

Coq Au Vin

Serves 2

Difficulty: 

Coq Au Vin or "rooster in wine", sounds much more difficult to make than it actually is. With a couple basic French cooking techniques throughout this recipe, this dish becomes a do-able, elegant option for the often overlooked chicken leg. It's tres délicieux!

Ingredients:

4 slices bacon

2 chicken legs, thighs and drumsticks separated

3 cloves garlic, crushed

2 carrots, chopped large

2 celery stalks, chopped large

½ medium onion, chopped large

16 oz dry red wine, such as pinot noir or cabernet sauvignon

5 stalks fresh tyme

2 bay leaves

32 oz unsalted beef stock

12 pearl onions

8 small button mushrooms (very small porcini mushroom caps may be used as well, keep stems)

2 Tbsp minced parsley

3 Tbsp butter

Salt and black pepper as needed

Directions

-In a large, tall sided saute pan (or small dutch oven) cook bacon until crispy. Remove from pan, slice into ¼ inch thick, short slices, and set aside. Keep fat in pan.

-Meanwhile, generously salt and pepper chicken on all sides.

-Over high heat, bring pan and fat to extremely high temperature without letting it smoke. Sear chicken, skin side down first in bacon fat. Once the skin side is a dark golden brown, right before it turns black, turn and repeat to sear every other side.

*TIP: To tell if the pan is hot enough, chicken should sizzle loudly and rapidly the second it touches the fat. If it doesn't, remove chicken immediately to avoid saturation and wait for pan to get hotter.

- Once all sides of chicken are seared, remove and set aside. Remove all but approximately 2 Tbsp of fat.
- Over high heat, brown carrots, celery, onion, and garlic (and mushroom stems if applicable) together in fat. It should get some color on it, but never burned. Cook almost all the way.
- Add wine and reduce liquid by $\frac{1}{2}$. Add thyme and bay leaves, chicken, and stock (enough to cover chicken).
- Bring liquid up to a boil, and then down to a simmer. Cover and cook until chicken is cooked thoroughly, about 10-15 minutes.
- *TIP: Make sure to use a meat thermometer to get a safe and accurate reading. When temping bone in chicken, make sure to measure at the thickest part of the meat, right next to the bone. Chicken should reach 165 degrees to be cooked through.
- Take out chicken, and keep warm.
- Strain cooking liquid into a shallow saute pan and reduce by $\frac{1}{2}$. Discard cooking vegetables.
- Add pearl onions, mushrooms (caps only, if applicable), and bacon and simmer until onions are translucent.
- Remove pan from heat, and add butter cut into small chunks. Swirl pan until butter melts into sauce.
- Add minced parsley. Taste and add salt and pepper as needed.
- Place chicken pieces on plate and pour sauce over the top. Serve immediately.

Tried and True – Daily Six Pack – by Marcy Lytle

The heat of the summer wreaks havoc on our skin, doesn't it? Heels that were cushioned and covered in the winter are now exposed and cracked and unsightly! Our skin and hair are in the sun and wind on those hot balmy days, and they both take a beating. There's just so much in the elements that affects our bodies during the hot days of summer that we need some hydration, a sweet fragrant rest, and a bit of smooth sailing as we endure the month of August up ahead.

Recently, I stopped and noted how many lotions I use in one given morning, and I chuckled, but then I realized that each one makes me feel so good and sets the tone for the day, so that I don't step out with ashy skin, brittle hair, and heels that hurt.

Here are six products I've found that work for me and make me happy daily:

For the body: I enjoy some sun-kissed skin just like the next person, but I don't want the sun-kissed rays of heat that damage my skin. [Nivea Sun-Kissed Radiance](#) is a lotion that works to moisturize AND tint the skin, and I love the medium to dark choice. I use it daily for the best results, for all over coverage of arms and legs.

For the feet: I've tried lots of foot lotions and my favorite scent is definitely peppermint, as well as my favorite tingly feeling of freshness! [J R Watkins Rejuvenating Peppermint Foot Cream](#) is one bottle that I found on a vacation in Old Town, in San Diego. But you can buy it at lots of places. I love it, and if used daily it really does stave off the rough edges around your heels.

For the face: We recently visited [Sunshine Farm](#) in Montgomery, Texas where a lady there makes all sorts of natural lotions. I bought a Cucumber Spearmint mixture that works well to tighten and freshen my facial skin before I apply a moisturizer. She calls it "face food." Check out all of her selections that are fresh and so fragrant, on line, and get some!

For the hair: I recently stumbled upon [Schwarzkopf Essence Ultime](#) shampoo for damaged and depleted hair. I think I received a sample in the mail! At first, the scent of the shampoo won me over – it smells like perfume – subtle yet so fragrant. Then I used both the shampoo and conditioner on my colored, dry hair and I really liked the way it styled after I blew it dry. I was sold.

For the hands: I love anything with the almond scent for my hands! [Almond Delicious Hands](#) by L'Occitane is a great lotion to keep in the car or in your purse for your dry hands, cuticles, and fingers. Not only is it creamy and smooth, but the smell of almond does something to me and calms me and soothes my soul.

For the face at night: Oil of Olay's [anti-wrinkle night cream](#) is my favorite. I've been using Oil of Olay beauty products for decades and I really like each one I've tried. This particular one is great to rub on your face after a nice bath, before you settle in for a good night's sleep and let it do its work. And it smells great, too.

This daily six pack keeps me hydrated all over, and that's so important all year, especially in the summer months. Dry skin itches and flakes, and dry hair is dull and breaks. That's not a rhyme I want to have describe me this season – and neither do you! I hope you enjoy pampering your skin and find a way to feel smooth and silky in the summer heat!

HOME

Practical Parenting – Love Looks Like Something – by Mandy Major

My cousin Mary always tells me, “Love looks like something.”

I've pondered the meaning of those words many times...

This week I went upstairs looking for my phone and discovered my daughter Eve (age 6) had cleaned her bathroom, made my bed, and cleaned up my bathroom! As I looked around, the words “love looks like something” echoed through my mind.

In that moment, I realized how much truth is in those words. Love **does** look like something. It looks like a mother pausing what she is busy with to talk to her child in crisis, it looks like a friend coming over and making soup when you are sick, it looks like a husband working all day in the hot sun to pay the bills, it looks like a son sacrificing himself to save others...

Love is action.

Love is tangible.

Love is seen.

Love is able to accept or tolerate delays, problems, or suffering without becoming annoyed or anxious.

Love is having a sympathetic attitude toward others, and a willingness to do good or give pleasure.

Love does NOT harbor feelings of discontent or covetousness with regard to another's advantages, success, possessions, etc.

Love does NOT speak with exaggeration and excessive pride, especially about oneself.

Love does NOT have a high or inordinate opinion of one's own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority, whether as cherished in the mind or as displayed in bearing, conduct, etc.

Love does NOT harbor strong feelings of displeasure and belligerence aroused by a wrong; wrath; ire.

Love does NOT record, as for the purpose of preserving evidence anything that feels unjust, being treated unfairly, or treated wrongly.

Love does NOT take pleasure or enjoyment; joy or rapture in anything causing injury or harm, suffering or misfortune.

Love takes delight in honesty; integrity; truthfulness.

Love always defends or guards from attack, invasion, loss, annoyance, insult, etc.; covers or shields from injury or danger.

Love always holds onto the feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best.

Love never falls short of success or achievement in something expected, attempted, desired, or approved.

(I Corinthians 13: 4-7 re-written and defined using dictionary.com)

I fall short of love daily.

I fail.

I struggle.

I make a mess of things.

In my mess, I remember I am able to learn to love because I have seen love.

I see love in the beauty of the ocean, the detail of a passion flower, and a tree shedding its leaves in the fall. I see love in all of creation, the intricate details, the dependence of life cycles, and the beauty. I see love in Jesus, who draws hearts and never gives up on me.

I think life.
The struggle.
The pain.
The hardships.

It is all bringing us closer to this thing called love, bringing us closer to the one who loved us first. The one who knows us more fully than we will ever know ourselves.

As you live life this week, as you enjoy summer with your kids at home, remember...

Love looks like something...

What does it look like to you today?

Life as We Know It - Victorious Failure – Erica Simmons

As parents, we don't want our children to ever have to suffer the consequences of a bad choice, which is why we set boundaries and rules to protect them as much as we can. Inevitably, they will get an idea in their heads or hearts and no matter what we do or say, they will be determined to act it out their way. This is what happened with my son, Jordan.

Although Jordan has the ability to learn, he is not one who works too hard at school. He has this belief that school is for school and once he is home, his time becomes his and there is no place for "homework." I have actually dreaded the start of school because of how hard I have to work to get him to do and turn in his schoolwork. None more than this year, as it was High School and credits were now involved. I was so happy and relieved he received all his credits the first semester.

At the end of February, my dad got sick and during Spring Break he passed away. Dealing with this loss and all of the emotions, and also working full-time, was about all I cared to handle for a while. Fast forward to the Friday before the last week of the school year. At 12:47 I got an email from Jordan's Algebra teacher explaining how he was in danger of not passing for the semester and then at 5:44 I got another email from Jordan's Biology teacher explaining Jordan had missing work dating back to the 5th six weeks, and he was in danger of failing for the year.

For the next six days, Jordan experienced what I am going to call "victorious failure."

The failure came when he realized that his belief that he was operating from, *home is no place for school work*, meant absolutely nothing to his teachers. He was still accountable and responsible for the work they had assigned him.

The victory came in two parts.

The first part happened on Wednesday night when He came to the realization that his belief system had failed. That afternoon Jerimiah (Jordan's twin brother) was able to get in the car after school and declare, "I am officially a sophomore." He had completed all of his work and exams. Jordan, on the other hand, was up until almost 11:00 p.m. working hard to finish the last of his math. He looked at me and said, "I wish I was like Jerimiah, all my work done and able to relax." The second and most important was when both he and I were able to see what he was made of. After the teachers emailed us, he looked over all that he had to do and came to me and laid out a plan to get the work done, and he did it. After six days, which consisted of some late nights and some early morning tutoring, Jordan was able to receive credit for both of his classes.

My "Life as I Know it" Moment

I am not proud to say it, but as I looked at all Jordan had to do, I was tempted to do part of the work for him. The only reason I did not was because he did it first. I now realize that had I stepped in, I would have destroyed the perfect opportunity Jordan had to fail, grow, re-think and adjust his beliefs.

I came to the realization that we all have things we believe, things we think are based on the word of God, which in reality could have come from a variety of sources: family values, wrong teaching, or our own misguided interpretation of the Word.

In II Corinthians it states that all arguments will be cast down ... and every high thought will be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. I believe God can do this similar to how He dealt with Jordan. He puts us to the test.

The Word says in [James 1:2](#) to “count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of YOUR faith produces patience. But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” (NKJV) I strongly feel that **part of our perfection and completeness is God showing us and teaching us where our thinking is wrong or out of line with His Word. He provides us with the chance to experience victorious failure**, where what we believe fails to get us through what we are going through, but also where we are able to trade in our wrong thinking for God’s truth.

I was able to experience this along with Jordan. My belief is that I am responsible for making sure my boys are successful. My new truth is that no, I am not. Someone much stronger and mightier is in charge.

As I complete this story, the full realization of this entire situation starts to become real to me. Looking back on this, after experiencing how much both Jordan and I learned, it frightens me that I almost took this great opportunity away by stepping in and doing his work for him.

God is so great and so faithful.

It makes me wonder what other opportunities I have robbed my boys and myself of by stepping in and not letting God be God.

I Don't Do Teens – Swimming Upstream – by Marcy Lytle

From the time our kids start walking and talking, we want them to forge ahead and not swim with the pack, but to stand up for what's right, make wise choices, and stand out in a crowd – when the crowd is a mindless mass headed for a cliff. This type of stamina and fortitude doesn't just happen when they become teenagers. In fact, if we don't teach our kids to swim upstream when they're small, they will most likely be carried downstream when they're tall.

But wait. There's still hope, even if our teens seem to want to dress like, act like, and be like their peers – no matter what their peers are doing. It seems to be the biggest temptation our teens face – the one to be like everyone else and “go with the flow.”

Maybe you know this, but salmon swim upstream when it's time to spawn. In fact, according to Wikipedia, they “return with uncanny precision” to their birthplace – they use their sense of smell – when they migrate. Isn't that interesting? They go back to their home.

When our teens hit “that age” when hormones rage and curiosity beckons with huge waving hands to enter into relationships with the opposite sex in ways that are harmful to their emotions and their bodies, they need a place – a sense of smell – that leads them back home before this part of their maturity takes place. In other words, the home that we provide for our teens will be their sense of direction, and a safe place for them to run to, if we purpose to make it so.

It's hard to swim against the current. I recently paddle boarded for the first time and realized I didn't really ask how to turn around with the large paddle, and I panicked for a brief moment when I saw the open waters where I was headed. Luckily, it was my son who paddled over to me and told me how to push the paddle the other way to turn myself around to head back to shore. I just needed instruction and to hear from someone who had been in my same “boat” before.

We can set up rigid rules, shake our fingers, and stay up late screaming at our teens to hang up the phone, put away the magazines, put on some clothes, and stop hanging with “him/her,” only to see them slam the door, hibernate, and roll their eyes.

So if our teens are pushing the limits and following too close to cliffs, or being carried away downstream without a paddle, there are some things we can do to provide a safe harbor, a home they love to return to, and direction they will listen to and heed. They may still react, but our love won't relent, and it will draw them back.

Here is some encouragement, if your teens are almost out of your view amid the school of fish that's swimming out to sea:

Get on your knees and pray. Ask God to give you clear discernment and direction as to the root of your daughter's actions. It may be that she has a poor self-image, or maybe she's taken as truth a mean comment from a friend, or it could just be that she's feeling unloved and lost. God is faithful to show you where to begin.

Invite your teen to talk. Really listen to what he is saying or not saying. If he's not a talker, ask him to write it out, or text you his feelings or thoughts. Keep judgment and criticism quiet, and just hear what he has to say. It's amazing what acceptance and affirmation will do for a kid.

Guard your teen's time. If your son or daughter is away from home all of the time because of activities, they will lose their sense of direction and safety. Insist on family time, and be the parent when it comes to where and how much your teen spends time with friends and at events.

Love the Word and love the Church. Don't allow your own cynicism, bitterness, rejection, or disappointment to render you a bad-mouthing churchgoer. Read the Word with your kids, not to preach at them, but to fill their spirits with His hope and love. Make their youth group a priority, and be involved by praying, volunteering and taking your kids to the place where other kids worship together.

Love your spouse and others. Be a good example for your kids of what true love is, at home, and in giving to others. If your teens see you respecting, honoring and loving your husband, they will want that kind of relationship. If your family responds to those in need, your teens will be inspired to follow suit, instead of becoming self-absorbed in her own world of how she looks and what others think of her.

There's always hope for our children, no matter what age they are. If your kids are small, begin now to make your home the place they will want to return to, when they arrive at the age of exploration, when the waters start to rush. If your kids are already teens and you're fearful of where they're headed, ask a friend how to hold the "paddle" and listen to their advice, and listen to God, and you can steer them back to shore. And if your teenagers are already hibernating in their rooms in a heap of trouble, God cares and loves them, and he loves you too. Keep believing, ask others to pray with you, and surrender your will and heart to Him.

He WILL direct you, lead you, and bring your children to the strongest scent of all – His strong love that enables them to swim upstream – back to their home – where they mature and become adults way too quickly – but oh so beautifully.

Everyday Home – The Calendar – by Mikaela Cain

My husband, Grant, and I used to be a basket case when it came to time management. I like planning more than he does, but he likes consistency more than I do. I feel restricted if I stick to the same schedule for too long, so I like to throw in unusual events, coffee dates and other meetings—but I want to know about them in advance. He likes to stick to the same schedule week-to-week, so he doesn't remember out-of-the-norm events (especially if they aren't exciting or fun).

Because I am the planner, I set alerts for myself in [Google Calendar](#) in my phone. And for two years, time-management in the Cain household looked a lot like Mikaela reminding Grant about out-of-the norm upcoming events the day before, and him feeling irritated that he wasn't prepared (because he forgot). Mikaela got frustrated at Grant for forgetting. Nobody was having fun. The scheduling caused a lot of contention in our marriage because we weren't doing the scheduling together.

You might be thinking, "What's the big deal? It's just a schedule." But, when Grant and I got married three years ago, not only our spirits became one but our time did, too. Time is really important. How we use it reveals our values. If we can learn to use time as a resource, we can protect and sow into the things we care about. In the first two years of marriage, Grant and I weren't connected in how to use our time. We needed some practical help.

Enter the dry-erase calendar.

One day, I bought a cheap dry-erase calendar [from Target](#), hoping that Grant would glance at it occasionally and remember upcoming events. I honestly didn't think it was going to work. I certainly didn't think that it would help with the emotional and heart problems behind the disunity in our time management. However, I couldn't have been more surprised, for several reasons. Not only did Grant love it, but he uses it every day. It also became a tool that prompted discussions about what values to prioritize in this season, work through them together, and decide how to live them out. It has become a source of connection for us.

Now, almost every month, we pull down the calendar together to erase the previous month, and fill in the dates and events for the upcoming month. We typically do one color for our routine tasks (youth group, date nights, small group) and another color for our out-of-the-norm events (weddings, birthdays, and friendship hang-outs). Doing this has given us an opportunity to regularly rehash how we want to use our time.

Some months, filling in the calendar is a pretty short and matter-of-fact task:

{Mikaela (in PJs, sitting cross-legged on the couch) will say: "We're doing this, this and this."}

Grant (glancing up from the computer) will reply: "That's a lot! Looks like we'll need to schedule some rest."

Mikaela writes it in, and we're done!

But sometimes, it opens the door to deeper conversations.

It's wonderful to have a monthly time of looking back at how we're doing, and looking forward at where we're going. We didn't have a natural checkpoint for these discussions before. Beforehand, we waited until there was a problem to reevaluate our priorities in our time. Because of that, the conversations came out of a place of frustration—which is no fun.

Even though we have frequent check-points, we still don't always agree on what's an important use of our time. But, that's okay. The heart of the matter is that we're creating space to hear each other's hearts and we're seeking to be united in all time matters. We've been given the same amount of time, and we want to be aware of where each other is, so that we can more effectively help each other.

Single women can still very beautifully create space for frequently time-reevaluation.

In fact, I am only accountable to myself and Holy Spirit when it comes to my work schedule. I have a planner that I write down tasks in. I often reevaluate monthly to see how I'm doing, and take time to check in with my heart about things that consistently don't get done and or other problems that arise. Then I can ask myself if this is a problem with unrealistic expectations, an inconsistency in what I'm saying my values are and what I'm living, or something else. It can take five minutes or an hour. Reevaluating how I'm spending my time has helped me to tap into all kinds of great discussions with God. It has helped me answer some really important questions: how am I managing my rest, why am I not getting relationships needs met, why do I feel behind the 8-ball in work?

If you are single, you can share a calendar with a trusted roommate for accountability. Or, you can keep a personal one that you and Holy Spirit look through together. If you reevaluate with Holy Spirit or with another person, you will likely guard yourself from becoming introspective during this process. Instead, you'll just become self-aware and conscientious about how you're living.

Time is a resource. How you use it is a great indicator of what you value and the patterns established in your life to live those out. It's very helpful to check in every once in a while and see how you're doing, and see if those are values that you want to keep or were even aware that you had. '

Grant and I love connecting over the calendar. For married or single people, finding ways to connect with God and each other in every area of life bring more opportunities to work out intimacy—which produce so much love and freedom. I love that I feel freedom and love how our lives are scheduled, and it's all because of a \$20 dry-erase calendar.

A Night to Remember – Transformers – by Marcy Lytle

You know those little toys that the kids play with – the ones that change from cars into robots – they're transformers! That's the subject of our devotional for the family this month. God tells us to not be conformed to the world, but to be transformed. So as we look together at items and people and places that transform, we're going to learn what it means to be renewed and made different...all in His image.

Preparation: *Find items in your home that speak of transformation and gather them to the family table. Ideas are: transformer figures, the movie Cinderella, a pack of seeds, a cake mix box, and some Playdough. Finally, have a cake baked, hidden in the oven, ready to serve at the end of the study.*

Read Romans 12:2 together:

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Transformers – These fun figures look like one thing, and then with a bit of maneuvering, they change into another thing! We look like everyone else around us, in the fact that we're human. But in God, we are all uniquely made. And when he bends us and shapes us into his image of who he created us to be, we become transformed into a powerful vehicle for him! (*Pass the transformer around and let the family change it back and forth.*)

Cinderella – Remember this movie? Cinderella wore tattered clothes and got dirty working among the cinders of the fireplace. But what happened? (*Let the kids describe her transformation and that of the pumpkin, too!*) God is not a fairy godmother, but he does have the power to take the parts of us that are dirty and unclean and make us beautiful. And we don't have to run home by midnight! His transformation is eternal...

Seeds – (*Pass around the seed packet.*) Notice how tiny the seeds are in this packet. And yet a huge plant can grow out of each tiny speck of a seed! That's a transformation that's hard to even understand at all. Yet God, in his amazing creativity, places everything needed inside that seed to respond to water and sun, and then sprout into a beautiful flower, bush, or even a huge tree. What an amazing God we serve! He has big plans for us all...

Playdough – Let's each take a piece of Playdough and make something out of it. (*Pinch off a piece and pass it around – then share your creations.*) Playdough is easy to manipulate because it's soft. Jesus requires that our heart be soft too, not hardened because of anger and hatred, so that he can make us tender to the needs of those around us.

Cake – Cake mixes come with all the dry ingredients in the box. (*Pass around the box and have an older child read what needs to be added before baking.*) Once the wet ingredients are added and mixed in, and the cake is placed in a hot oven and timed, out comes this delicious dessert we all cannot resist! God has just the right ingredients of love, peace and joy to mix into

our hearts when we present them to him, so that we come out tasting sweet and delicious!
(Surprise the family with the baked cake from the oven).

Before we enjoy this great transformation (the cake) together, let's pray and ask God to allow his transforming power to make us into his image, so that we can bring glory to Him.

Pray together as a family.

The Family Practice – Road Trip – by Rachel Toalson

A few days ago, we packed up in our mini-van, every seat in this eight-capacity vehicle occupied, and went to Family Camp.

Family Camp is a place we have been four years running—a retreat over a three-day weekend where families can take time to reconnect, play together and rest. We usually are the youngest family there. It took me a while to figure this out. The camp, with its canoe capabilities and its swimming pool with a slide and its large wooden playground, seemed like it would appeal to parents of kids as young as ours.

And then I remembered the packing and the traveling and all of the logistics must be worked out to successfully road-trip with young children.

It's exhausting.

The day we left, we had plans to leave right after the baby ate, which was usually around 3 p.m. It was only a 2.5-hour drive, so we should have been able to make it before **the** baby needed to eat again. Except my husband didn't start packing the car until I sat down to feed the baby and it took an entire hour to fit everything inside the crammed-full car. Except two minutes down the road one of the bigger boys said he needed to go potty, and we knew he wasn't joking, and then everyone else, of course, said they needed to go, too, because it meant a break from the car (already). Except, we ran into torrential rain and heavy traffic.

A 2.5-hour road trip turned into a six-hour drive.

By the end of it all, our kids were whining, the baby was screaming and I said we would never, ever do this again, because it was **just.too.hard**. And it's true. It was hard. Even the retreat was hard, because 3-year-old twins don't make anything easy.

But the time spent away was good for us. It was good for our family. The 8-year-old learned how to row a canoe with his daddy. The 6-year-old strung beads and blessed all the mothers at the retreat with a pretty nametag necklace. The 4-year-old found a Batman mask in the treasure box set out the first day and wore it for the entire weekend. The twins painted pictures they never would have painted at home because it was so messy and turned their faces black. But it was camp, and it was fun, and it was so good to take a weekend to just enjoy each other.

Sometimes the hardest parts are the parts that turn out to be the most life-changing parts.

When we are the parents of young children, it can feel almost impossible to go anywhere, because there is so much to pack and so many unknowns, and the kids will be in the car for so long, and we'll probably go crazy, and what about the routine?

But sometimes it's good for us to throw out that routine and accept the unexpected and go a little crazy, because there is little-boy pride in rowing across an entire pond, and there is little-boy excitement at having mastered that humongous twisty slide into water, alone, and there is little-boy joy in having made something beautiful for other people.

Sure, it took an hour to fit all those suitcases around legs and seats and a baby swing. Sure, that trip didn't turn out exactly the way we planned. Sure, the kids drove us crazy asking every other minute how much longer it would be, but as soon as our car pulled into camp and they read the front sign, they started shaking the back end of the car they were so excited.

It was that minute I felt glad we had braved a road trip with six kids.

To make traveling with young kids a little easier, try this:

1. Bring along some audio books. We checked out some classics: *How to Eat Fried Worms*, *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, *Peter Pan*, and listened to them during the trip (Tip: Always bring more than you think you need, in case of torrential rains and heavy traffic). Our boys love listening to stories when we're traveling, and the parents get to listen, too.

2. Give them a small travel kit that's only used during trips. When we made the 26-hour trip to Florida to visit family, we got each of the boys a new composition book and a small container of crayons and set them free. The 3-year-olds drew one line on every page. The 6-year-old drew works of art and colored them in. The 8-year-old took notes about each state we passed through and called it his Travel Diary. It still sits in his closet, with the date and time we drove up to his grandpa's house. It's a great memory for him.

3. Play car games. We all know the typical ones: *I Spy* or *Shapes in the Clouds* or *Road Trip Bingo*. For variety try this one: *Word Association Game*: One person picks a word, another says the first word that comes to mind based on the first person's word. (Example: Person 1 says "Banana." Person 2 says "Yellow." Person 3 says "Taxi.") This can get hilarious with young ones.

YOU

Under the Influence – The Proof – by Marcy Lytle

You know the part of the bible that says if I give my body to be burned and all I have to the poor but don't have, it means nothing, right? It's found in that famous love chapter, [1 Corinthians 13](#). I suppose passages of that chapter are quoted or sung in more weddings than any other verses in the bible. And usually I've heard lessons from it regarding giving to the needy and helping others, and how we must couple our giving with love, in order for our actions to bring us profit.

But I don't recall this verse being used so much when it comes to relationships with those we love the most – like our family and friends. In other words, if we preach to those closest to us about how they need to live, we even explain to them the errors of their ways, and offer a hand up by inviting them sit next to us on any given Sunday at church – but we don't have love – this profits neither their souls nor ours.

Recently, I was exercising as I do in the early morning, to worship music. I enjoy doing this alone – just me and God – before I start my work. On this particular morning, my husband was still at home working a bit before he had to go into the office. I don't like him to watch me or even see me, because it's MY PRIVATE TIME alone with the Lord as I dance and move to the awesome lyrics of the music. The song I was dancing to was by For King and Country, "The Proof of Your Love."

Here's one line from the song:

"Let my life be the proof, the proof of your love."

And the rest of the song includes parts of 1 Corinthians 13.

My husband stepped into the room and saw me and commented something to me, which I don't even remember, but I do remember my reply. I snapped back and said "Don't watch me!" as I glared at him as if to shoo him away from my quiet time, because "how dare he" intrude? He was making a simple statement to me as he got a drink of water, and I retorted with a harsh statement as I continued to worship. Do you see something wrong with this picture?

Right then, more of the lyrics played in my ears,

"If I sing but don't have love I waste my breath with every song. I bring an empty voice, a hollow noise. If I speak with a silver tongue, convince a crowd but don't have love I leave a bitter taste with every word I say."

I immediately felt shame for my retort to my sweet, thirsty husband who just wanted a drink of water and caught a glimpse of me worshipping and made a comment. Here I was dancing and worshipping in my alone time with God to the truth of his word about love, and yet my actions, my life before my husband at that given moment, was full of anything but love.

We all do this. The ones we love the most are the ones we fight with, lay side time with, smart off to, criticize and bicker with, and oh that other thing – we judge them. I'm not sure why the ones we are closest to end up receiving our worst on any given day, and our lives so many

times are not the proof of His love at all. In fact, our lives together with our family and friends are often proof that we don't really love like He does. We love with condition.

I immediately asked my husband to forgive me that morning, because I had let my purpose driven quiet time supersede my connection with the man I loved. I valued my time alone and felt he was encroaching up on it by being here, showing his face, and speaking to me. I had an agenda, and he interfered.

These are the small foxes that spoil the vine, so to speak. ([Song of Solomon 2:15](#)). We don't realize that while we are focusing on loving others well by giving to the poor, showing up to volunteer for service, making a meal for a family we don't even know – all good things to do – and all motivated by our love for Him...we are then neglecting those nearest to us by shoving them off when they dare to peek their heads around the corner when we're busy "doing."

When I get going in the morning in my routine, my work, and my agenda I'm like the energizer bunny that runs until bedtime. But I don't want to live my life running and doing even good things, and in that running, run over the ones in my life who matter the most.

My life to strangers might look like the proof of His love, but my life at home to my husband and to my closest of friends has to prove His love as well.

I'll close with another line from the song, and then take a listen if you have the time...to the entire song.

"If I give to a needy soul but don't have love then who is poor? It seems all the poverty is found in me."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-2dKOfbC9c>

or

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pr9YVD05x8M>

Strengthening Your Core - The Embrace – by Marcy Lytle

I was shopping recently for “longer” athletic shorts to wear over my bathing suit for summer. I’m not willing to walk around the pool without them, since my legs no longer are appealing to any eyes, not even my own! I couldn’t find any long shorts, because the short ones filled the racks. As I walked into one store, feeling a bit disappointed about it, I thought to myself,

“Embrace what you *do* have, not what you *don’t*.”

And it was like the word “embrace” was in neon lights, blinking for me to take notice.

Have you ever reached out to hug someone and she kept her arms to her side, stiff as a board? It’s not a very warm feeling to embrace a telephone pole, is it? And what about an embrace of a different kind, like accepting enthusiastically that you’re now a mom, the CEO of a company, or 10 pounds lighter? Those exciting moments of life are an easy embrace, as are the reciprocating arms of a friend when we hold her close.

There’s a huge difference between embracing someone we’re excited to see and just a quick hug and a turn, as we walk quickly away. There are times when embracing being a mom is joyful, satisfying, and so fun, but other times when we wish for our pre-kid time and bodies back. Embracing something requires intentional clasp of the arms, welcoming of the heart, and holding dearly that which is being brought near.

So here are 10 things I’m going to try and embrace and be enthusiastic about, instead of whining and wailing about that which is no more...

- I’m going to embrace the next decade on the horizon of my aging process as though it were another milestone, indicating a race I’m running well.
- I’m going to embrace the fact that sitting on the floor Indian style may no longer be my comfort place when kids are present, and I’m okay with that.
- I’m going to embrace my aging parents ever so gently with my arms, but ever so closely with my heart, knowing their time left with me is short.
- I’m going to embrace the shopping experience for clothes I love and ones that look good on me, and enjoy wearing them with a smile.
- I’m going to embrace a friend when she hugs me, so that she knows she is valued and honored and loved.
- I’m going to embrace the sun on my face and the wind in my hair, when I walk along the beach or down the trail hand in hand with my husband, or even alone with Him.
- I’m going to embrace the words from the pages of the Good Book more than I embrace a good quote on Pinterest.
- I’m going to embrace the songs that rise in my heart when I am grateful instead of hateful.
- I’m going to embrace the heat of the summer, the breezes of fall, the crisp air of winter, and the smells of spring – all seasons.
- I’m going to embrace the knowledge that I am beautifully and wonderfully made.

When is the last time you felt disappointed with what you can no longer do, no longer have, or can no longer achieve?

Once we start down the disappointment dirt road, pretty soon dust is flying up in our face and we cannot see any of the beauty around us.

Think about embracing the good, instead. It's not easy to reach out and hold that which doesn't want to be held, or to hold close those things that are hard to face. But choosing to welcome the things we cannot change, to pray about everything without ceasing, and accept and relish the fact that He hears and cares, sets our hearts at ease to breathe, pump strongly, and thrive – until that perfect pair of shorts appears that fits us and covers us like a glove – embracing our body with a snug fit.

And yes, I did find a pair of shorts I love...in the Men's Department 😊

Healthy Habits – The Good-For-You Meals Kids Love – by Mandy Major

You want to eat healthy, but you're starving and you have 30 minutes to throw something together before things unravel on the home front. So...

What do you make?

An even better question...

What do you make that is healthy that your kids will eat too?

I have found planning ahead, cooking extra to freeze, and the art of disguise, are my best friends here!

In those moments where I have to come up with dinner in a hurry, my go-to meal of choice is **pesto or spaghetti**. I choose these for the very reason that I can hide anything in the sauce! I can throw any veggie in the blender with spaghetti sauce, puree it, and my kids will eat it! I have discovered with my kids that their hatred of vegetables is usually due to texture, and not flavor. If it's in a pureed form and served over pasta, it's amazing what I can get them to eat!

I make my pesto with greens, basil, garlic, walnuts, and olive oil. I load up on the greens too! 2-4 cups of spinach to 1 cup of basil! I use walnuts instead of pine nuts because they are much cheaper than pine nuts and are loaded with omega 3's. I also leave out the cheese. I started making pesto without cheese because I didn't always have fresh parmesan cheese on hand, and now we actually prefer the vegan version! You can always add cheese last, over the hot pasta, if you like. As for the pasta I choose? I usually let my kids pick what shapes they like. The brilliance of this is they're already more willing to give it a try when they see their pasta shapes on the counter waiting to boil!

Spaghetti and meatballs is another quick dinner in less than 45 minutes. Without the meatballs you can have this ready in 20 minutes. I always keep a few jars of organic sauce in my pantry! EASY! I throw this in my blender and add any veggies I have on hand. Some I always have handy are fresh tomatoes, squash or zucchini, carrots, and greens.

Meatballs are always a huge hit around here and these are easy and fun because I can make a lot and freeze them. This recipe comes from my sister who got it from her favorite Italian restaurant near her home in Chicago. I love these because they bake in the oven and they're so incredibly easy! I can easily make 60 at a time.

Meatballs:

2 lbs ground beef
1 lb Italian Sausage
2 eggs
1 Cup bread crumbs (I just blend whatever bread or crackers I have in my food processor)
1 tsp oregano
1 tsp herbs de providence
1 tsp garlic (or 2 cloves fresh)
½ tsp salt
½ tsp pepper

1. Mix everything together with your hands (My kids love to help do this because it's a bit like playing with play dough!)
2. Form into equal size balls and place on a cookie sheet

3. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 min
4. Cut ball in half to check and make sure they are done!
5. Serve or freeze! I always freeze them on the cookie sheet and then transfer them to Ziploc bags after they are frozen. This way they don't stick together! Then you can just take out what you want for dinner and leave the rest!

Pesto:

2 cups fresh spinach
1 cup fresh basil
½ cup organic olive oil
½ cup walnuts (plus more if needed)
2-4 cloves fresh garlic
½ tsp of salt (plus more if needed)

Put everything in a food processor and pulse until smooth. Serve over pasta of choice. I usually use half the recipe on our dinner and freeze half for another meal. This pesto freezes great! To freeze, just portion out into bowl with a lid and place in freezer.

So there you have it...the answer to those nagging questions that moms have about dinner...

Beauty for Ashes - It's My Choice – by Pam Charro

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

(John 14:27)

God promised us his peace and it wasn't given because we could earn or deserve it. So it is there, waiting to be received; yet we usually have such a challenging time receiving it! We love God and have chosen to follow him, so why does peace seem to be so elusive?

I heard a good analogy by Joyce Meyer. She said that everything God gives is like radio waves waiting to be picked up by us, and we are like radio towers. The waves are always there, but sometimes we are tuned in to other frequencies. And I realize that is often true of me. This analogy helped me to never question God as the giver, but to accept that the receiving is up to me.

So how can I better receive God's peace?

I know it isn't by ignoring my problems. They are real and very frustrating! But I can choose what I focus on, and focusing on God's promises is what will lead me to his peace.

Here is what I am learning about my choices:

- It is up to me to choose to believe God
- It is my choice to be thankful in the midst of my struggles
- I can always ask the Holy Spirit to help me to receive God's peace
- I can pray, pray, and pray some more!

Basically, this is Philippians 4:6,

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

However, I paraphrased. God's kingdom and promises are eternal, so his peace will only be found there. Stress, anxiety and problems are all temporary. I am free to acknowledge all things, but I choose what I focus on.

James 2:18(b) is a good reminder that if I believe God, I will make godly choices.

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

If I want God's peace, I can always **choose to receive** it by tuning my radio waves to his goodness and promises.

Created for Life - Where are the Heroes? By Ginny Hurley

Miracles are happening all around us. Nations and cities around the world are experiencing the presence of Jesus and seeing unheard of healings, salvations, and transformations. The Father is sending out messengers, believers, and agents of love to preach, teach, and confirm the Word through accompanying signs. These sent ones are radical believers in the truth of the gospel, and are willing to lay down their own lives in order to bring transformation to a lost and hurting culture.

Where are they?

Why haven't we heard these testimonies?

They are people right in our own neighborhoods, schools, businesses, and homes. Young people are encountering the love of God through the Body of Christ at the mall, grocery stores, concerts, and in every realm of society. Churches are welcoming His Spirit and are entering the celebration! God is alive and moving in unprecedented ways. One suicide bomber in an unnamed nation came to a showing of the Jesus movie, intending to blow everyone away. As the movie progressed, he was overwhelmed by the love of God, gave his heart to the Lord, and publicly repented in front of a startled crowd! One young lady in a horrific situation encountered Jesus in her room and exchanged her shame for His love and acceptance. Another was almost killed by a bomb. She was burned beyond recognition, and left for dead. Jesus healed her and she became a model because of her beauty. Someone you and I know might have been the one to share the gospel with her. These believers are not nameless or faceless, and aren't living for recognition or reward, but from LOVE.

Our thoughts of heroes are the Davids, Daniels, and Pauls. Society's idea of a hero is the one on the football field or movie screen.

God has other ideas!

He doesn't see His people as ordinary or simple, but powerful!

Each of us has been given the assignment to go and offer the goodness of His Kingdom. Whenever we choose to believe who we are and what He has given us, we are purposeful and full of life's message. We can only give away what we have. It's not even in us to hide anymore. We have Him living in us, and the only way to subdue Him is to choose to believe the lie that we aren't who He says we are! Our minds tell us that the job is for evangelists, preachers, and church staff.

God says, "Rise up, Gideon! You great warrior!"

We reply, "Huh? Are you talking to me? I'm just a preschool teacher...a student...a cashier. Remember? You made me shy. That's why I give to my church, because my pastor is gifted and everyone loves him! Let him do it."

I was observing a friend the other day. She had no idea that she was sharing the gospel. She was smiling and chatting with a woman in the check-out line at the store. The woman shared that her back had been really bothering her and she was having trouble with pain. My friend asked if she could pray for her, and she was HEALED right

there in the store! This beautiful friend loves Jesus and it is her lifestyle to give Him away. She didn't have an agenda. She wasn't on the prowl for some victim to come along. She was merely being who she is, a lover of God and His Kingdom. She has discovered that the supernatural is higher than the natural. But what if the lady *wasn't* healed? What if she *was*? Our own experience cannot dictate our beliefs, only His Word can.

- He said to GO!
- He is my Healer!
- He is my Hope!
- I must make the choice to believe!

I'm learning to hear the difference between the lie and the truth! I'm training my mind and heart to hear His voice and obey. In Philippians 4, it says to think on things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, and of GOOD REPORT! I choose to go after Him, to search out the testimonies of LIFE, to listen to the good reports, feed on His Word, and open my eyes to a lost and hurting world. I choose LOVE!

Do I always see? No way!
Do I fail and fall down? Yes!

But my decision was made a long time ago. He is always good. Every good and perfect gift comes down from Him.

I adore Him! He is my Hope forever! I can't help but share Him!

We, my friends, are CALLED HEROES by God!

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road - Melting into One – Lynn Cherry

“It’s not like they make it out to be in the premarital classes. They make it sound so easy, so matter of fact.”

My friend Anita is newlywed after many years of single life. She is learning a lot about marriage that premarital classes don’t prepare you for.

Anita continued, “It feels more like we are two ice cubes thrown into one glass and in order to become one, everything about us has to change. We don’t just become one, we melt into one.”

I can totally relate to Anita’s analogy and the idea of being thrown in a tight space with my spouse, feeling the winter in our sharp edges.

Her analogy awakened the scientist in me and I decided to do an experiment. I put two cubes of ice into three glasses. I placed one glass outside in the hot Texas sun, one on my air-conditioned kitchen island and one in the refrigerator. I set a timer, watched, and waited.

“What are you doing?” my husband David asked, when he came home from work and found me outside on the patio staring at two half-melted ice cubes.

I explained my experiment.

“Well I can tell you this much. The ice cubes that fell on the floor in the kitchen are already melted,” he commented.

I groaned. Of course he would notice the puddles of water on the floor. He has a way of running into those!

It took 19 minutes and 7 seconds for the ice to melt outside. I was surprised it took that long. I had melted long before the last sliver of ice was gone.

It took 33 minutes and 49 seconds for the ice on my kitchen island to melt. It was about 15 degrees cooler in the house and it took about 15 minutes longer to melt.

Four hours later, when David and I left to go out on a date, there was still ice in the glass in the fridge, which was about 55 degrees cooler than the patio. It melted at some point during a musical at the Georgetown Palace Theater. I confess, I was perfectly willing to abandon my inner scientist for a night out with my husband. But we did talk about the experiment and looked for conclusions.

Our first conclusion is that **environment matters**. The warmer the environment, the less time it took for two to melt into one. That makes sense. It IS easier to submit to change in the safety of love and acceptance.

Our second conclusion is that **the more energy you put into your relationship the faster two melt into one**. Frozen water molecules are stuck in a rigid hexagonal pattern. When thermal energy is added to the system, the molecules begin to move faster and they break free of their frozen structure. In the much the same way, time,

attention, and focus add energy to our relationship. The effort we make to keep moving toward each other softens our edges and points.

Our third conclusion comes from my husband's knack for spotting any mess I leave behind. The ice that fell out of the fridge and landed alone on the floor was the first to melt. We call this proximity effect. Anyone who has felt the bite of a cold remark or the chill of an icy stare will understand this observation. Two ice cubes take longer to melt than one because they keep each other colder. **The issues we bring into marriage as two flawed individuals can make it harder to surrender and easier to defend our solitary structures.**

Jesus said, *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh.* Mark 10:7-8 NIV

The Greek word for "will become" not only suggests something that happens in the future, it often indicates a timeless aspect.

Two do not instantaneously become one on their wedding day.

It's a process that continues for years to come.

It is like melting, changing states, and gradually blending two lives together.

Date Night Fun – The Classics – by Marcy Lytle

The classics are those things that have established value over time, never losing their charm, their attraction, or their ability to entertain or inspire us. I think everyone has a favorite classic story or movie from childhood. *It's a Wonderful Life* is a classic movie that is watched over and over again every holiday season.

There are also classic dates that never grow old, are always fun to enjoy together, and they need to be pulled out from time to time, just like an old record with a familiar tune needs to be dusted off and played.

However, we're providing you with five classic dates this month...with a twist! You'll find the activity to be familiar, but there will be an added "something" to make it new and different.

Enjoy!

Classic Movie – Our town shows the old black and white movies in one of the oldest theaters in town, so that we get ambience with the movie. But even if your town doesn't have this option, consider finding one on television for a classic movie night at home...alone. Pick a classic that you both know and love and discuss your favorite scenes beforehand. Enjoy a few classic snacks and drinks with your movie and wear your classic jeans (rolled up, of course) and sneakers, hair pinned up, and hats on heads! (Moon pies, root beer floats fit the bill!). *Our classic movie choice?* How about [Wait until Dark?](#) You'll want to sit close during this one!

Classic Diner Date – Diners are in every town, aren't they? Find a local diner that has that 50's feel and plan your date night accordingly. Remember Andy Griffith? He often took Helen to the diner for dinner and then enjoyed some music on the porch swing in the moonlight. So after your diner dinner, find a moonlight bench and park yourselves, and sing together. If one of you plays an instrument, bring it and play it. If neither of you sing, then play your favorite 50's tunes. Want a suggestion? How about ["In the Still of the Night"](#) by Five Satins. And if you really want to splurge, rent a convertible for your night out, or...ride bikes instead.

Classic Music – What if your entire night revolved around classic music, from the decades you've lived so far? Decide on three. Pick one from your childhood, one from your teen years, and one from any decade you've been together. Download them and bring them along on your date night out, or have them ready to pull up on your laptop. Enjoy a three course meal as you share your classic tunes. Stop at a drive-thru for an appetizer to share as you listen to the childhood favorite – and pick something from the menu that's fun – like a bag of tater tots! Next, enjoy a dinner on a patio, sharing a meal, while you share the lyrics from your second song, then play it as you leave. Finally, either at home or over coffee at a shop, share your third classic. What a fun trio of an evening! A childhood song that might be fun to start with (or end with) is [Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star](#) – as you wonder together at the vastness of the sky.

Classic Dancing – The Twist, the Moonwalk, and the Hokey Pokey. There you have three. Or you can pick your own. [Visit this site](#) to refresh your moves. Sometime during the course of your date night, break out into each of these three dances. For example, enjoy a picnic dinner by the water and get up and surprise him. Take a walk on a trail that's lit by moonlight and

break into the move, when the mood hits. And finally, visit a coffee shop where live music is playing and be brave and get up and dance – or if that’s not your thing – save the last dance for home when the lights are down low. Dancing is always a mood lifter, so why not be bold and date night dance this weekend?

Classic Stories – What was your favorite Golden Book as a kid? Find it or look up the story, or go buy it! World Market still sells [Golden Books](#). Read through your pick and see if you can incorporate something about the story into the date night. For example, if you choose *The Poky Little Puppy* you might include a visit to a pet store, to see the cute puppies, after you read the book together. Maybe you’d rather choose a classic book from your adult years, like *A Tale of Two Cities* or *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Spend your evening discussing literature classics and visit a bookstore, sip coffee over discussion of the book’s contents. And then...take home a new classic to start reading together. What a fun idea!

The classics are always fun to pull out, in all decades of life, and you could even mix and match some of the ideas above, or come up with your own! It doesn’t matter if you’re newlyweds or been married for decades, there are classics in your life that you can revisit and share together. It may open up a whole new conversation and closeness that you’ve not had before! Happy date night fun in the month of July!

After 30 Years - The Seesaw – by Marcy Lytle

I love seesaws. In fact, when we are on road trips, I often ask to stop in small town parks that have them, because they're not around much anymore – especially in big city playgrounds. You know how the seesaw works – two people hop on – hopefully balancing each other out – and up and down you go! Of course, dismounting requires attention to the other person so you don't get whacked in the head (maybe this is why they're not so popular anymore!). However, when the balance is just right, the push is just enough, and eyes are locked in sync, the seesaw can be one of the most fun experiences among all of the playground equipment!

Being married requires seesawing every once in a while. First of all, we need to look for the opportunity to balance each other out, then we need to be gentle with the push so as not to bounce the other one right off onto the hard ground, and we also need to keep our eyes on each other so that we both enjoy the ride as we move back and forth together, in perfect rhythm.

My husband has a nice set of lungs on him, so he's told quite often that he's loud. It's a great quality to have when trying to get others' attention in a crowded room of people. But it's not such a great asset in the quiet of a theater. His whispers are not really whispers at all...

I, on the other hand, am a busy bee. I rarely stop once I get going, much like the energizer bunny. This is a great quality when there's a list of things to be done, but not so wonderful when I'm exhausted at the end of the day and grouchy – and mean.

It's at times like these that we hop on the seesaw. When he gets too loud and doesn't realize it, I sit on the side of reason and nicely remind him to quiet his voice. This doesn't work if I slam him with criticism and Shhh! of the finger, but it works out if I gently sit on the other side and balance out the boom with a kind and calm spirit. When I'm too busy to rest and the balance is tipped too much by activity, so that I'm up in the air in a tizzy, he has a great way of pressing me to relax, rubbing my back, or holding me tight so that I come back into balance.

Seesawing alone is quite impossible. Either one side is loaded with heaviness that has no legs and we're stranded up high and can't get down, or we're sitting alone on the ground unable to fly because we won't stand up and allow the other person to get on and balance us out. Seesawing by definition is the act of going up and down – when one goes up – the other goes down. That's the only way to enjoy this fun activity.

Seesawing in anger is quite dangerous. Imagine showing up at the playground angry at your playmate and just sliding off your seat, sending him hard to the ground! That's what we do when we get angry at a weakness in our spouse and we refuse to pray, support, or quietly soothe their mile-high swing. It's just as rude to sit in our own stubbornness, refusing to let a playmate mount the other side, all because we're judging and criticizing. What a missed opportunity of seesawing when we weight down only one side!

Seesawing in sync is quite enjoyable when one goes up, and the other goes down, because we know the movement is going to continue up and down, as long as...we face each other. That's a requirement of the teeter-totter – that both participants face each other. Why? Well

you can imagine the disaster of hurt that would result if one exited the wooden board without the other one being aware...

There are things about your spouse that draw you to him, and then there are things that just simply annoy. But the truth is, he feels the same way about you. You're both joined and one – yet you're both very different and separate. Marriage is give and take, give and take, up and down, up and down.

It's easy to exit this piece of the marriage playground equipment and just let the board whack our partner in the face when we feel he's a little too heavy on his side. Maybe he's a disorganized mess, won't socialize at a party, or zones out in front of the television. Perhaps we like things tidy and neat, we enjoy stimulating conversation with friends, and hate the television with a passion. These differences are normal in a marriage. But they're not grounds for divorce.

There are ways to balance each other out, lock eyes, and allow each other to push – then soar – push – then soar. And if we learn to welcome each other as we take our place on either side of the seesaw, we might find ourselves on a delightful ride – instead of grounded alone unable to fly.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – The Lonely Hearts – by Rachel Critz

Do you ever have that lonely feeling in your chest, even when there are tons of people standing in the same room as you?

Yeah, me too.

You can put that sweet smile on your face and wear it like a mask. Even if you believe that everyone around you thinks you are happy, guess who knows about that little sting of loneliness in your heart?

Well I mean, He is your God.

He knows what you think, what you feel, and what you need.

Psalms 46:1 says: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

And maybe you do not just feel lonely, but like an outcast. You walk down the halls at school seeing the popular girls and boys wanting to be like them. A word of advice: Don't you dare try to become someone you are not! God created you to be the light in dark places.

2 Chronicles 16:9a says: "For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him."

You know, maybe that emptiness inside you is from you pretending to be someone you are not or simply because you see no hope with the bright light you hold. As a Christian, we are not meant to fit in. You are meant to stand out from the crowd.

As we grow older, we will find it harder to be able to share Christ since the urge to fit in will be knocking at the door. Loneliness and emptiness will creep up on us as rejection comes from the popular kids or we feel, again I say, hopeless.

I want to share something with you.

Two years ago I had this volleyball teammate who made some bad mistakes. We all are human so simply I forgave her for the situations I was put in by her. As I grew to know her, not only on the court but off the court, I noticed her lacking in faith. I began praying for her but I only saw rejection and the same result over and over again as the weeks past.

Just as soon as I was about to give up, we had our last practice. She had recently broken up with her boyfriend and began going to church again. Then she approached me with some questions:

What type of bible do you have?"

What is your favorite bible verse?

Where do you go to church?

She proceeded to stand up for her faith in the last tournament we shared together, being the first one to pray in the team huddles.

We do not have to let fear, hopelessness, or loneliness have its own way in our hearts. God owns our hearts.

We can stand up for our faith and stand out in Christ's eyes.

That's all that really matters, right?

How God sees us should be the most important judgment for us.

Psalm 28:7:

"The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song."

Moving Forward - The Smile – by Pam Charro

One of the most moving Christmas songs for me has always been "The Little Drummer Boy." I still cry when I hear it. I imagine how nervous the boy must have been, knowing he was to play before his King and wanting so much to do his very best. I am touched by all of the thought he put into giving his very best gift.

And then .. the smile.

God's approval.

What a beautiful moment.

I have often wondered why my gifts don't seem to have the same kind of impact. I love people but I feel inept at really establishing deep and lasting connections with them. What am I actually accomplishing with my life? How will I make God proud of me? At nearly 51 years of age, I should have better answers to these questions by now!

Am I the only person who has this type of frustration?

I was recently surprised when I was approached by several people within a short period of time and told that I had left an impression on them. You see, I really love greeting new people and helping them to feel welcome and encouraged. I don't think much of it; it just seems to be something that is easy and natural for me to do. One of the elders in my church asked me to join with him in targeting new people and helping them to feel welcome because it is my *gifting*. Two women in one of my gym classes told me that they always remembered me because I had so encouraged them to keep coming. And another woman who was recently leaving the gym with two small children greeted me with, "Hi, Pam!" I helped her to her car and then cautiously asked her to remind me of her name. She said, "I haven't worked out in two years until today but I remember you because you have always made me feel so welcome here." Two years?! I was astounded.

I realized that the small gifts I give are often very valuable to others and it encouraged me that God might be doing something much greater with my everyday life than I had been aware of.

I am not good at everything, but the good I can do is important.

And when I give my gift, God really does smile.

Bush Bean Blessings - Limbo Land Way by Tammy Morrison

Transition is never easy. I know...I was there for quite a few months. Limbo Land wasn't really a place I enjoyed living. I mean, does anyone actually enjoy it? I bet you've never met anyone who proclaimed, "YES! I love being in limbo!"

The good news: Limbo Land doesn't last forever.

The maybe not-so-good news: Limbo Land is often necessary for life movement.

Recently, during our life-transition time (Limbo Land), my husband and I temporarily stayed on a friend's ranch. We were smack-dab in the middle of majestic (although sometimes scary) nature. Everything from cattle, horses, coyotes, wild boars (EEK!), deer, foxes, hummingbirds, butterflies, Canadian snow geese, skunks, scorpions, even snakes...yuck! But the scenery? It was second-to-none. I just had to make sure I remained focused on the beauty and not the beasts.

Fortunately, the view from the kitchen window was an incredible winding road. Every single day, multiple times a day, I gazed at this winding road and pondered all of the life changes we were experiencing. I contemplated our past, our present, and our future.

I am acutely aware that the serenity I experienced during this pondering time intensified my appreciation for life. It's that simple. I could breathe freely...and deeply. Throughout this time of cleansing and healing, if you will, I could feel clarity rising from the ashes of Limbo Land. Each time I looked at that winding road, a new appreciation dawned on me.

Whereas before, I didn't have a clue what was along the way, I learned a few things from the winding road, both literally and figuratively speaking:

- 1) Sometimes the path is smoother than other times, depending on the weather.
- 2) I just might see a skunk along the way, and we all know that's a potentially stinky situation.
- 3) There COULD be a snake along the road; it was important to know the difference between harmless and deadly.
- 4) Inevitably, I'll encounter a loose cow or two which, of course, means I might step in deep doo-doo if I don't watch where I am going (as awesome as they are, those crazy cows are pretty much oblivious and are not potty-trained, so they just do their business wherever).

We all know hindsight's 20/20, so I'd like to declare life lessons learned, but I have a hunch I'll need some reminding along the way. What stands out to me about the winding road from my personal Limbo Land are these priceless treasures:

- 1) There is ALWAYS something beautiful to take into consideration along the way (a bird swooping by, a delicate flower, a butterfly freed from its chrysalis, even a cow mooing "hello" as I pass on the trail).
- 2) If I only focus on the potential harm I just mentioned, I'll miss out on all the wonder to behold. What a crying shame that would be.
- 3) The distance I travel on the path takes me from one place to another, out onto the open road and beyond, which is where I want to go.
- 4) No matter the season of life, change is inevitable. There really is a time for everything under heaven. I can go with the flow of nature, enjoy each moment, and let the process take place naturally.

What could be better than a pause in life to just regroup, take in a few refreshing deep breaths, and prepare for what lies ahead? I guess what I'm trying to say is that as uncomfortable as I was in my personal Limbo Land, it actually served a positive purpose in my life. I'll be forever grateful for my specific time of "waiting for life to happen."

After all, life *is* what happens while I'm living.

My Limbo Land provided me with much-needed rest and reflection. I feel that God spoke to me throughout this moment in time. He opened my eyes to consider the vantage point of a beautiful winding road to clear my thoughts and prepare my heart for the incredible future He has planned for my life.

"For I know the thoughts *and* plans that I have for you, says the Lord, thoughts *and* plans for welfare *and* peace and not for evil, to give you hope in your final outcome. Then you will call upon Me, and you will come and pray to Me, and I will hear *and* heed you. Then you will seek Me, inquire for, *and* require Me [as a vital necessity] and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the Lord..."

Jeremiah 29:11-14 (Amplified Bible).

ENCOURAGEMENT – Dry Spell...Even in the Rain – by Melissa Critz

Rain!

Central Texas drank up the water from heaven! What a blessing for all of creation. We had been in a drought for years, but the weather forecast only showed chances of rain every day, continually. Mud boots strapped on and hair pulled back, I grabbed some carrots and headed out to the barn. With all this rain, riding had become rather nominal and time spent grooming was the choice as of late.

Gathering the tack box, I set it in its place. Horses were haltered and tied to their stalls. While picking hooves and brushing their bodies, my thoughts were focused on the recent events. The college semester had ended and my two oldest were home – one had a summer job and the other was summer-job hunting. In between this, these two young adults were enjoying some much needed rest and refreshment. My other two were still plugging away, two more weeks of school still yet for them – and for myself – since we home school.

With the irregularity of horseback riding, I hadn't been hearing much from my Saddle Partner. No words of wisdom seemed to be pervading my head. It certainly felt like what is talked about as a "dry spell."

Dry times, even in the middle of this rain from heaven?

I guess this is the same that people speak of feeling all alone in a crowd of people. My ears were attuned and I waited to hear Him speak. *But nothing.* I had been asking Him about what to write in this column this month but heard nothing. *Nothing.* I felt like I was trying to force it and just come up with something but even that something wouldn't come. Then I thought on all the teaching I have heard about dry spells - about when God seems distant or quiet. But I really don't believe these exist, as I KNOW that the Lord is always there. He is always with us.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” Joshua 1:9.

So why does it seem like there is a dry time because He is quiet?

Do you think that He wants to hear more from us?

Psalm 13 is what came up in my research (bible.org), split up into three sections – the problem, the petition, and the praise. After reading some, I came up with this:

The Problem: Determine that what is perceived is that God seems distant, hidden, and silent. Slow to respond, if at all. Look at yourself as well. Is there despair, inner turmoil, or futility? Recognize this and give it to Him – turn it over. This leads to...

The Petition: In the silence, cry out! Let it all hang out – this is Almighty God! I promise He can handle it. As you give it to Him then also know that He wants you to see and have the victory as you are part of His kingdom and a victory for you honors the Lord and His kingdom. It brings glory to God. And He delights in you! Then lastly,

The Praise: Remind your spirit man who God is. He is FOR you! He LOVES you! He wants the BEST for you! You are his CHILD!

Going back to Psalm 13, David's circumstances had not changed BUT his focus did.

REFOCUS!

I can be deliberate and speak truth to my heart about God's love and who God is.
I can be thankful for the silence – He wants me to grow and seek Him and know Him. He wants to hear from me. He is my Father.
I can spend time with Him, share my heart, speak with Him, and glorify Him.
I can be blessed with the reading of Psalm 13:

“How long, Lord, will you continue to ignore me? How long will you pay no attention to me? How long must I worry, and suffer in broad daylight? How long will my enemy gloat over me? Look at me! Answer me, O Lord my God! Revive me, or else I will die! Then my enemy will say, ‘I have defeated him!’ Then my foes will rejoice because I am upended. But trust in your faithfulness. May I rejoice because of your deliverance! I will sing praises to the Lord when he vindicates me.”

If you don't know Him as your Saddle Partner, then I encourage you to seek Him and ask Him for the truth of what He did for you through his Son Jesus Christ who died for all and carried every sin so that we can live eternally with Him.

Real Stories – Fresh Freedom – by Ashleigh O'Connor

"Let's just move here!"

I blurted out in nervous excitement as we drove across Lady Bird Lake and passed the Austin skyline, heading north back to the town we called home...back to our comfort zone.

That was over two years ago, and I do not regret opening up that conversation door with my dear husband for one second. It's been two years, or eight changes of seasons. Many of those seasons have come and gone, all with their own little lessons, their own dying off of old thoughts and pains, struggles and pits. And with each changing season, there's been a new characteristic and trait that has come forward to the surface, pushing its way to the top. I'd like to think the change is for the better. My new ways are better than my old ways. My mentality is more broad; more deep and wide.

And my life is more – what's a good word for it – **welcoming**.

To be quite honest, I never thought I would leave the area that I was in a couple of years ago. I liked being comfortable. Don't get me wrong, I loved "growing and maturing." I liked new challenges. But I really, really liked knowing the comfort of things I was familiar with. Those "things" included my obvious expertise on all things marriage (*insert sarcastic tone*), the way I viewed church, even God, doctrine, love, grace. I was comfortable in my job, my friends, and my family relationships. I was comfortable with convincing myself that I knew what things were *supposed* to look like, feel like, pan out like, wind up like, end up like, start up like... You get the picture. In essence, I became really settled into one long, drawn out, never-ending, smells the same, looks the same, **season**, with no real intention of pushing myself into new life.

Then, the fall of 2012 came along. For the sake of saving details for a whole other article and topic of discussion and sharing (I'll keep it brief), the nice foundational box in which we had put our life was completely and utterly smashed to bits – billions and billions of bits. Jobs were shifted, churches were left, relationships in our lives were diminished, questions were raised, belief systems challenged, more questions were raised, tears were cried, arguments ensued, and uncomfortableness set in. **Fast.**

Have you ever felt so uncomfortable you hardly recognized anything around you?

That was me.

That was my life in that season.

From that season forward I, along with my husband and by the gentle and never wavering love of Christ, decided that we would take hold of our situations, our decisions, and our foundation of what we knew, and move on. At the beginning of our shift into 2013, it was becoming more and more clear that we would make a physical move away from the place we had previously believed we would call home for many, many years. Healing conversations, talks of moving, dreams of settling elsewhere, began. We stopped being afraid of feeling like we were running away from our pain and confusion and embraced the fact that we were instead running straight into a new season, an exciting adventure, and an array of endless opportunities to better ourselves in our present and for our future. We had always loved visiting the city of Austin. We were drawn to its natural beauty, its laid back style, the dozens and dozens of hidden outdoor

treasures to explore. Willie Nelson said it right when he said, “There’s a freedom you begin to feel the closer you get to Austin, Texas.”

And that's exactly what we were looking for – freedom.

A fresh freedom that we hadn't experienced in a long, long time. Maybe ever.

A new season that encompassed fresh everything.

Fresh scenery, a fresh home, fresh smells, fresh opportunities, fresh thinking.

We needed a new beginning. And in the spring of 2013, our new season began right here in Austin, Texas. It's been a changing of seasons like none other before and I don't expect it to be the last. Just as sure as the spring will turn to summer, the summer to fall, fall to winter, and back again (or, if you live in Texas, winter straight to summer and back to a one week spring), so will there be more new beginnings to be shared. More changes to be made, more times to be celebrated, pains to be felt, love to be given, grace to be unveiled, thoughts to be stretched, beliefs to be solidified or shattered, relationships to be formed and cultivated, and laughs to be shared. And in the midst of all of those things, **I will always embrace the fact that there is forever grace, forever love, and forever trust in what God has laid out for me**, my life, and my next eight changing seasons and the eight after that, and so on and so forth...

After all, there's a time for everything under the sun.

Will you embrace your changing season?

There's an opportune time to do things, a right time for everything on the earth:

*A right time for birth and another for death,
A right time to plant and another to reap,
A right time to kill and another to heal,
A right time to destroy and another to construct,
A right time to cry and another to laugh,
A right time to lament and another to cheer,
A right time to make love and another to abstain,
A right time to embrace and another to part,
A right time to search and another to count your losses,
A right time to hold on and another to let go,
A right time to rip out and another to mend,
A right time to shut up and another to speak up,
A right time to love and another to hate,
A right time to wage war and another to make peace.*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

*Ashleigh is California born, Texas raised, Austin based. She is happily married to the love of her life and partner in crime. And by crime, she means Netflix binge-watching, avid learner of all things natural-living based, dog-mom, and hoarder of coffee cups. She is a believer in **grace** and unconditional **love**, only made possible by Jesus and the finished work on the cross. Ashleigh is a champion for loud laughing and memory-making moments with folks in my*

*life that are second-to-none. She loves patio dinners and road trips to anywhere, hikes along creeks and dance parties in the kitchen. (Sometimes all she needs is a good **giggle** and a long **hug...**) For snapshots of Ashleigh's life and the things she loves, follow her on Instagram [@crashleighann](#) and find her on Facebook!*

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Camp Mimi by Debbie Heatley

Camp Mimi came into existence about a year ago when my son approached me about keeping our grandchildren, 4 year old Grace, almost 3 year old, Elijah, and 1 ½ year old Anna Ruth for about a week. My son is a youth pastor, and he and his wife needed someone to keep the kids while they accompanied their youth group to camp. Prior to this, we had usually just kept the kids for 24 hours or so. This would be the first time we would be keeping them for several nights, and so...

“Camp Mimi” was born.

I taught first grade for 10 years (years ago) and I learned that the best way to make a happy experience for children is to have a *game plan* for survival. For the week I had the grandkids, I decided to have a backyard Bible school experience that would be *fun for them* and *fun for us*. Last year, I went with a camping theme and planned learning activities for them each day. I even hired a teenager from our church to come and help. We did things from tie-dying t-shirts to counting games to art projects. Every afternoon we took the kids swimming and had a movie every evening. The kids loved going to camp while Mom and Dad were attending their camp.

This year, my son asked again so I began brainstorming ideas for Camp Mimi 2015. We had recently gone camping with my son’s family and he took us on a treasure hunt using his cell phone and GPS. The coordinates took us to the top of a hill that gave us a 360 view of the park and surrounding area. The treasure was actually a tiny toy dinosaur that was lying on the rocks. That gave me the inspiration for this year’s theme for Camp Mimi:

Pirates and Finding Treasure!

I like to find a Bible verse to center my theme so I looked up what the Bible says about treasure and found this verse,

Psalms 119:162 “I rejoice at your word as one who finds great treasure.”

My theme was going to be how while pirates are searching for silver and gold, the Bible tells us that God’s word is like finding **great treasure**.

I was off and running. My husband will testify that I can get carried away sometimes with carrying out a theme, but my inner first grade teacher took over. I knew my grandson liked the Disney cartoon *Jake and the Never Land Pirates*. I changed this around a little bit and called it *Elijah and the Promised Land Pirates*. With a little help from the computer, I designed a camp T-shirt for each of the three grandkids that featured pirates, their names, and the Bible verse. I used [Avery iron-on transfers](#) that I printed off on my own printer and then ironed them on. This is a simple and cheap way to make a few shirts, and the kids love having their own camp T-shirt.

We couldn’t play pirates without a ship, so I went to a local furniture store and loaded up the back of my car with furniture boxes. My husband helped me put together a pirate’s ship with even a working sail that we made from an old flag pole and a cut up sheet.

The kids had hours of fun playing in the ship.

I began searching local stores for anything that had to do with *Jake and the Neverland Pirates*. I was lucky to find a Jake costume at a children's consignment store for my grandson. I also have a box of costumes that a friend gave me several years ago. I knew Elijah would love having a pirate costume to add to his characters. I found everything from play telescopes to crayons and stickers. I went to the library and checked out pirate books and bought a copy of the original *Peter Pan* movie.

Once again, I hired a teenager from our church to help for a couple of days. The kids loved her and she watched the kids while I did things like get their lunch ready or plan the next activity. She really earned her keep at the swimming pool. I like to have one person assigned to each child at the pool to be extra cautious.

Our first activity was to **use a treasure map to find treasure**. I drew a map of our backyard and had my helper hide the clues. I wrote one word on each card and had her hide them at the specific spots that I had marked on the map. The kids had a ball hunting for the treasure. When all of the words had been found, we laid them on the patio and put them in order.

Our first verse was Ephesians 6:1 "Children, obey you parents in the Lord, for this is right."

We talked about the verse and what it meant. They took turns saying the verse. When they said it by themselves, they earned their pirate's hat. We played this game one other time during the week.

Other activities included **digging for buried treasure**. I ordered on Amazon a bag of [play silver and gold coins and beads](#). My husband lined a laundry basket with black plastic and we placed all of the treasure on the bottom. He then covered the treasure with sand. They loved scooping the sand out with cups and filling a small swimming pool with the sand. Of course they were finding treasure all along the way and loving it. They were also excited to now have a sandbox to play in for the future.

We also made **play boats out of recycled materials**. We had a couple of pieces of scrap wood and we taped empty water bottles to the bottoms. We made sails out of card stock and used pencils for masts. My husband drilled holes for the pencils to go into for the masts, and then we used electrical tape to tape on the sails. We used another plastic swimming pool that my husband filled with water to "float our boats." The kids had fun playing with their boats in the water. We also made one boat out of a milk carton.

One other thing that I did that they enjoyed was a **reward system for good behavior**. I found tiny [plastic boxes](#) at Walmart that looked like little treasure chests. We passed out dimes and nickels and quarters for certain things like following instructions right away, usually when we asked them to clean up or get ready to go somewhere. We were trying to help potty-train our two year old, so she received a quarter every time she used her potty. They all loved opening the tiny chests and putting the money in themselves. I told them when they all had over a dollar we would go to the Dollar Tree where I knew they had lots of toys for a dollar. Sure enough, after a couple of days we made a trip to the store where they spent almost an hour picking out

their surprise. After the trip to the store, they were even more willing to following directions right away because they knew we would follow it up with another trip. This certainly made for a pleasant several days for us and they had a good time as well.

With a little extra effort, some planning, and lots of help from my awesome husband, we all had a wonderful week. I think they will remember our Pirate week for years to come.

YO HO!

Debbie Heatley has been married for 21 years to her husband David. Together, they have blended a family of five children. Their ages are 34, 33, 31, 30, and 29. They have three beautiful grandchildren, Grace 5, Elijah 4, and Anna Ruth 2. They are excited to meet number four in September. Debbie taught school for about 15 years. She taught Adult Basic Education, Physical Education.

FRESH THYME - That's Ellie – by Marcy Lytle

I was in the stall of the church bathroom when I heard a voice next to me, but I really didn't pay attention, because no one talks to a person in a bathroom stall...*do they?* It was one of those moments where I heard the voice, but I didn't really hear what was said until a few seconds went by...and I realized something. That little small voice was talking to *me*, and she asked *me* a question,

“Who are you?”

I suddenly recognized that little voice as that of a small girl that I know, and it clicked in my mind that she must have seen my shoes and decided to hold a conversation with the “lady” in the next stall...only I didn't answer her. By the time I realized what had happened, she was washing her hands and exiting the bathroom, while I was just coming out of the stall and saw the bottom of her frilly dress as the door closed behind her.

I was amused, taken aback, and tickled at what had just happened.

I was amused that this little friendly girl wanted to talk to “whoever” was next to her, so she just boldly asked who I was.

I was taken aback because I just hadn't realized she was talking to me, until it was too late.

I was tickled later, at the sheer fact that Ellie (the little girl's name) was looking at my shoes underneath the stall where she sat...*doing her business*.

For some reason, that incident sparked me to pause and think.

I too notice the shoes other women wear, because I love shoes. I even glance at the shoes of the lady next to me in a public bathroom and wonder who she is, what she looks like, and what her name is, just like Ellie did...but I never just ask out loud, to a total stranger. I just sit there quietly minding *my own business* until I exit the stall, wash my hands, and see the face of the stranger...or not.

Ellie is a very outgoing, friendly, super intuitive young lady for her age (all of 8 years old). Once at church, on another day, she had noticed I was coughing and as I went to get a drink of water, she asked, “Are you okay?” Ellie is a nurturer of other children, checking on the younger babies back in the nursery to see if there's anything she can do for them. Ellie wears frilly frocks and sometimes gloves, with her hair up on a bun atop her head, and she has a flare for style, all her own, without a care in the world of what others think of her. She reminds me a bit of Pollyanna. Remember that little girl and that movie?

That morning after the stall incident, I was prompted to take more notice and to speak up, all because of Ellie noticing my shoes. Here's what I purpose to do, after being beckoned by Ellie to answer a question I barely heard, because it was at such an odd place and time:

- I want to admire the shoes of other women and then look up and ask them their names.
- I want to be bold enough to introduce myself to a stranger, even in odd places.

- I want to be comfortable in my own skin, and with my own voice, so that I speak up when I'm curious.
- I want to listen more carefully to the voices of those beside me, even if a wall stands between us.
- I want to be quick to answer the voices of little girls who just want to be friendly.

When's the last time you noticed the shoes of the lady next to you, and queried out loud, "Who are you?" all because you're interested in making a new friend? Of course, you might ask it with a bit more adult etiquette and wisdom, but it's something worth noting and thinking about.

Ellie's got a heart of gold, a voice of sweetness, and a kindness that reaches under dividing walls. She didn't care who I was, what I looked like, or how old I might be. She just wanted to know my name so she could visit with me while we sat...

That's Ellie. And that's simplicity and purity of friendship personified.

FRESH THYME – 1 Question, 3 Answers – by Marcy Lytle

When our kids were little they had lots of questions, when mom and dad told them no. They always wanted to know why, just like all kids do. In fact, we kids ask our Father the same question all the time,

“Why, God?” “Why aren’t you answering my prayer?”

My husband told our son one day something I’ve never forgotten. And I don’t think our son will ever forget either. It was one of those life lessons that sticks and stays with you, like gum on your shoe. You might try to shake it off, but it won’t come loose.

He said there are some things when you’re a kid you don’t understand because you’re too young, but you then understand when you’re older. For instance, if Dad says to stay away from poison ivy, a toddler doesn’t understand so he touches it anyway. If he then gets a rash and itches like crazy, that toddler soon learns the reason why his dad said no, and next time he’ll obey. ***That kind of understanding comes with experience.***

He said there are some things when you’re an older kid that you do understand, because you’re reasoning and logic skills have set in, and you get the explanation because it makes sense. For instance, we teach our kids to drive and they understand that they have to stay in their own lane, that they need to use their turn signals, and they need to pay attention. They can see and rationalize and comprehend the safety needed and involved in driving a vehicle. If you cross a line you’re going to hit a car. ***That kind of understanding comes with knowledge of how things work and how things are.***

Neither of the above two types of understanding require faith, however. When a young child breaks out in a rash, he listens next time because he suffered and hurt. He doesn’t want that experience again. And when a teenager can see and comprehend and therefore understand, he acts and obeys because it makes sense to him.

My husband finally said there are some things you may never understand, and those things require faith. Those are the things we ask of our Father and we see with our own eyes that the answer would be helpful, beneficial, and so why wouldn’t he say yes? We even try to reason out why he might say no, and we just can’t understand why he doesn’t heal or provide or give us what we’re asking for, when we need it, and there is no understanding on our part. It’s those things we must accept, because we know the character of our Father. ***That kind of understanding comes only with relationship.***

This requires that we know who He is. And the only way we know who He is, is by walking with him, reading about him, and experiencing his love in our lives. It’s only then that we can ask, hear nothing, and keep living and trusting, knowing that he must have a good reason because he knows all, sees all, and controls all things.

So that is the best instruction I ever heard my husband share with his son, the lesson of the three types of understanding.

We all know that there are some things we require our children to believe and obey that we instruct them in, things that we cannot possibly make them understand, but things that we know are for their best. And yet, we are flawed and sometimes make mistakes, even at our best attempts in parenting.

So if we, being earthly parents, know how to give good things to our children when they ask, how much more does our heavenly father know how to give us his best? ([Matthew 7:11](#))

We'll always be like a toddler or a teenager if we rely on experience and our own reasoning skills to understand and accept and - in fact - delight in the ways of God. But when we finally realize that that third kind of understanding that requires faith in the goodness of who he is - we will walk like a man, or woman, fully confident in the hand of our Father that is always answering our prayers. It's just that those answers are beyond our understanding...

And that's okay.

FRESH THYME – Jumpstart July

It's July and maybe you're already counting the days until the kids go back to school. Or perhaps you're sad that summer's half gone and you've not yet had a vacation. And most probably, wherever you are, you're in the heat of the summer and staying outdoors all day is just not an option! July is a great month to get a jumpstart on things you might not have the time for, once fall arrives in not that many weeks!

We've put together a list of things to do every day in the month of July, if you need an idea:

1. Go through everyone's clothes and make a giveaway basket – then actually give them away.
2. Plan a summer night's stargazing party for the family – or invite friends. Lay out blankets, provide snacks, and oh – make sure it's a cloudless night.
3. Prepare for the 4th by watching an independence day film like [All Aboard America](#).
4. It's July 4th! Make it a memorable night by packing fun to-go boxes for each family member to take to the fireworks. Include snacks, something red/white/blue to wave, and a surprise.
5. Empty your pantry of all expired goods, open the cans and packages and place in a bin. Send the kids outside with large bowls, the expired goods, spoons, and the water hose – and let them make muck soup!
6. Plan a date night out either with or without the entire family, near a water source – a splash pad, sunset walk by the lake, an aquarium, or a lakeside view dinner for two. Put it on the calendar and make it happen.
7. Let today be one where you create. Set aside pens, pencils, markers, crayons, crafts, glue, scraps of fabric, journals, etc. and spend two hours doing nothing but creating. Then share with each other your creations.
8. If money is tight, plan a staycation at home this next weekend. Plan to “visit” another country by watching a movie about that country, preparing food from that country, listening to music from that country – you get the idea. Incorporate the help of every family member. [The Red Balloon](#) is a short film, takes place in Paris, and French food could be your theme!
9. Make it spa night. Set out lotions and creams, combs and brushes, powders and potions, and take turns pampering each other.
10. Go through everyone's closets again and this time, pull out those items in need of repair. Then go to work repairing. Job fulfilled!
11. Redecorate a bathroom. Consider a new [hand towel](#), a pretty soap dispenser, a candle or nightlight for ambience, and maybe a new shower curtain or wall hanging.
12. Sort through your recipe collection or books and pick out 20 go-to meals for when life is hectic. Place them together in a binder, and you've accomplished a good thing.
13. Plan a flea market visit to a town near you, for the whole family, or just for you and a friend. Enjoy your time browsing, eat vendor food, and take along some sunscreen and a cold water!
14. Let the family help you brainstorm five ways to bless others and make a box for doing just that. This way you have it handy when friends are in need. It might include [cards](#)

[for decorating](#) and writing in, tins and sacks for toting meals in, or even a small envelope for stashing away cash to have for giving.

15. It's the middle of the month. Turn the A/C down low, curl up with popcorn, M&M's and pretzels, and have a movie marathon.
16. Get down your Christmas boxes and go through them. See what you need, what you can give away, and what needs to be trashed. Shop for new items now, so when Christmas comes, all you have to do is pull out the new and decorate!
17. Make it a food truck dinner outing, one night this week.
18. Clean out the car today – really well. Decide what you can do to keep it clean. Do you need small trash bags for the console? A bin for the back, for stashing things that roll around? A kit of emergency needs like pens, tape, and scissors? A fresh Kleenex box? Make a list. And organize!
19. Enjoy a [good read today](#), without guilt. Visit the bookstore, or pull out a book on your own shelf, and spend time in another world, another time, and another story...
20. Wish list day. Let each family member assess their needs in their clothes, shoes, toiletries, rooms, etc. and make a list. Place them in a folder, and see what you can do to fulfill one thing today.
21. Make a [refreshing drink](#) to be enjoyed today. Include fresh citrus or strawberries or both!
22. Make it a Pinterest Day. Scan boards for fall decorating ideas, holiday dishes, DIY crafts, and more. Pin them to your boards. Then pick one DIY to start on now.
23. Invite friends over sometime this week. Just make it easy – dessert only. Use this as an excuse to clean up the backyard and prepare for guests. Start the party just before dark. (Include bug spray).
24. Take the family on a road trip for a day. Start as soon as they wake up, have snacks in the car, and head out in one direction – stop to read historical markers – eat at new places – get out and walk small town squares – and play [road trip bingo](#).
25. Let today be the day everyone cleans a window and a sill, until every window is shining and every sill is dust-free. Celebrate the completion of this chore by window shopping and Auntie Anne's Pretzels for dinner.
26. Set aside time today for a family devo and prayer. Use one from our archives, or the one for this month.
27. Go through old magazines and newspapers and make collages today. Use large construction paper for each person, let them cut out and paste pictures and words describing themselves. Have these laminated, and you've got new placemats for all!
28. Have a biscuits and jam event tonight. Provide biscuits and choices of jam; then invite each family member (or guests) to bring their favorite music to share as you "jam" together.
29. Find something broken and fix it. Let each person decide what that item is.
30. Check your winter outerwear and wash them, match them, sew on buttons, or see what is outgrown. Shop for sales and be prepared for the first chill of the season.
31. It's the end of the month. Pick one of the above activities that you enjoyed the most and do it again.

Make your family fun list for each month, or every few months. It keeps you looking forward to the next day's activities and helps you accomplish those things that get put off until next time...

Look What We've Done

“They” say that when you point one finger at others you’ve got four fingers pointing directly back at you. And that’s so true. So maybe, when we feel like pointing and blaming, we need to look four times as hard at our own selves, before we unfold that first finger.

Since the Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage, I’ve watched as Facebook posts burned up with those for it, against it, with rainbows, with crosses (as though they are opposite emblems), those who speak up and judge, and those who make jokes, those who are silent, and those who are vocal in sinister or simple ways, all wanting their voice to be heard on the subject.

I too have thought over it for days now, and I can’t help but think about many reasons why we need to look at ourselves and ask ourselves what it is we’ve done to promote the anger, the distrust, the feuds, and the judgment we all sling at one another. What is it that has us defending our beliefs, instead of pointing others to a relationship with Christ? Isn’t that really what true Christianity is all about?

I’ve lived over five decades now, and I myself have been party to, observed, and realized a few things that we Christians and church-going people have done that certainly must have caused confusion among those we call “outsiders:”

Divorce used to be unbiblical, except for adultery or abuse, but we’ve now allowed and even encouraged divorce just due to differences, outgrowing one another, or because we need a fresh start. We ditched the sanctity of marriage a long time ago, before the rainbow appeared superimposed on same sex couples.

Going to church, for some, has become a social club where we go to find a fix for our brokenness, comfort for our pain, and support for our cause, instead of to worship Him and in doing so, draw others in to His presence. In fact, His presence isn’t even found in most churches. So where is it?

Family, which we proclaim as being important, faded into the background in favor of climbing a social ladder to achieve all that money can buy, at the expense of leaving our children with sitters, our spouses alone, and our families only knowing our voice over the phone. Our kids were left to watch and play video games, and explore with themselves and others.

Sex before marriage was taboo too, but then our children found out that dad was on the computer looking at pornography, or they saw mom trying to be “sexy” for her reunion, and they wondered what was so interesting about this physical act between two people? So they tried it.

We made it about rules of what to wear/what not to wear, where to go/where not to go, what we could say/what we couldn’t say, and our kids grew up knowing a list of do’s and don’ts instead of the love of a Father and obeying him because they loved Him, not because they feared his wrath.

Moms and dads decided that their bodies needed some work, so they got gym memberships, paid for alterations, and started popping pills and eating less, all so their image would never

fade or age or die. Only we didn't like the new mom/dad they became, ones so self-absorbed, so we became obsessed with our own bodies and started cutting them, starving them, and abusing them.

We claim that we know Jesus and have received his love and forgiveness, yet we talk about our friends, hate our neighbors, scream at our kids, and envy our girlfriends' new house. Where is the peace and joy that we sing about at Christmas?

There are many more things we ourselves have done that presented a skewed picture of this life we claim to live – one we invited others to come live with us.

I believe that as we ask forgiveness for our own sins, repent of our own self-absorption and our own hypocrisy, we can then start to love God again and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Do I still believe in sin? Of course, I do. But in looking at the example of Jesus, he sat with people, listened to their story, spoke life into their lives, pointed them to the Father, and then he told them to go and sin no more. In fact, not one of us can stop all of the above folly on our own until we know the Savior.

And if you're of the opinion that the ones you speak against don't think they need a Savior, don't see the need to repent, and don't think anything they're doing is wrong – then by all means pray. Pray that the kindness of the God of mercy, that same kindness that rescued you, will lead them to Him.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, and if we believe, we will never die. That's the message. He's the healer. He's the peace and joy. And He is the one we all need to read about, know, and love. Anything else we're talking about, complaining about or fighting about is a waste of time.

I've already lived and experienced the fact that shaking the finger only wounds and drives children running, and unless there's some place to run where they can receive forgiveness, healing, and restoration – they won't return.

It's our job to exalt Jesus and who he is, our privilege to serve him humbly, our honor to love him and others, and our duty to pray without ceasing.

And when we present anything else to the world other than Him, it's no wonder they refuse to listen.

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

August 2016

TIPS

The Dressing – Purposeful Purchases – by Marcy Lytle

This month I'm going to focus on accessories from Market of Hope, a non-profit that sells products made by women from around the world, and each purchase enables these women to step up into life, out of poverty and shame. I've purchased necklaces, totes, and candles from Market of Hope and have been pleased with each purchase. Not only do I love the item, but I love purchasing with a purpose.

I think August is a good time of year to sit in the AC, under a shade tree, or relax against a huge pillow and shop...for yourself...and for those to whom you give at birthdays and the upcoming holiday season. I know the women who started this business and they are dedicated to the cause of empowering women who have talent and creativity, but super hard circumstances, to feel strength and dignity as they make a living that brings them life.

Here are a few of the items you can find on their website, or if you're in the area of one of their markets, please stop by and look, feel, and be amazed at the craftsmanship in each piece:

This lariat style necklace is super fun and dressy – it can pump up a plain tshirt or add glamour to an evening dress. I love the fact that it's just one long piece and can be draped around my neck in different ways!

Check out these **cute, snappy sandals** and get a pair before summer is over, and they're gone. What a pretty addition to your feet, when you're wearing something so sweet!

Scarves are coming this fall to Market of Hope, and they're handmade and looped just for those chilly days in the fall. Scarves are never out of style, especially when you wear them with a smile!

See this t-shirt? Just the pocket sewn on the front makes this t-shirt go from plain to insane! You might want to buy more than one of these...

This large **leather tote** is super popular at the markets, because it's roomy, it smells divine, and it's so fashionable and pretty with all of your outfits, from morning til night!

I have a friend who wears this **ring**, and it looks SO PRETTY on her finger. It's simple, elegant, and unique.

Long necklaces like the one Lauren Elizabeth is wearing in the feature photo are beautiful when draped and hanging low, making others stop and see the show!

Crossbody bags are essential for the upcoming fall season, so your arms are free to do other things you need to do! The fabric, colors, and texture of these bags make them a must-have.

Take a look online and watch for Market of Hope shows around the United States, because they are now traveling! If you see something you like, grab it, because many of these items are limited in quantity. I think any piece you choose will find its way into your treasure box of keepsake jewelry for a long time...and into your heart for a lifetime.

Seven for You – Before School Begins – by Marcy Lytle

You probably made a list back when school was out of things you'd like to get done this summer. Or maybe you're not a list person at all! Either way, the summer season is almost over and fall/winter are busy for all of us with holidays, back to school routines, and all of the changes that come with the business of life after vacations are over, weekend getaways are fewer, and lazy days of summer are now crazy days of the coming season.

Here are seven projects you might consider enlisting the aid of your kids to complete before school begins, so that the home runs a little smoother when that transition begins:

Closet Cleaning. Go through closets. Do it now, and toss (or give away) outgrown shoes/shorts/tops etc. It's a good thing for kids to learn BEFORE they start shopping for new clothes for school – to sort for tossing and to sort for giving. Give them each a different color of [sticky pad](#) to write down items they need and let them stick these notes in the washroom on a board, for the next shopping trip. This enables you, the mom, to see how much to budget for new items.

Recipe Raid. Spend a hot afternoon inside the house and let the kids peruse the internet, your old recipes, your cookbooks, etc. and pick out fun lunch treats, desserts, weeknight meals – and give them guidelines – like no more than 5 ingredients each! Using the same sticky pads (one color per child), let them write down page number, link, or name of recipe and stick these on your fridge for meal planning!

Handwriting. It's a lost art, but it's a good one to renew every so often, and to renew it with our kids. This time, hand them each a card out of a [boxed set](#) and ask them to think of three people to send a card of encouragement or thanks to – it can be a grandparent – a friend – or a leader. Not only will this exercise work their grammar/English brains, but it will get those hearts and minds pumping at the thought of the blessings in their lives, and who grants them those blessings!

Drawer Designs. Designate a drawer for each kid – preferably one in the bathroom – or a shelf – that's just theirs and theirs alone. Ask them to clean and toss and organize all of their toiletries, from toothpaste to makeup, to deodorant, to brushes, to band-aids and so on, so that each kid can "design" a spot for their things. Let them go to the Dollar Store for organizers to house all of their things, and to stock up on supplies for the school year, as listed above. What a fun activity for all, and it makes each kid feel so special!

Reading Review. You know it's an issue – there are magazines, books, papers, junk mail, and all sorts of reading material strewn around the house, in bedrooms, under sofas, on the shelves and even in various book bags that need to be sorted, stacked, and well – read – if necessary! Set a timer and send everyone to gather the reading material into one big pile. Spend a family evening at home sorting and going through each piece of reading material, and putting them away, allowing each one an opportunity to browse and read aloud something from each item that is kept. This will beef up the kids' reading skills, and give you a free family activity to enjoy (with [dessert](#) on the side!)

Supply Station. Maybe it's a hook, a shelf, a stand, or the floor – but your kids drop their backpacks somewhere when they arrive home, and then they have papers to sign, homework to do, and projects to complete. It can be sheer madness if school begins and designated spots are not set up ahead of time. One idea is to create a “station” for each person in the family, including mom and/or dad. Hooks can be installed for each person's bag/backpack/purse/laptop carrier. Shelves can be cleared with labels on each one for papers that mom/dad need to look over. Corners can be decorated in bedrooms for reading and studying. Let your kids suggest and you all brainstorm together how to make this happen, and then do it!

Refresh and Renew. We all know that once school starts, feelings and emotions with friends and classmates go up and down, parents are stressed, and the whole family starts to suffer from schedules, deadlines, and work – too much of all of it! There must be time and place for the family to relax and be refreshed spiritually and physically. Grab a [large mason jar](#) and popsicle sticks and to every family member who can write, hand them a Bible, a marker, and let them start. Ask them to fill the jar with at least 30 (that's one for each day in the month) sticks with either a verse reference, a fun idea, or an encouraging word. For example, one stick might say “God loves you” or “Let's go for ice cream” or “Proverbs 3:5.” Keep this jar on the kitchen table for use by anyone and everyone who needs a “pick up” on a hard day. Make sure to sign them, so each person can thank their encourager for the day.

That's a month full of activity for this last month of summer, when kids are getting ready to start up the routine again, and these ideas will help ensure that all have participated, all are noticed, and all are valued!

Selah's Style – Amazing and New – by Selah Irwin

Have you seen the new amazing clothing line at Target?

I don't know who these Cat & Jack people are but I love them!

School is returning from its vacay. If you don't have to wear a uniform, these Cat & Jack styles will get your school year off to a fresh and funky start.

Cat & Jack is the new black!

How fantastic is this shawl? You can wear it with it all! This dress is one of the cutest things I have come across at target in a decade. I have only been alive for ten years so that right there is really making a statement!

This outfit makes me feel like I stepped into a time portal to the fifties. This jacket could be worn with anything from dresses to shapers. You name it.... It goes with it! Did you notice the spectacular leggings? Target carries a wide variety for only \$6 each!

It's the hour for flowers. This dress is extremely comfortable and equally cute. Add a long sleeve shirt for warmth and you can wear it anytime of the year.

You might not notice it now, but if you take a closer look, there are actual Pom Pom balls sewn into this skirt!

How fantabulous is that? A comfy shirt and leggings make this a go to outfit!

Look at this blue shirt and happy skirt! It's casual yet the gold sparkles add pizzaz. The good thing about Cat and Jack is that they have so many patterns and colors that all mix and match.

Cat and Jack may just be a guest designer for Target but I hope they stick around. They are my favorite designers yet! Go check them out before time runs out!

The Fearless Kitchen - Water, Anyone? By Marcy Lytle

I love drinking water. In fact, when I turned 40 I gave up sodas (except for once in a great while). It was hard at first, but after a while, I actually started preferring water above all other drinks. My family laughs at me, but my answer to every ailment is, "Drink more water." Whether it's a cold, a nasty virus, achy back, or whatever, that's my cure-all. However, some don't like to drink water, and because they don't make it a priority, they certainly don't get in their "8 glasses a day."

Infused waters are my answer to those of us who don't like water. Even though water is my drink of choice with my meals, I have a hard time making myself drink it between meals. I'm not one to sit with drink in hand, sipping all day. I found several recipes of fruit/veggie mixes infused into water and decided to give them a try. Here's what I love about infused waters:

They're pretty, so they lure me to drink.

They're easy to put together – 1-2-3 – you're done.

They're usually made with items I already have in my kitchen.

They're tasty, fresh, and satisfying.

You can make a whole pitcher to keep in the fridge, or you can make individual servings in mason jars or glasses. I prefer to make individual jars, so that I can vary up the flavors daily. These are great to make in the morning, place in the fridge, then grab on the go, too! You can drink with a straw, but sometimes the fruit gets in the way. And be sure and chill them for a bit for the flavors to meld!

Sliced lime and mint: Grab a few mint leaves and muddle them (smash them, to release their juices) and place in a glass of water, alongside slices of lime.

Blueberries and lemons: Not only is this tasty, it's so pretty – the yellow and navy blue! Slice a lemon, rinse a few blueberries, and stir them into your water.

Cucumbers, fresh cherries and mint: Just cut the cucumber into chunks and dunk into your water, along with a few fresh cherries and crushed mint – place in a colored mason jar – add a straw – and you're done.

Raspberries and lime: The red and green in this infused water combo makes me think of Christmas! I decided I wanted to enjoy this one in a prettier glass, with a slice of lime on the side...

Pineapple and Citrus: Place chunks of pineapple and thickly slice oranges into a mason jar and place on a lid. Pop in the fridge the night before, then grab and go the next morning!

Tried and True - 10 Things to Conquer Before You Die – by Marcy Lytle

I have the book of *100 Places to See before You Die*, and there are many other books out there with lists and lists of things we must have, must do, or must see before the end of our lives here on earth. And I do want to experience other places and scenery, tastes all sorts of food, meet new people and cultures other than my own – it's all so enticing and adventurous and wonderful!

But there are other things that I have dealt with since childhood, some I've acquired in adulthood, and others I have no idea where they came from – and these are feelings and attitudes I want to conquer before I die. Otherwise, when I experience all of those fun things I read about in books and on the web, I won't enjoy them because they'll be overshadowed by the clouds that hover over me and my emotions that I carry in my baggage wherever I go.

Here are the ten things I truly want to conquer, because I'm tired of losing the battle to them too often:

Fear – that's a biggie, isn't it? It creeps into our lives and overtakes us in the middle of the night, while driving down the highway, or while sitting alone at our desk working. It's the thoughts of the "what-if's" and these thoughts send us down a slippery path to despair.

Envy – it's the splatter of green that blinds us to all of the good gifts we have – and colors our lenses to only see what we don't have and what we must have. It can destroy a perfectly happy home.

Judgment – I want to learn to leave this one at His feet, because I'm not privy to all the facts and yet I find myself judging those in my "courtroom" and calling them "guilty" when I really have no idea of their background or why they do what they do that irritates me so much.

Mistrust – I'm not talking about mistrusting others, I'm referring to mistrusting the Father himself – the one who is good, loving, and kind. I find myself having some days where I question all of his ways and lose my childlike faith that causes me to shake his hand loose and go my own way...towards faithlessness.

Discontentment – I suppose this is a precursor to envy, because when I become discontent, I open myself up for that green splash mentioned above. Discontentment is then rooted in the next thing I want to conquer, and that is...

Ingratitude – Being thankful is really the antidote to so many evils in our hearts, and yet we hang up this in favor of being ungrateful, complaining, and whining. Who says two-year olds are the whiners? At various stages in our lives, we all fall back into that mode of irritating noises that spew out of our mouths as we fail to give thanks.

Weariness – Most of the time this is not something others have placed on me, it's something I've picked up myself by believing I have to be super busy to be fruitful and purposeful in life. The truth of the matter is that rest is just as much an act of worship as anything else we do. I want to learn this and live this truth.

Anemia – I'm not talking about low iron in my blood, but low energy in my spirit. It comes from not staying in the Word daily and ingesting and imbibing it as much as I do physical food. When I go days without it, I feel weak and lightheaded, and it's all because I haven't sat at his table and eaten what's there before me.

Performance – This leads to weariness, listed above, and it's one of those things we learn as children – to do well – to do more than the others next to you – and to shine while you do it all. Circus dogs and ponies get applause for jumping through hoops but they're sent back into their cages when the clapping ceases. I want to know I'm accepted and loved, and that what I do for him is done out of love, not sheer duty.

Worry – I know. It's part of fear. But I'm more referring to the worry of what others think or might say about me if I don't look thin or young, or what they might think if I don't seem smart or witty, or what they might do if they see my flaws and my failures.

These 10 keep me busy, and they take up a lot more of my time and energy than I'd like, so I am purposing to conquer them all in my lifetime. I can't do it alone – heck – I can't do it at all. But I'm connected to a Source that can. In fact, he began the process and I know he will complete it, as I stay in relationship with Him and His Word. I've **tried** Him and He is **true**.

That's my 10. What would you add to the list?

HOME

Practical Parenting - Sailor Shoes – by Marcy Lytle

I recently saw the movie *BFG* (Big Friendly Giant) and actually enjoyed it, although it is a movie mostly for kids. One of the outfits in the movie that the little girl wears is a sailor dress and sailor shoes. When I saw that, I whispered to my friend next to me, “I had a dress and shoes like that!” She whispered back, smiling, “I did too!”

My sailor dress and shoes is one outfit I remember fondly, and I remember feeling so special when I wore it. My mom loved fashion and she made sure I had fun clothes and matching shoes.

These days, the focus (which it should be) is so much more on the inward appearance than the outward appearance, among Christian homes – and that’s obviously a good thing. Girls wear everything from ripped jeans, to twirling skirts, to tennis shoes, to sandals that lace up to their knees. And parenting our girls through the ever changing, ever luring, world of fashion is quite hard at times. I remember when my daughter went through a phase of wanting dresses with huge petticoats underneath them. I detested those dresses, so thankfully, that attraction faded away...

I was thinking after the movie about those sailor shoes, and I thought I’d encourage moms in the area of raising little girls in the area of clothing. There are all sorts of books and scriptures on making sure our daughters have a good Father relationship, stay pure, work on their attitudes, etc. But what about the outward? What if our daughters are enamored with haircuts, jewelry, high heels, and even...sailor shoes (I’m convinced they’ll make a come-back soon...)

There was a time in my own life when I felt guilty for enjoying clothes and fashion and all things related to style. After all, surely God wasn’t interested in any of that stuff, because the bible says man looks outward...but God looks inward.

However, Proverbs 31 (the famous chapter on how women are to behave) mentions this...

“...For all her household are clothed with scarlet.

She makes coverings for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple...”

I’m not really into digging for underlying meanings as to why these two colors are mentioned, but what I note here is that her family is clothed. She is clothed. And the clothing is fine.

One day it dawned on me that part of the way I was made was to house desires for clothing, for me and those I care for.

Can you imagine the joy and the pressure released, when I shopped with this new sense of identity and worth?

Here’s what I’ve learned about fashion and clothing that is worth passing on to our daughters:

- God made us to love fabric, the feel of it, the look of it, and the wear of it.
- God loves to clothe his children, and we are told not to worry over what we shall wear.

- God enjoys shopping with us and enabling us to “stumble” across incredible bargains.
- God does look inward, but he’s concerned with taking care of all things outward too, as long as we seek him first.
- God grants us all good things of his kingdom (including clothing) when we seek him first.

So practically speaking, what does that look like when our little girls start shopping and looking and finding all of those things she “must have?”

- Don’t shame her for desiring to clothe herself well.
- Don’t criticize her own sense of style, as long as it’s not revealing and rude.
- Don’t prohibit her from owning something new once in a while.
- Do train her to shop on a budget (growing up to be wise.)
- Do train her to see and to give to others in need out of the blessings she enjoys.
- Do allow her the pleasure of seeing God provide in ALL areas of her life, not just in disciplining her to be holy.

I think it’s sad to squelch our little girls’ energy and flare, when they want to look and see and touch and feel all of those pretty outfits in the stores. There are so many great lessons to teach and to learn just in the area of clothing our bodies.

Use the opportunity as it arises to train, but also use the opportunity to watch her grow...into the beautiful woman God has made her to be...inside and out.

(Don’t have any girls? Look for an article for boys soon...)

I Don't Do Teens - The Sex Talk – by Marcy Lytle

I'm guessing that this topic is written about in more books than we parents can read in lifetime, how to talk to our teens about sex, and how to coerce them into waiting until marriage for sex at all. There's the idea of father/daughter dates or mother/son dates – and these are good. There's the "true love waits" campaign, giving our daughters promise rings to wear until they trade it for a wedding ring, and there's threats of severe punishment if our sons even think about taking away that "treasure" from a young lady before marriage.

All of the above are good. I say yes, do them all, do what works for you and your family, and do something, for sure.

However, some of the best things we can do to protect our kids from pregnancy before marriage is talk to them, live a life of purity before them, teach them to love God and to know that He loves them, and to be the parent – by setting guidelines enforced with love.

Talk to them. Kids will shut their bedroom doors, they'll talk all night to their peers, and they'll hide away their feelings unless we talk to them...regularly...about everything. We can't make our kids feel that any question they have is ever stupid or irrelevant. We should be the source for truth for them, not their peers, the television, or the movie theater. And if they spend unlimited time with either of those three, unsupervised, they will learn all they need to know and never darken our door with questions.

Live the life. Maybe you made mistakes before you were married and you're scared to death your kids will do the same. However, we don't have to live in fear that our mistakes will be the mistakes of our children. Once we've prayed and asked forgiveness for our own wrongdoings, we can boldly ask God to help us live a life of honor and purity in front of our kids. We can turn off the TV when promiscuous sex scenes fill the screen. We can make sure the music we play in our homes is honorable, uplifting and pure in tone and in lyrics. We can treat our spouses with respect by loving and looking at them only, and by daily staying in the Word together as a family, not out of duty, but out of love for the life that it brings.

Love and be loved. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Learn to know what it means to be loved by him unconditionally and fully, no matter what you've done or where you've failed. Take your teens to church and help them find a place where the love of God is real, taught, and experienced through worship, teaching and relationship. Yes, there are churches that are healthy. Seek and find. Pray and He will guide you.

Guidelines are Fences. You are the parent, until your teen is gone and out from under your roof. You won't be a popular parent when you instruct your daughter/son to tell you where they're going, to date in groups, to keep their hands to themselves, to pray about everything and listen and obey God's voice, and to wait until marriage for sex. Sex isn't evil. It's beautiful, holy, and blessed when two people know God first, fall in love with each other second, and reserve themselves only for each other...after the vows.

Most of our kids are from broken homes, including our own. Many parents feel their kids are “bound” to mess up, so they’ll just “be there” for them when they do. And lots of us fear that our kids are going to succumb to peer pressure, so we might as well “deal.”

If we are still broken in the area of sex, then it would be a wise decision to seek after healing for ourselves so that we can then impart that healing to our kids. We need to know that God loves us and it is from Him and in Him that we gain all acceptance, validation and worth. No person or boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse can give us that.

When that truth is the solid foundation on which our family stands, our kids are then surrounded by protection. If they choose to open the gate and exit, that’s their choice, of course. Mankind has always had a choice. We as parents are called to be the gatekeepers of our homes and we can make it so inviting inside the gate that our kids won’t notice the exit until we open it and send them on their way...

Don’t be afraid. Seek God first. Love him and be loved. And talk to them...while they’re still playing in your yard...

Life as We Know It - The Power of Choice – by Erica Simmons

I have recently started watching the Investigation Discovery channel. It has a variety of documentary shows on murder. I know this sounds morbid, but I am always amazed at how one decision leads to the death of an innocent person. It is truly a testament to the power of choices. In a recent episode of one of the shows, there was an incident of road rage. The victim reported that the attacker was trained in some sort of fighting technique. She said that when she tried protecting her head the assailant threw body shots, and when she tried to protect her body the assaulter then targeted her head.

I recently found myself in a situation that spiritually I felt like the victim in my story. I was praying for protection in one area and the enemy attacked in another. I then focused my spiritual warfare on the other situation only to be attacked in a previous area. Writing this column has empowered me to stop looking at my situation as a *single parent* and just see myself as a *parent*. However, there are seasons when the fact that I am in this alone becomes very apparent.

This has made me aware of two things:

One, there times when I feel so very alone and isolated in my parental Christian walk, and I wonder who I turn to and be honest and open with, about the issues that I go through with my boys. I want to protect them and not share some of the choices they make that would impact their relationships with others at church. I can get caught up in looking at the other teenagers in the church and take on *parent shame*. I ask myself,

- Am I doing something wrong?
- Do I overreact?
- Are my consequences enough?
- Are my prayers even working?

It all gets so very, very overwhelming at times.

Two, I have become my mother, by taking a small act and imagining the worst case scenario. My boys make a stupid decision and I make it out to be the decision that changes the course of their lives and that ends badly. In my defense, it is not just a leap from A to Z. Their father has a checkered past full of bad decisions, so my boys sometimes become the benefactor of my bad experiences with their dad, then mix in a little of my mom, and voila! "The sky is falling!"

Things especially get bad if I can't talk out my worries with someone. I found myself in this position recently when dealing with the fallout of Jerimiah totaling my car and Jordan's very strong personality where he thinks he is never, ever wrong.

Feeling closed in and, quite frankly desperate...

I FINALLY turned to my Heavenly Father.

One morning when in the kitchen cleaning, I just started talking to Him about why I found things to be so difficult right now. I was completely honest and open about my frustrations as a parent, my loneliness as a parent, and my fears as a parent. He listened quietly and patiently; then simply spent time with me. He did not give me any huge revelation about how to deal with the situations. He just shared with me a little bit more about who He is, about who His Son is, about His word. He shared with me about how I look and search for answers, and all my answers are right there in front of me in His word. This all made me think. It made me think about how no matter what He has already done for me I want Him to do more. I want more assurances, more signs that everything will be alright, and more peace in all situations.

All of this thinking lead me to my "life as I know it" moment. Given all His power, given all the great things He has done and continues to do, there is one thing greater:

Choice

I have the ability with my choices to render all that He is in any given situation powerless. How I choose to live my life gives authority to my Heavenly Father or to my enemy. No choice is neutral, each one has consequences.

This is why a few weeks ago I made a conscious effort to make choices that released the authority of Jesus Christ over my life and the lives of my children. In doing so, I must have patience. I have to let go of my timeline of when things should get better. The enemy is not just going to quit his petty attacks, he is going to constantly try to get us to look at what he is doing and not on what our great God has done - which is defeated him with the death of our Savior on the cross.

After spending this time with the Lord, it all just got better. It was like the pressure valve was turned and all the turmoil of the situation all was gone. When I quit focusing on me and my feelings and what I was going through and how hard it was for me to deal, and let my heart start to dwell on Him and who He was and what He has done, everything changed.

One choice was made.

And in it was my peace, my sanctuary, my deliverance.

Everything Home - Project: Kitchen Space – by Mikaela Cain

My mother-in-law gifted my husband Grant and I several of her pots and pans last month. She is an amazing cook and we hoped her aura would transfer to the dishes we prepare with her cookware.

Her downsizing benefited our new family—with one problem. There was no room to put the stuff! Our duplex's kitchen cozily contained one set of pots, but not two. We either had to figure out how to fit it all in, or move to a bigger house.

Because we don't have an extra ten thousand dollars laying around for down payment on a bigger house, we decided to try to make everything fit.

This brings up an important house-keeping law:

If you grow and can't expand, you have to increase organization.

Organizing our kitchen looked like shopping for various organizing tools. Target had everything I needed for cleaning up the pots and pans drawers. With two [lid-holding racks](#) (MARCY, this isn't the right one, but I can't find the right one online. I see that this is the closet one) and [regular rack-like shelf](#). I put up a decorative hanger in the pantry for the bulky stuff we use frequently.

Look at the before and after pictures to see the amazing difference!

We're loving Grant's mother's cookware and the ease of storage, and I'm so glad we didn't have to move to fit all her generosity in the kitchen!

A Night to Remember – Captured – by Marcy Lytle

School starts back up this month, and lots of things will capture our attention. Teachers, stories, math problems, friendships, sports, etc. will capture our time, our ears, our eyes, and even our hearts...as we get into the busyness of the routine once again. There are so many things that fill our schedules that totally capture us – hook, line, and sinker – like a fish is caught on a pole.

However, we must be aware and beware of the bait that dangles in front us, and know whether or not to take that bite, be hooked, and reeled in for the capture. And only our relationship with Jesus can give us this wisdom.

Preparation: Google and then cut out pictures of a paintbrush, a fish, a criminal, an animal, a warrior, a fort, and a princess. You will need a brown lunch bag with the top rolled down about halfway. Place a paper clip on the items being captured. Then make a fishing pole using a pencil, string and a magnet tied at the end of the string.

Did you know that Jesus “captures” our heart? He does this through His great love for us. Let’s look at other items that are captured.

Let each participant use the fishing pole to fish out one item at a time, from the brown bag, asking the following questions as they fish and capture.

What kinds of things are “captured” with a paintbrush? (*Ask for answers which might include: landscapes, faces, animals, etc.*)

Who captures fish and what kinds of bait are used? (*Fishermen...minnows, lures, etc.*)

Who captures criminals, and where do they go if they are guilty? (*Policemen...jail*)

Who captures animals, and why? (*Hunters...for food, or Trappers...for sport*)

Who captures a warrior? (*The opposing and stronger warrior*)

What big group can capture a huge fort? (*An entire army*)

And who captures a princess to keep her from danger? (*Prince*)

Some of the items we captured wiggle and try to go free, because they don’t want to end up in jail or on someone’s dinner plate. But the princess in danger is thrilled when she is rescued (or captured) from danger. Something beautiful appears when an artist captures an idea and draws or paints it in living color. And when enemies are captured, the people who were afraid can sleep in peace.

Jesus is our Prince of Peace, a Mighty Warrior, and the Great Artist who created the universe. He captures us and holds us next to his heart through his great love, and he never lets us go. He offers bait of kindness and reels us in with his mercy.

Read these verses aloud:

Colossians 1:13

“For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” (God captured us from the enemy - Satan)

Luke 5:10

“And Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men.’” (We should be capturing people for Jesus.)

I Thessalonians 4:17

“Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.” (Someday we will be caught up (captured) into heaven to live eternally with Jesus.)

Family prayer:

Lord Jesus, capture us with your great love so that we will then capture others with that same love. We don't want to become so busy that we fail to see your bait of love and recognize and resist the temptation to get hooked on too much busyness. Thank you for the hope of heaven, when we will all be captured and whisked away by the Prince of Peace – Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Family Practice - Technology Does Not Rule – by Rachel Toalson

It's still summertime, and I've spent the last four weeks with six kids in the house and all the craziness that unleashes, and all I really want to do right about now is sit my kids down with a movie so I can actually hear myself think. I want to set them loose with the iPad until their brains explode, because, well, that would be better than feeling like it's my brain that's going to explode.

Sometimes it would just be easier to give my kids a screen and say, "Have at it."

But Husband and I have put some very strong parameters around our kids' technology time, which means my boys don't actually get to enjoy technology time until they've fulfilled all the requirements that have been placed around the privilege. Technology time, for them, is not an I-deserve-this thing. It's an I-earned-this thing. And, even then, there's a time limit on it all.

I don't have anything against technology time, exactly. I remember my brother coming home from school and playing video games for hours at a time, because we had a single mother and she had a job and there wasn't really much else to do. I preferred to read, but my brother would slide his backpack off his back, flip on the bulky television, and the music of Mario Bros would ping through the house.

The other day, my oldest, who is 9, was complaining about how he hadn't been able to have his technology time yet, because he hadn't finished his silent reading, and he was bemoaning the fact that he was bored.

"I'm sure you can find something to do," I said. "We live in a house with a billion books."

"When we were kids, we didn't spend nearly as much time playing with technology as kids today do," Husband said, because he wanted to sound old.

"Yeah, but you had a whole lot more to do when you were a kid," our boy said.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. He has no idea how little we actually had to do when I was a kid because there weren't nearly as many toys in the world as there are today, but, mostly, because I grew up poor. I had a secondhand bike, a used pair of roller skates and a handful of Barbies.

Sometimes I fear that my sons' generation is in danger of losing the art of creativity. When they have screens shoved into their faces at every turn, they don't know how to BE without a screen. They think they have to be constantly entertained. Their brains are, according to neuroscience, rewired in significant ways. They don't know how to be bored, and the valuable part of being bored is that it cultivates creativity. When you have to find something to do, you're naturally practicing your creativity.

Parents today are the first generation of parents walking this fine line between technology and creativity. We are wrestling with technology parameters, because screens exist everywhere. Elementary schools use iPads for work. Kids are asked to do homework online. Parents are recommended to permit their children to play educational video games because it helps develop and practice emerging skills and such.

I get that this can be a good thing for children, but I don't really want to raise tech-heads. I want to raise artists and writers and musicians, and you don't get to develop those skills if you're constantly faced with a screen—a virtual replacement for pen and paper or actual instrument or canvas.

That's why, every year's beginning and every summer, Husband and I call a family meeting. We discuss what creative projects we'd like to do for our year. And we get to work, without a screen. Our boys have written and illustrated picture books and painted canvases and storyboarded screenplays and composed original music. It's quite amazing.

They still complain about what they believe are "unfair rules." But I suspect one day they'll be glad we didn't give in to the lure of constant screens and encouraged them to instead create something beautiful for the world.

How to make sure technology time doesn't rule your summer.

1. Make some before-technology time requirements. The kids won't like it, of course, but it's good for them to practice self-discipline. Let them know they have to read for half an hour. They have to write in a journal for fifteen minutes. They have to play outside for an hour. Technology time is a privilege, not an I-deserve-this thing.
2. Brainstorm a summer project they can do. Sometimes kids just need a bit of help knowing what they can do besides sticking their face in front of a screen all summer. So help them out. Give them a little motivation—like if they want to create a story, tell them you'll help them publish it at the end of the summer. We've got a couple of picture books we'll be publishing sometime this year, written and illustrated by my boys (with a little help on storylines from me).
3. Write some extra chores on popsicle sticks. If the words "I'm bored" come out of their mouths, have kids draw one of the popsicle sticks. Might as well put them to work if they're bored. Then maybe we can be bored.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core – It's Not Mine – by Marcy Lytle

Every year I went to youth camp, once I hit the teen years, and every summer the girls wanted to trade clothes during that week. However, I didn't want to do that. My mom created and made a lot of my dresses (we could ONLY wear dresses to camp – imagine that!) and I didn't want other girls to wear my clothes, and I didn't want to wear their clothes either – ewww! One year I succumbed to the peer pressure and let a friend wear my dress and yes, she tore it. And yes, I was irritated. And yes, I didn't trade clothes any more. I wore the clothing that I brought, things that belonged to me, fit me, and were made just for me. And that was that!

Just last week I was thinking about fear and how some days it just gets the best of me. But I had the thought,

“Fear was not made for me, so why am I wearing it?”

And then I thought of those days at camp.

The main reason the girls wanted to trade clothes is because girls compare, they share, they are jealous, they want what other girls have and they think it's cool to “borrow” that which belongs to another and wear it as though it belongs to them.

However, there are so many things wrong with that picture.

- The clothes don't belong to them.
- The clothes weren't bought by them; therefore, not a perfect fit.
- The clothes might get stained or torn, and then what?

Fear isn't something a friend is wearing and I want to wear it instead, but it is something most of the world wears. It's promoted on television when 99% of the news stories are about killings, missing people, or abuse taking place somewhere. It's an attitude lots of moms wear because they're nervous about keeping their kids safe, their homes intact, and their sanity corralled. It is something that hangs in our closet like a familiar old sweater that's easier to take off the hanger and wear, because it's comfortable, fits us snugly, and we don't want to ever let it go.

However, the realization that fear doesn't belong to me, it was never a gift given to me by my Father, and it was never designed to fit me at all made me want to shed it like a wool jacket on a hot summer day – because it's itchy and annoying!

I think it just might be in our DNA as women to look at other women and want what they have. It might be part of that Eve mentality that there must be something we're missing that others have, and if we can get our hands on it, we want to wear it as our own.

However, fear is not a pretty dress, a cutesy outfit, or a stylish pair of shoes that anyone wears at all! It's unattractive, it's ill-fitting, and it's way out of style – and it will never be in style – if we want to shine as a strong women full of strength and dignity!

Fear is a familiar piece of clothing for me, but just opening my eyes to the fact that God never hung it in my closet made me realize that I can toss it. I'm not going to give it to a friend to wear, I'm not even going to box it up at all, I'm going to trash it and burn it.

Since that day last week, I've been quoting a line from a song I've come to love:

"I'm no longer a slave to fear. I am a child of God."

If you're one of those now grown-up girls that used to trade clothes at summer camp, stop and consider now what you're wearing and if it really belongs to you, was made for you, or was given to you by your Father.

And if it's not, you have permission to toss it! Maybe it's fear, insecurity, rejection or a number of other ill-fitting wraps that weigh you down...

Listen to this song and enjoy...

<https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=i%27m%20no%20longer%20a%20slave%20to%20fear>

Under the Influence - Left to Wander – by Marcy Lytle

I don't know of any mother or father who sits on the beach and lets their child wander out into the ocean, or down the coastline, unwatched, untethered, or unseen. But it's easy for a child to wander without realizing it, because that ocean is huge, the beauty of the coastline is enticing, and the waves makes him lose his sense of placement!

I've been floating in the ocean myself and laid back with my eyes shut for just a few moments, only to lift my head and see my party way down the beach, not where I thought they were – and I certainly wasn't where I had started out!

There's an old hymn with lyrics about wandering, and artist Sara Groves sings them like this:

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it

Prone to leave the God I love

Prone to hear you and not heed it

Prone to scorn you in your love

From the time we learn to walk, we're all prone to wander. Toddlers quickly learn to slap away our hands when we try to hold them while crossing a busy street, because they want to go their own way, at their own pace, and in their own direction. We're not much different as adults. When God doesn't answer our prayers, we're prone to wander in our faith, away from what we know to be true about Him. When life is really busy and hectic, we are all prone to push aside the good and the best in life, in favor of what feels good or looks good at the moment. And all of us are prone to wander away from the love of God when something else calls our name, and in a moment of weakness we succumb to that over there...instead of what He's saying over here.

But the thing I've been thinking lately is that although we're all **prone** to wander, we are never **left** to wander, when we belong to Him.

When we have children, we instruct them to stay by our side, on our blanket, with our family, when we're beachside. If our daughter starts to wander down the coastline looking for shells, we walk beside her and keep a close eye on the tide and on our set-up so that we can get back to where we belong. And if our son decides to surf, swim or float in the huge blue ocean, we go out there with him, and we stay near so that if he should need us we're there in a flash.

Even at best, our efforts are feeble, compared to the Father who watches over us while we play, work, float, surf, or walk along life's beach looking for souvenirs and objects of beauty. He knows this world is big and full of enticements that look good to the eye, but they're sharp, they bite, or they pull us away from the shore.

And this Good Father who sets up camp with us promises to never leave us or forsake us. In other words, we are never left to wander aimlessly, losing sight of home. He's behind us, out there swimming beside us, carrying us as we play in the waves, feeding us when we're hungry,

spreading a blanket for rest when we're tired, and showing up just when we start to panic and lose sight of everything familiar.

Prone to wander? Sure, we all are.

Left to wander? No, we never are.

And when we realize we've wandered too far, we can hear his voice above the roar of the ocean as he calls us back to his arms...

For the LORD your God has blessed you in all that you have done; He has known your **wanderings** through this great wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you; you have not lacked a thing.” (Deuteronomy 2:7)

Listen to Sara Groves here...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DASAFafO04A>

Healthy Habits – Keeping it Fresh – by Marcy Lytle

My garden does not look fresh in August. In fact, it looks wilted, weather-beaten, and dried up, and sometimes we feel that way physically, spiritually, and mentally as well. It takes too much water in the hot months to keep my flowers fresh and blooming, and too much time to stand out there and douse with the hose. It's just plain scorching here in the Texas heat.

However, even when the season is hot, hot, hot, in every arena, there are ways to keep everything fresh, vibrant, and enjoyable. When we can keep it fresh in the heat, we feel healthier...and happier...even if the sun is out a little too much for the liking!

Fresh movement. Maybe it's too hot for long walks by the lake, or jogs in the neighborhood. Even if we wait until just before dark here, the temps are still in the 90's! To keep our exercise fresh and happening, we opt for walking in the cool AC of malls, or in outlet malls where we can zip into a store for a cool down, then hit the pavement again. I know, "old people" walk in malls, but hey – when it's hot we all need a break indoors.

Fresh drinks. I love to drink water, all the time. However, [lemonade](#), flavored teas, and Italian sodas are so refreshing in the dog days of summer. Even an Icee is sometimes just the thing to cool me down! There are so many good recipes for these, but try visiting your local drive-thrus as well, for a fresh drink you've never tried before. It might make you smile!

Fresh apps. I'm not talking about apps on your phone. I'm referring to appetizers. I find that heavy meals don't feel good on the stomach at the end of a hot day. So why not make at least 1-2 nights a week just appetizers? Make them healthy with fresh herbs and vegetables, and enjoy [light bites](#). Your body will thank you.

Fresh words. When's the last time you took out your Bible and asked God to give you something fresh? He will, you know. In fact, his [mercies are new every morning](#) – fresh like opening buds on a rose! Start the morning off right, open the Word, and ask to receive a fresh bouquet from Him – un-wilted and full of color!

Fresh tunes. I like to go to Youtube and choose "new Christian songs 2016" and go through the playlist, picking the ones that move me. The lyrics refresh my soul, they challenge my mind to step up to higher thinking, and they boost my spirits. So why wouldn't we all want that experience? One of my favorite new tunes is ["No Longer Slaves."](#)

Fresh prayers. Is your prayer life dull and stale? Try just quoting the Lord's Prayer – and hanging out on the phrase "Our Father, in heaven..." Realizing he's a good father, and that his point of view is higher than ours, enables us to lay down our cares at his feet and arise feeling refreshed for the day. Prayers don't have to be full of words...just full of faith....in Him and his goodness.

Fresh thoughts. Fear sometimes takes over my day without my realizing it, and at the end of the day I'm exhausted from the darts of worry and dread. Lately, I've realized that [fear is not](#) a piece of clothing that my Father designed for me to wear...at all! When fearful thoughts arise, I

toss them aside like I would a hot wool coat on a summer day – in favor of running free toward the water!

Fresh rest. It's August, we're winding down our vacations but maybe getting one more weekend away, we're getting ready for school routines, we're preparing for cooler months ahead, and our to-do list is too long. Resting is necessary for good health, and sometimes we have to feel a snuffle or an ache to make us slow down. Be pro-active and [rest often](#), by shutting your eyes, laying back your head, and putting up your feet and clearing your mind. Breathe in, breathe out, and give thanks. Amazing what this will do for you!

Beauty for Ashes - Respond Only to Love – by Pam Charro

John 4:18

*Perfect love casts out fear because fear has to do with punishment.
The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*

I never cease to find new ways to apply the above scripture to my life. I make a little progress in one area and turn to find another "new" area where fear has taken up residence and is keeping love out. Fear and shame, unfortunately, have motivated (bullied) me my entire life.

God recently revealed a relationship in my life where I felt challenged to grow in this area. For years now, I have seemed to constantly feel the need to "try harder" so that this person will finally see how loving I am being and will respond with love and acceptance for me. God showed me that my attempts were not only self-degrading; they weren't even able to accomplish anything good for the relationship. The other person continued to convey that he/she felt unloved and misunderstood and I felt hurt and frustrated that my love was consistently rejected.

God told me,

"Refuse to allow that negativity to push your buttons; you're too valuable for that.
Respond only to love."

Respond only to love. What does that mean?

I think it means different things, depending on what's going on.

Jesus said we aren't to throw our pearls to swine, so not all relationships are worthy of all of our effort. That other person may never love me, and I might always be misunderstood in this relationship; I can't control that. Life has been hard on others and we all have our own filters that keep us from seeing clearly. I may be trying too hard when the other person isn't putting much effort or thought into the relationship.

I don't always have to know everything but I do need to know how loved I am so that I am not desperate for any other person's approval because I may never get it (even from my own mother and father!).

What is important is that I am always free to **respond to God's love for me** so that I do not despair over any other relationship, because no one determines my value except God. And he already approves of me 100%.

Don't let your buttons get pushed. Respond only to love because you are so very valuable.

Created for Life – The Vision – by Ginny Hurley

As I was sitting in a prayer group time with some of our intercessors from my church, a video appeared on the screen of my mind. We were praying for America and asking God to show us His Heart for our nation.

My first vision was one of a massive army riding swiftly on horses while carrying the American flag. There were so many warriors and horses that the pounding of the hooves excelled any movie I had seen. As they swept across our country flying high in the sky from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic, they became mighty waves of water. The waters rose over the country, and surfers, parasails of people without boats, and kite surfers, flew over the waters in great power, zeal, and wonder. They were catching the winds and flying high up into the sky in great delight. Again, the waters went over the United States cleansing, washing, and healing everything and everyone in its wake. I had a great sense of joy and anticipation. As the waters stirred, suddenly, little lambs began to rise up out of the depths. They were leaping about bleating and actually bringing an overwhelming breakthrough of JOY! Little goats joined in the fun, and valleys became hills and high mountains. There was a great sense of purity flowing over our land.

Quickly, I heard in my spirit,

“The Lord is my Strength. He has made my feet like hinds feet.
He has made me walk on my high places!”
Habakkuk 3:19

I knew God had spoken to me about His Heart for our nation, and for those lost or trodden. I knew He was speaking to His church. He has conquered all of our enemies and will come with healing in His wings. He has truly anointed us to take His Good News across our nation. We are powerful and equipped to carry the heart of His Kingdom.

As my ‘video’ was winding down, the Body of Christ, all over the globe, was climbing the heights with purpose and power. Rescue lines began to fall from these climbers to those below. The ones below were being carried up without effort over the heights of the ones climbing. Life jackets and rescue harnesses were falling down and flying up, like a fisherman that throws his line and the fish jumps and flies out of the water. I actually saw wheelchairs falling down the mountains.

The last picture I saw was of cotton balls falling from heaven like drops of rain. As they hit the earth, they absorbed all the tears that had fallen and were still falling. No tear was left out or unseen.

Laughter and Life began to be heard throughout the earth and I heard Him say,

“Arise child, hold My Hand and I will show you great and mighty things you have not
seen. I am coming and I adore you!
I am the God of HOPE! Trust Me!
The Beauty of Holiness is revealed in you, America.
The time has come when true worshippers will worship Me in Spirit and in Truth....”

MARRIAGE

In This Together – 13 Things – by Sarah Stennett

We recently celebrated our 13th year of marriage on a family vacation at a dude ranch. It was a great day filled with horseback riding, beautiful scenery, delicious cake, and a champagne toast in a hot tub under the stars. Escaping social media, television, and the “real world” together was a great time to reflect on what marriage {now} means to us. In random order, here are a few things that I came up with.

1. **Not you vs. me, but us vs. the problem.** When things get tough, remember to approach the struggle as a united front. If there’s frustration over housecleaning or busy schedules, the worst thing we can do to our husband is keep a record of his wrongs. There is no running scoreboard of who did what when...if we start to operate in that way, the fabric of our marriage will unravel pretty quickly. We have found that it’s much more constructive to unite against the problem itself. Working together to overcome challenges and talking through possible solutions helps us to build one another up, which strengthens our marriage.
2. **Good friends are essential to marital health.** As women, we have to be careful with the girlfriends in whom we choose to confide our marital struggles. A simple story about your husband not being willing to run to the store for milk before bed can turn into an attack on his virtue, if aired out to the wrong friend. Some women are quick to tag on to your complaints, quickly turning a simple frustration into a husband bashing session. I now know which of my friends to call, when there’s something about my marriage that I need to talk through. These women are wonderful listeners and encouragers, and most importantly, they are on Team Stennett, meaning they always champion our marriage.
3. **Kids are a blessing, but they take a lot out of you.** When you give your days (and many nights) meeting the needs of little humans, it’s hard to muster the energy to give yourself physically or emotionally to your spouse. I know this is discussed ad nauseam, so I won’t elaborate except to say that I wasn’t expecting parenting to be as taxing on me, and thus my marriage, as it has been. I guess there’s not much one can do to avoid it, but giving yourself, and your spouse, grace throughout these early childhood years will help you get through them.
4. **We need friends in Christ-centered marriages.** When we were newlyweds, the men my husband spent the bulk of his time with were godly young married guys who loved the Lord and their wives fiercely. This is mostly due to the fact that he was on the youth staff at a large church so his workplace was always pro-marriage. I now know what a blessing that was in that first year, for him to have the positive peers encouraging him to doing his best for God and me. In the 12 years that followed, we have moved a few times and with each one, we have sought out Christian community in which our couple friends have strong marriages. If all of our friends are single or are in self-serving, dysfunctional marriages, we lack the support structure that can help build us up.
5. **My husband really is a better human than me.** I think that the longer we are married, the more I appreciate his willingness to not only accept me in spite of my flaws, but his ability to love me so well in the midst of them. Just the other day I broke down in tears telling him I hated that I had been so impatient with him and the kids that day (turns out, it was PMS) and he gracefully just brushed my hair out of my face and listened. He then hugged me and we talked through some ideas for how to handle it differently. Seriously ladies, solid gold, right there.
6. **God will guide you, if you let Him.** We have to make space in our marriage for God to lead us. That means making some time to pray together each day and

opening up to each other about the things God is putting on our hearts. The tenderness that comes with sharing something God is doing in us is beautiful in our marriage. I love talking about church sermons or scriptures with my husband because it sheds a different light on his heart. I believe that these small actions help the two of us become one before God and we pave a way for the Holy Spirit to go before us.

7. **Money can be tricky.** Sometimes I wonder what we did with all of our money back when we were double income but hadn't yet had our kids. In all fairness, it was really only one year of that status before we shipped off to California for Rob to attend a screenwriting program while we lived on my teaching salary. And once we finished his schooling, we started having kids so the rest is history. Thankfully, we haven't ever been credit card people nor have we insisted upon driving brand new cars. We both came from modest financial backgrounds so we have been more scrimpers than spenders. That said, in every marriage, there's always one who is more of a scimp and the other who is more of a spender. For us, I hate paying bills so by entrusting Rob with paying the bills I am submitting myself to his scrimping. I trust that he knows what is best for us when we sit down to do our budgeting. Even that is something we have learned along the way with the help of Financial Peace University. We have to communicate and make plans or our money will not be what it needs to be to give us opportunities to fulfill our goals and dreams for our family or ministry.
8. **Sex is glue.** When you keep sex as a regular part of your marriage, it deepens your intimacy and brings you closer together. Yes, that means even when you don't necessarily feel like it. The calorie burn is a bonus.
9. **You need time together.** I know that may seem to be an obvious one, but in busy lives with kids and jobs and church activities and such, sometimes you forget to block off at least 15 minutes a day to talk and connect. Also, getting a date night out of the house at least once a month helps to venture to try new things and enjoy life just the two of you, like your relationship began in the simpler days. I also love the idea of taking at least one overnight a year and a kid-free vacation every 2-3 years. Whatever we can squeeze into each season of our life, we do. We refuse to just be ships passing in the night, exchanging house and children duties like we are relay racing.
10. **Stuff is just stuff.** My grandpa (who had six children) used to tell us, "You can either have kids or you can have nice things, but not both." Although it seems to be a glass half empty perspective, we have come to realize that having four kids means we have older cars (paid cash for them, thanks to Dave Ramsey) and a less-than-pristine house. Our marriage and respect for each other should always be priority over earning tons of money to allow us to buy the latest and greatest things.
11. **Coffee talk is underrated.** Okay, truth be told, this works for just about any beverage shared in a focused, distraction-free environment with your man. When my husband Rob and I were engaged and planning a wedding while working jobs to try to finance it, we would take an evening to just connect over a glass of wine. It was a simple formula: my kitchen table, cheap red wine with a little hunk cheese and some grocery store French bread to snack on. The simplicity of sitting face-to-face and asking questions to seek to understand the state of one another's hearts is what enabled us to support one another better. Nowadays, it may just be a cup of reheated coffee and a leftover muffin during naptime on a Saturday afternoon, but grabbing those moments and talking through small matters that need our attention is important. It can be anything from how to best

- nurture one of our daughters who is struggling with friend issues or sorting through our ideas on how to best structure our family's morning routine.
- 12. It's okay to rewrite your roles.** Reinventing yourself has become a trend in our culture these days. In fact, the average person with change careers 5 to 7 times in their working years. The ever-changing society can mean that we develop skill sets rather than hard set careers, enabling our professions to shape shift along the way. Our marriages too may need to adjust along with everything else. I know that for us, when we were first married, we both worked jobs that we enjoyed but Rob had a dream to pursue screenwriting in graduate school. In order to make that happen, we moved to LA and I commuted to work at a tough teaching job and support us. When his schooling was drawing to an end and we were expecting our first child, we moved back to Colorado Springs and both took great jobs. We got into a rhythm of both of us working and sharing household duties and childrearing duties. But, the more children we had and freelance work my husband took on, the more complicated our lives became.
- 13. I am committed to this man, not the 2003 version from our wedding photos.** The man I married was young and boisterous – the hilarious life of the party. He had a ton of guy friends and the world was his oyster. Fast forward 13 years and now my husband is more reserved. He writes alone and struggles to find time for guy friendships with ministry, work, and family. He is a very skilled and talented writer and director with a heart for people like none other, but his perspective on work and life has shifted. I cannot expect him to be that 2003 Rob because he has changed. Yet, so have I. I look at my wedding picture and know I am not that same woman either. Acknowledging that life and God shapes us as time passes is a healthy and good thing in a marriage. I loved 2003 Rob with my whole heart – I mean, I committed my life to him. However, 2016 Rob is so much better. He is better suited to 2016 Sarah because we have allowed the Lord to work in us and through us to support and love one another. I know that this isn't what I thought I was getting in some respects, but when I look at God's faithfulness throughout our journey and where we are right now, I know it's far richer.

Date Night Fun – The Learning Curve – by Marcy Lytle

Class is starting up soon for the kiddos, and they will be learning all sorts of new ideas, formulas, and hearing lots of cool new stories. So why not incorporate the learning curve into date night, where we both learn new things about each other, new skills, new appreciation, and new likes? It will be like we're going back to school, only we're adults now and we get to choose our partner and our subject!

Here are our five ideas:

He teaches you. Decide on a skill that he has, that you don't. Maybe it's weed-eating, kite-flying, or wood carving. It can be anything at all. Next, plan your date night around your being the pupil with him being the teacher, while he supplies the material and you learn something new from him. After the hands-on learning is over, sit down and ask him all about his job, what it is he does all day, and learn about the stressor/perks he encounters on the job. Finally, ask him his favorite dessert and drink ([or make this one!](#)), and go enjoy it together, while he explains why he loves both. At the end of the night, you'll have a new appreciation for this man you call your own.

You teach him. Now it's your turn. Maybe you're really good at ironing (my favorite chore), you make a mean [spaghetti sauce](#), or you turn out an amazing and fragrant herb garden. Go through the steps and teach him how it is that you do what you do, so well! After his hands-on learning is over, he gets to ask you all about your job (at home or away) and what it is you do, what stresses you out, what you love, etc. Finally, ask him to whisk you away for a shake, hot tea, or whatever it is you enjoy to wind down, and explain to him why you love this so much. At the end of the night, hug each other as you now know and understand a little bit more about what makes the other one tick.

You both take a class. We once took a cooking class at [William Sonoma](#) together, and we enjoyed it so much! Maybe you both love bowling, or you enjoy rowing. Look on line and find a class you can afford, a time slot you can fill, and do it...together. If you can't agree on one, then each pick one and take two! Carve out time on your calendar for learning, together, and now you have a new fun activity you can do on your own – next month for date night! End the night in a bookstore coffee shop, with down time reading and sipping on your favorite brew.

Go back to school. Pick any school in your town that has a pretty campus – it can be a college or an elementary school or wherever you please! Plan your date on that campus, and talk about your years in school. Ask questions like, "Who was your favorite friend in elementary school?" "What was your favorite subject?" "What was your biggest disappointment?" etc. Make up your list of seven questions each, ahead of time. If there's a playground, swing. If there's a bench, go sit and observe the stately trees on campus. If there's a path, take a walk, hand in hand. And end the evening with a shake for two at a joint nearby...or make a tasty peach shake at home by peeling and chopping peaches, adding to a blender with milk and vanilla ice cream – delish!

Read a new story. Start your date off with a trip to the bookstore and each pick out a [tiny book to read](#). It can be a child's book, a magazine with a good story inside, a picture book in the travel section, or whatever attracts your attention. If you don't want to purchase the book, you could start at a library instead. Take the books and find a shady park and lay out a blanket with pillows...and read to each other. There's nothing more soothing than to hear each other's voice reading aloud. I personally love this activity. After you've read, discuss the story. Talk about the future. Dream together, pray together, then play together – fly a kite or walk a new path – but always seek learning and loving.

Whatever you do this month, don't skip date night fun. Never stop learning, especially about each other. And learn to enjoy what you love about each other, focusing always on the good!

After 30 Years - The Timer – by Marcy Lytle

I've never liked it.

I wore a watch, I looked at the time, I was the “responsible” one, and I said when it was time to leave. This is the way it was early on in our marriage, and I often grew tired of it and said so to him...out loud...in an accusing tone.

Here's how it was, and sometimes still is:

He doesn't like to wear watches. Sure, he has a phone, but it stays in his pocket. So when he goes out to work in the yard, and we have to be at an event in two hours, I have to be the one to call him in when it's time to get ready because he doesn't look at the time.

He loses sense of time. He gets busy in a project, like hanging a new shelf in the kitchen, and he loses all track of how long he's been working and that he needs to quit so that he has time to get ready for our date. So I enter the room, I say, “You need to quit now,” and he does. But I'm annoyed.

He doesn't even know what time it starts. We can have a wedding invitation magnetized to the fridge door with the time of the ceremony, but he has no idea of when it starts, because he never looks at the invitation. He knows we're going to a wedding on a Saturday evening, but he waits until he sees me getting ready and he stops repairing my necklace, lays it down, and hurries to take a shower.

He enjoys events...too much. When we arrive at a birthday party, for example, I tell him that I don't want to stay too long because I'm tired, I'm not interested in these people, and I didn't want to come anyway. Therefore, I tell him, “Let's leave in exactly two hours, okay?” Two hours pass, and I have to find him and pull him away and remind him that he said he'd leave.

These types of occurrences super-annoyed me for years, because I felt as though I was the “mom” to my husband, making sure he came in when I called him, put down his “toys” when it was time, and arrived or left on time everywhere we went.

Therefore, I felt like The Timer. And that felt sterile, cold, and situated – certainly not valued at all.

But...if you will look with me at the list above, each time I was calling him in to notice the time, he was working on something for me. This is often the case at my home. It's true that I'm better at time issues than he is, but he's way better at serving than I am. He's always looking for things to fix, saying yes to my next project, keeping up with repairs and restorations, and going to parties with me at all times.

My husband, over the years, has become better and better with his lack of timing. He now uses his phone to remind him of events, times, and when to stop what he's doing to get ready. This has pleased me and made me happy.

But I too, over the years, have realized that he's just bent to relax, enjoy, and breeze through most days without a care in the world – while I am bent to rarely rest, run fast, and plow through most days with my very full to-do list.

He realized that he needed to work on not relying on me to be his timer, and I realized I needed to appreciate all the things he spends time doing for me, while I'm looking at my watch.

We all at times feel like we are more the “mother” than the “wife” when it comes to relationship with our spouses. And it's perfectly okay to talk to him about this feeling and discuss ways to both work at being spouses only. We did that, often.

But I realized it wasn't just HIM, it was ME, too.

When he messes up and forgets to look at the time once in a while now, I can stop and realize that he was just caught up in the moment of what he was doing, and I can help him out, can't I? I can do it now without feeling stepped on, misused, or taken advantage of, because he sees it, he's worked on it, and he tries...really hard. I too see my own shortcomings, I work on them, and I try...and I fail sometimes, too.

I guess **grace** is the key element here.

It's good to have talks about annoying habits, and it's best to both listen and be heard, as we talk. But we're all going to still be bent a certain way and fumble the ball at times. If we're on the same team, we can occasionally pick up that ball and run the same direction toward a goal, or we can leave that ball lying on the ground and get trampled by the opposing team – those big bullies of irritation that destroy marriages.

What will it be with you?

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – Has He Left Me? – by Rachel Critz

Philippians 1:6 says,

“Have patience, God isn’t finished yet.”

Have you ever hit a road block in life and it is like you cannot see any way around it?

You feel like God has completely abandoned you, you are all alone, with no questions answered or any paths to get out discovered?

You feel the entire weight of the world sitting on your shoulders and you feel like taking the easy way out and avoiding your problems?

Or you simply carry everyone else’s burdens and do not make time to take care of yourself?

If you related to those questions in any way, we have something in common.

I have felt like that about school, tests, sports, friends, etc. And if you are like me and actually thought God had left you for good, here is a promise God has made to you and me:

Deuteronomy 31:6

“Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.”

When times get tough, God is putting our faith to the test. He is not finished with us when we make a mistake on a test, a pet passes away, we fight with our parents or siblings, we accidentally say the wrong thing to our friends or they say the wrong thing to us, and so on. In the middle of these trials, He is growing us because He is not finished with us.

It took me quite a bit of time to realize that I was being stubborn and not letting myself see that **God is literally right behind me when I think He is hundreds of miles away.**

1 Peter 5:7 reads,

“Casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”

Another one of the amazing promises God has made us to let us know he will not abandon us is this:

Matthew 28:20

“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

He is not finished with you, he cares for you no matter how big or small your problems may be, and he will never leave you. Although a lot of times it may feel like you cannot even talk to Him, just think of Him. Think of Him, and he will appreciate you as much as the next person who preaches the gospel in front of ten thousand people.

If you carry your own or others burdens, lay them in His hands because I am sure He can handle them. Now make this promise to yourself from this moment on:

Micah 7:7

“But as for me, I will look to the Lord;

I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.”

Firmly Planted - LET GO AND IMMERSE – by Dina Cavazos

These are the hot, dry days of summer. The garden is in a holding pattern, staying alive for the most part—but I can almost feel the plants panting for a drenching rain. Drip irrigation helps keep the roots watered, but there's no substitute for the deep, cleansing waters from the fountains of the sky.

Have you ever felt like you're in a holding pattern—making it day by day but not growing or doing anything really “meaningful”, wondering if God is really there? Or maybe you're a few inches too far from the shade, barely hanging on as the heat of life drains the moisture from your soul?

As I think about those times in my life, I've identified some things that kept me in the hot, dry desert, and the remedies that were like cool drenching waters.

- **Looking at the things below instead of things above**—Colossians 3:2 wisely advises us is to “Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.” Focusing on the problem instead of the solution makes the problem bigger than God, who “never leaves or forsakes us.” This doesn't mean we don't acknowledge the situation or take action. It does mean that instead of worrying and being consumed by it, we bring it to God, trusting He hears, obeying what He says to do, and waiting if we must wait. My mindset is on His ability, not mine or someone else's.
- **Giving up because my timeline wasn't met**—Waiting is hard, but it strengthens us on the inside. It develops trust, perseverance, resilience, and a bunch of other traits God sees as gold. When I've wanted something really bad, prayed for it and believed for it, and it didn't happen....I came to a place of choice: was God real or not? Did He hear or not? Does He care or not? It didn't come easy, but each time I made a choice of faith to believe “Yes”—to believe that God knew better than I and had His reasons—my relationship with Him grew deeper. Sometimes the answer came, sometimes the waiting brought another perspective that erased the timeline altogether.
- **Misplaced hope**—It's natural and good to hope for things. Hope helps us keep going when things look dark, hope gives us something to hold on to....but what if the thing hoped for doesn't happen? What if it never happens? I've had to reevaluate whether my hope is really in the right place. Is my hope in my own determination of what's best for me or someone else, or in what God knows is best? Whatever the disappointment, who's in charge of my life? When I'm able to surrender the hope to God—still hoping, but trusting in His divine wisdom—then it's not a crushing disappointment and I can still believe He has a better plan.
- **Manipulation**—This has been one of the hardest for me let go of because I (used to) think I've figured out the best way for God to do something! I've tried to arrange people and/or events to fulfill some plan in my head. Of course it's a “good” plan and I mean well—but it usually backfires. I have so much more peace when I don't create an agenda for God to follow. I really don't know the twists and turns of the future or the path He must take to accomplish His good purposes in someone's life.

Times of discomfort and pain have pressed me to go deeper, just as my plants go deeper to reach water during dry weather—but it's the drenching rains that rejuvenate. As I let go of looking at and hoping in the wrong things, expecting things to happen in my time instead of God's, and manipulating, I immerse myself in the Fountain of Living Water that replenishes and satisfies my soul.

Psalm 36:9

For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light.

Saddle Up – Sameness – by Melissa Critz

I was enjoying my horses one day – just watching them be horses. I was thinking about how horses really look the same, for the most part – kind of like the breeds of cats are rather similar, unlike dogs. As this thought just flowed inside my head. I recalled an issue that had been prevalent as of late in my life and in the lives of my kids.

We and some others we know have been bombarded with issues of judgment for not “looking the part” of or, I guess, even acting the part of being a Christian...best way for me to put it. It has been quite a trying time and something that my husband and I have been blessed with (yes – blessed) so that we can have those good talks that we all want with our kids.

I was talking with my Father about this problem that seems rather common in the realm of Christians, and being a Christian means this to me:

I believe that God has always been. He is the Creator of all. He chose to send His Son Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, who died an innocent man by being crucified on a cross around others that were sinful thieves. Jesus, after being put in a tomb, rose on the third day, took the keys from Satan and after being present among his disciples in spirit form, went to sit at the right hand of the Father. I believe that Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit are the Trinity – one and the same – and that the only way to eternal salvation is through knowing Jesus as my Lord – one and only – and knowing that He died for my sins – for all humanities sins and took all that on Himself so that we who believe and know Jesus can stand spotless for Father God.

Everything else is secondary. What do I mean by that? What I mean is the rest doesn't really matter in terms of a person's salvation. The rest can possibly be argued as black and white, or having gray areas. I think the problem arises when people start expecting to see others as having to ACT certain ways or LOOK certain ways.

How can this be?

Look at the MANY different cultures on our planet! I have run into people in my life that believe drums are evil, yet there are Africans that know Christ and use drums solely to express the joy in Him by dancing. Some people believe that we need to wear certain types of clothes or say the right words in order to be how a Christian *should* be. Thankfully, God is so very gracious to us all. At times, we all choose to judge others based on their looks or what they wear, etc. Personally, I have been judged for having tattoos. We are ALL made differently. We express ourselves differently. We, across cultures, ALL look very different from skin color, to hair, to body shape, and we ALL act and sound differently as in language, food, living accommodations, ways of sleeping, health habits, and the list goes on and on.

Don't you think it would be terribly boring if everyone in the world looked and acted all the same?

Our Lord is very creative. Just look at all the fish in the sea and how they differ even compared to those in the deep depths of the oceans!

Now I will move into a more spiritual side to this issue.

I Corinthians 12:12-14 says,

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

And this passage goes on to talk about each part of the body needs to function for the purpose it is to serve. My take on this is that we are ALL meant to be who we are in Christ. Yes, the Lord gave us the 10 Commandments and does guide us in His Word to protect us and help us learn obedience. However, I don't believe that the Lord calls us to look the same or even act the same. Some people are loud and vivacious while others serve in very quiet ways. Some people like all different genres of music while some don't desire to use instruments at all.

What's my encouragement?

I hear the Lord say to **embrace others for who they are**. I think when we do, that those that don't know Jesus as their savior yet, may be more willing to listen to us possibly – maybe.

- Don't try to change them to look like you or even act like you.
- Be accepting and compassionate.
- Don't waver in your belief of who Jesus is.
- Be purposeful in knowing others for who they are as you share the most important person in your life – Jesus.

You will have times where you need to draw on the Holy Spirit for boldness, and some may take offense. We all know that can happen.

What I am encouraging here is to just know that we are different. God has created each of us to be who we are for His greater purpose.

If you do not know Jesus as your personal Savior then I invite you to contact me via this magazine. I would love to share my experience and who Jesus is to me. Know the Father loves YOU for who YOU are and just as YOU are.

Thanks to my Saddle Partner who shares Himself with me a piece at a time, even when I am just sitting and watching my horses graze contentedly. He is truly patient and gracious.

Seek Him and Know Him as He loves you with a love that is beyond our understanding.

Moving Forward - Walk on Water – by Pam Charro

I had such an interesting dream last night.

I dreamed I was dreaming! ‘

And in my dream's dream, I was in Minneapolis, which is a large city near the Great Lakes. Only in my dream's dream, the water was everywhere, even running throughout the city (I would imagine somewhat like Long Island). I remember feeling overwhelmed at all the water, especially in areas where it was murky, roiling, and as deep as the ocean.

I was looking at the huge skyscrapers in this unfamiliar city and at all of the deep water under my feet, and I was walking across the water! But I was also wondering what on earth I was doing there, and I was uncomfortable and afraid.

While still asleep, I woke up from that dream and it seemed important to tell my husband about it, and later, within the same dream, I fell asleep again and had the exact same dream within my dream!

I won't pretend to understand all of that dream's meaning, but I do think I have an idea of at least one important message I can take away from it:

I can view my unfamiliar and challenging circumstances as either hopelessly overwhelming or I can remember Jesus' power in my life and view my situation as exciting and full of limitless potential; the choice is always mine.

I am not here to be comfortable and I wouldn't want to be so familiar with every experience that life became dull and boring, so why not choose to be excited?

I may never view Minneapolis or actually have deep water under my feet.

But I like the reminder that, while many unfamiliar situations will come my way, with Jesus by my side...

I can always walk on the water.

Real Stories – What Really Matters – by Sofia Herrera

Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

This is the verse that I have on my varsity jacket. It's a reminder. A reminder that anything is possible with God who gives me strength.

High school is rough. Every morning I wake up having to face hundreds of other people who are constantly looking at me and judging me for who I am, or at least who they think I am. I walk the halls longing for a sense of belonging, trying to see where I fit in best. Everyday I feel the need to impress people who, just like me, are too worried about themselves and how they appear to even notice their surroundings. It becomes a game of who can get the most followers, the most likes, and the most attention. I start to dwell on things that aren't even important such as the latest trends in fashion or who broke up with whom. But the truth is, none of that even matters.

It shouldn't matter what other people think of me.
What matters is what I think of me and what the Lord thinks of me.
This is something I've come to realize over the past couple of years.

When I was a freshman, I transferred to a new school having just come from my parents getting a divorce the summer before. I was petrified. I spent most of my freshmen and sophomore year trying to fit in and being so worried about what others thought of me that I forgot to enjoy myself. I was so worried about my outer appearance and fitting in with certain friend groups that nothing else seemed to matter. I was pouring all of my emotions into what was going on in school, dealing with my parents' divorce and my social life that I forgot about what really matters, which is my relationship with God.

Junior year came along and I lost it. I began to get involved in too many activities; I overcommitted myself. I was taking AP classes, I was on my school's drill team, I was the president of a community service club, I was in Student Council, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, I was working and I was a student leader within my youth group at church. Suddenly, I belonged. I was a part of something, many things actually. And it was too much. For the first two years of high school I wanted so badly to fit in that when I became a junior I pretty much just joined anything and everything that sparked my interest. And in the process, in all of the chaos, I lost myself.

Instead of looking to God to help me with all of my problems, I tried to fix them myself. I didn't ask for help.

I thought, “They can't see me fall, they can't see me be weak.”

So day after day I picked myself up and carried on in fear that if I admitted I had taken on too much, I wouldn't be 'somebody' anymore. I had stopped going to youth because I was always either too tired or had too much homework; and it wasn't until I was folding laundry one night that I finally fell apart and went to my mom for help. As I sat there and cried in her arms afraid for my future, and myself, I suddenly realized that I wasn't meant to take on all of my problems. That's what God's for. I was meant to walk with him in my struggles and give thanks to him for what I have.

It's hard to find joy in the Lord when things aren't going our way,

but it's not our plan.
It's His.

In a way, I feel like the Lord put me through such hard times so that I could fall back on Him and realize that I'm not meant to walk by myself. I'm not alone. There's always someone that loves me no matter who I am. For three years I was solely focused on who I was to other people and how they saw me that I forgot about the only opinion that matters which is how God sees me. I was so fixated on my relationships with other people that I began to neglect the only relationship that matters which is my relationship with the Lord. Through these past couple of months it was the Lord who picked me up.

He showed me that I never lost who I was; I just lost what made me who I am.

This is why I no longer define who I am through what I wear, who my friends are, or even through how many followers I have on social media. I define myself through my relationship with God and who He wants me to be; not through who others think I am or should be.

About the writer: Sofia Herrera is an American high school student who is going to be a senior in the upcoming school year. She loves to be involved in many activities such as her schools drill team, Student Council, community service clubs and her youth group. When she graduates she hopes to attend University and study Business.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – Coming Out – by Marcy Lytle

“I’m coming out” was a phrase that I guess began with the first person to admit in public that they were gay. Prior to the “coming out,” they were in “the closet,” so to speak, living in shame, rejection, and fear. And of course, they had good reason to hide. Many family members, friends and co-workers shunned and shamed these individuals for their lifestyle and choices.

I’m not writing here about the gay culture, or the “coming out” of those who want others to know their sexual preferences.

I’m writing here about coming out as a Christian, and stated that I’m “saved,” even if both of these labels sound ancient, non-trendy, and offensive.

Let me explain.

Over the last few years, saying “I’m a Christian” has become something of an embarrassment among those who call themselves Christ-followers. There have been things said, done, and lived by those labeled Christians that were nowhere near Christian in origin. Murder, hatred, slander, and gossip, to name a few, are not attributes of Christ-followers, yet many exhibit those attitudes toward others, while toting Bibles and pointing fingers. No one who truly follows Christ wants to be associated with that kind of behavior.

Another saying I’ve heard less and less of is the word “saved,” describing a Christian’s experience when he or she repents of sin and becomes a follower of Christ. There’s been so much discussion over what is sin, is there really sin, and isn’t everyone a sinner? To which we’ve backed down and away from using the word “saved.” What exactly is it that we’re saved from?

I get that words and labels have strong connotations when connected with people who are not desirable at all to be associated with. But for the sake of this article,

**I’m going to say boldly, and with definition to follow,
that I’m a Christian because I’ve been saved.**

The word Christian is a term I’m proud to wear because it means Christ-like. I’m not always Christ-like, but I bear his image because he’s changed me from the inside to a person that knows He loves me, accepts me, forgives me for sin (wrongdoing) and saves me from eternal death – apart from Him. I want to be called a Christian because I want others to see me and want to know Christ. Therefore, I want to bear that name with honor and humility, as I bow in service to Him and humble myself at his feet, to serve those He loves – which includes everyone. I know that at times that name will mean something different to those who hear it by name, but I want to change that so that the false Christian that wounded my friend will now be the true believer who wins my friend with His love. I want to replace that bad image of a Christian with a full-on image of Christ.

I’m not ashamed to come out and say that I’m saved, as well. I needed a Savior, because I had attitudes and heart issues that were killing me slowly, as I succumbed to all of the selfish

attitudes this world embraces, like greed, haughtiness, fame, and wealth. I needed to be saved, rescued, from that path that leads to nowhere at all – but down.

And then he came. He called my name. He held me. He spoke truth into my mind and heart, until that truth began to change me. And he saved me from myself, and from all of the sins that I had done, and will do, because he's faithful like that.

While others are coming out, unashamed, I am coming out and standing beside them, asking to hold their hand, to shine bright as a friend who loves them fiercely, and I want to point them – and all of us – to the cross of Jesus Christ. He died so that I might live. And I believe that with all of my heart.

That's what makes me a Christian. That's what saved me. He makes me. He saved me.

Jesus.

If any Christian has ever offended you in word or deed, if you have wondered why you're so "bad" that you need to be "saved," then I'm sorry and I ask forgiveness for pointing, pushing, and probing you in the sides until you hurt and ran away.

Being a Christian and acknowledging that He saved me is freeing, it's liberating, and it's about time we who know that we are loved by Jesus stand up and say together,

"We're coming out."

FRESH THYME - Duty Call – by Marcy Lytle

Duty – it’s a funny sounding word to me. It rhymes with booty, and that led me to the title of this article...

Duty means an action that one is required to perform, or responsible to take care of. Moms and dads have the duty of caring for and feeding their children. We give our kids the duty of feeding the dog, or taking out the trash. At work, we have duties that we must do, if we want to get paid. And so, life is full of duty calls.

A mom might be napping, and a child cries out in pain, “Mom, my knee is bleeding!” Duty calls, and mom’s nap is put off until another time, as she leaps to her feet to respond to the hurting child.

A woman might be enjoying a lunch date with friends when she gets a text from work that a client showed up 30 minutes early for her appointment. Duty calls, and the woman leaves the leisurely lunch to land back at her desk, because duty demands it.

I’ve lived a good part of my life responding to duty calls, in my relationship with God. I grew up reading his word, hearing about his ways, and somehow I saw my obligation to him was to obey, respond, and do it all in a flash – because duty demanded it. He gave his life for me, He paid it all, so when duty called I wanted to be sure and respond, faithfully.

However, we all know that in a good relationship with our spouses, our kids, and our friends we must move from duty to love, at some point, if we want these relationships to flourish. Maybe when we are first married, we take upon the duty of making dinner each night. But if that chore is constantly a duty and not a desire, we will soon grow cold and callous and want to stop making dinner altogether. If we constantly see parenting as a duty call of wiping butts and noses, preparing lunches and outfits, and teaching and training little ingrates, then our kids will suffer. They will see right through our dutiful hands and miss out on the greatest part of parenting – that of loving our children with all our hearts.

Duty calls cannot be our reason for living, although they are a big part of living.

Of course, we have to take care of our duties. But let me explain what I mean when I say we must move past duty, into desire.

Knowing God’s ways – that he is holy and pure – can ignite a duty call because we fear that he will punish us if we don’t obey.

Knowing God’s ways – that he is holy and pure – can increase a desire to be like him IF we have all fear erased in the presence of a loving Father.

Do you see the difference?

I never want my kids to obey me as they began to mature only because they are afraid of me, or because duty demands them to obey. I don’t want my kids to sit with me, talk with me, or visit

me because duty calls. I want them to be with me because they love me and enjoy my presence.

I used to be afraid of God's presence. It was easier to just obey rules than to sit quietly to hear what he might want to say to my heart, apart from the rules. It was often a quicker fix to mark off on my list that I had read my bible, prayed 10 minutes, and given to the poor than it was to speak to that person over there, love on that unlovely one over here, or deal with that attitude inside.

How do we move past duty calls into calls of desire?

We get to know Him, and we start to love His ways, instead of fearing them.

This takes a lifetime, and it starts with reading all about Him at the beginning –when He created the earth. Have you read it lately? He paid such attention to detail, he was so powerful, he provided so much, he created boundaries of protection, he shone light into darkness, and he called all that he did very good indeed.

If your relationship with him is all about duty, but the desire is lacking, ask Him to reveal his heart of gold to you so that you can sense his desire for you and respond in like desire.

When that transformation takes place and you have a few minutes to stop and pray, you won't be thinking, "Oh yes, I need to do that," but instead you'll be stating, "Why yes, I'd love to spend time with You!"

Don't let duty calls be your lifetime achievement in the work of the Kingdom.

You'll burn out and wind up in a heap of ashes.

Enhance your desire for HIM by revisiting the great Creator and Savior that he is, and see if you don't burn brighter with a passion that calls up every desire within you to obey – because you can't help it – he's that worthy!

FRESH THYME - The Whittler – by Marcy Lytle

According to definition, to whittle is to carve into a piece by repeatedly cutting small slices from it. I've never whittled, but I've seen the end result of whittling – these amazing products of intricacy and beauty – all from the patient hands of the whittler. That is, if the whittler is skilled and has a purpose in mind for the piece on which he's whittling!

But what if the whittler is unskilled, the knife is dull, and there is no vision for the piece? I'm thinking it will end up being unrecognizable, misshapen, and good for nothing.

That whittler, if we call him by name, is Complaining.

Our kids don't even have to learn this skill, it comes with birth. As soon as they learn to walk and talk, they learn to complain. "I'm hungry." "I want that toy." "I want to go home." Toddlers don't have the ability just yet to keep quiet about their discomforts, to sit still in patience, or to realize that all good things will come in good time. They just can't. They complain, and their whiny voices whittle away at our nerves until yes – we become unrecognizable – because we lose our cool.

Hopefully, we teach and train our kids to learn to be a constructive person instead of a complainer, a doer instead of a whiner, and a thankful person instead of an ungrateful human being.

However, here we all sit as adults and many of us still complain constantly about all sorts of things, like the weather, lack of finances, our dull marriages, our unruly kids, our appearance, his lack of manners, her lack of kindness, and so on. **We have all become master whittlers with knife in hand, various objects in hand, and away we go – cutting slices out of this side and that side.** And a lifetime of whittling in this manner does not produce a masterpiece of art, but rather a stub of a piece of wood that needs to be tossed aside, and a dull knife that needs to be taken away from us.

Here's what a constant complaining attitudes whittles away:

- Peace
- Contentment
- Joy
- Gratefulness
- Love

I'm sure there are more, but I'll stop with those five. Complaining about life in general robs us of daily peace in knowing that God is a good father and cares for his children. Complaining about what we don't have that others do only creates a discontented outlook, a grumpy attitude, and pushes the friends we do have far away from us. Complaining about the questions we still have unanswered, ones that we've asked God over and over just whittles away at the joy that comes from knowing Him and resting in who He is, and who we are – in Him. Complaining about lack of funds for this or that blinds us to the fact that we have so much to give thanks for, and cuts away at our 20/20 vision and causes us to see things through scratched lenses. And finally,

complaining all the time about something cuts into our ability to love God with all of our hearts, and others as we love ourselves.

The sharp knife really only belongs in the hands of the Master Whittler who carefully holds each object and cuts and slices with a purpose in mind – and that is – to create something masterful, beautiful, and amazing. That's what God does when we let him whittle away.

When we take on the role of The Complainer what we have, in effect, done is taken that knife out of his hands and begun to use it at will whittling away at everything smooth ridge and skillful angle that he so carefully crafted - causing discolor, gouges, and chopped off pieces that had significance and worth.

I don't want to be known as a complainer in any circle where I do life, but I will be, if I don't daily hand the sharp knife to him and sit still while he whistles and whittles, and while I stop whining and rest.

Complaining is not pleasant to the ears, and it's certainly not healthy to the heart, no matter the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Philippians 2 says,

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world,

FRESH THYME - Why I Don't Weigh Anymore – by Marcy Lytle

I hope teens, young moms, my peers, and older women read this article and throw away your scales. If you haven't done it yet, you're missing out on one of the best freedoms a girl can experience – that of not weighing in daily to see if the numbers have gone up or down.

Before I tell you why I personally don't weigh any more, let me make sure that I say that I'm not advocating obesity or an unhealthy lifestyle to where we all become ill. In fact, I'm touting just the opposite message; and that is, weighing one's self constantly can be an illness that is a product of another malady – a low self-image.

Here's my story.

When I was a teen, I weighed in every single morning to see if I was maintaining my weight, which I never felt was low enough. Now that I look back and remember what I weighed, I was thin. However, I never felt thin enough or pretty enough, because of one particular reason – the Beauty Review. All the girls wanted to be in it at the end of the year, and not only in it, but win “more” or “most” beautiful. And weight was certainly a factor, among all other outward appearances.

When I got married, I continued to weigh in each morning, because now I had a husband I wanted to please, wanted to look good for, and wanted to be desirable to. He never once put this burden on me, but I carried it anyway, because my peers where I worked (I was a school teacher) proudly toted in their yogurt and mixed nuts (yes, those were popular even then) or leftover dinners in cute containers, and everyone compared what they were eating with everyone else – as well as houses, kids, and husbands. Again, outward appearances mattered so much.

When I got pregnant and had my daughter, the weight came off easily and was I so proud that I was back to my pre-baby weight in no time. However, with my second child it was a completely different story. Ice cream was all that soothed my nauseated stomach and I put on twice as much weight, I was five years older, and those last stubborn 10 pounds hung around me like a noose around a woman hanging, waiting to die. I weighed. I walked. I weighed. I ate less. I weighed. The scales didn't budge.

When I turned 40, a “friend” noted to me that I looked larger than I had the last time she had seen me. Wasn't that nice of her? It bugged me. So I changed my lifestyle of eating. I exercised more. I did away with sodas – which was a great sacrifice for me – but all of these things worked. I lost 20 pounds in three months. I weighed. I was happy. I looked in the mirror. I felt good. People noticed. I felt even better. So I kept weighing in, day after day, making sure those numbers stayed down.

When menopause began, a whole new episode started – and it wasn't a rom-com. Everything in my body started screaming at once. Hair fell out, stomach felt bloated, nice round butt flattened, and I'll spare you the other gory details. I weighed, and those few pounds I had so quickly lost just as quickly reappeared. I kept weighing, first thing in the morning, no shoes on, lightweight clothing – you know the routine. And each day I felt depressed, ugly, fat, and old.

Then it hit me. Why am I doing this to myself? I'm a healthy person, I eat well (for the most part), I exercise often, and I cannot do anything about these other symptoms of womanhood that have now appeared, except fight them. And even though I fight, aging still happens.

I watched and listened to my peers and even older women around me, and some of them STILL held constant conversations about their weight, their latest diet, or what they were cutting out of their food groups. And yet, I hadn't met one person who had cut out, eliminated or done without who kept it up for a life change, but rather they went from fad to fad. And they always looked the same size. They all wanted to get atop a square box with numbers on it and read three digits that spoke to them "You're thin." But every time I saw them, they were still looking...

I had enough. I got rid of my scales. At first, I was petrified that I was going to put on weight by the tens of pounds over a few months, and my body would be out of control. I had already learned from endless commercials, magazine articles, and from the mouths of all the women around me, enough healthy tips to keep me busy for the rest of my life.

I began to realize that there were more important weights I had been carrying that I needed to work on reducing, like pride, judgment, disdain, and anger, to name a few. I had worked and thought and labored so much on maintaining a "proper" body weight that I hadn't realized how much mind and heart weight was killing my soul.

Of course, I still think about my body weight, because I'm careful and want to make sure I'm healthy. However, I'm training myself to quit comparing and setting goals that were never my goals given to me by my Coach. I'm going to quit running a race to the finish line where a full length mirror awaits me, to see if I'm the fairest of them all. And I'm certainly going to stop concerning myself with stepping on the scale daily, to see if the pointer hits the mark.

Am I happier? I'd like to think that I am. At least, I'm still working on it. My focus on the outside has lessened some, and the focus on the inside has increased a lot, I know I'm lighter on my feet and a more beautiful person to be around. At least, I hope so.

Are you stepping on the scales every morning, not because of health issues, but because of self-image loathing?

We women are all headed down a slippery path when celebrities, magazine covers, and the friends who survive on oatmeal and greens are our standard for whether or not we've arrived. And tha

t slippery path will cause us to fall and crumble, because it's not meant for us to walk.

Consider joining me and tossing that scale, and waking up each morning and asking Him, "What can I let go of today?" and see what He says. Think about enjoying food and savoring each bite, all in moderation and discipline, instead of in cravings and abstaining. Realize your beauty is not in a number, but rather in a reflection of strength and dignity as you release and let go of your old self and take on and embrace His image of love, mercy and grace.

It's liberating, friend. It's a freedom worth pursuing...

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

September 2016

TIPS

The Dressing - FALL IS COMING – by Marcy Lytle

I've said before and I'll say it always – Fall is my favorite season. Even though the weather here where I live does not cooperate with giving me cooler temps as soon as I'd like, I absolutely love this season with all of its color and scents. The warm hues of fall make me want to shop, to style, and to sense the fabric and feel of a new outfit or accessory or shoe!

Check out what's hot this next season, and then enjoy the hunt...

Chokers – Yes, they're back – the choker that sits high on the neck – in all sorts of styles and shapes and colors. This one is very inexpensive, from [Forever 21](#). At this price, you'll be able to buy several to go with lots of your new fall outfits!

Dressed up Boho – This Boho dress from [Old Navy](#) looks great paired with booties, you can add leggings, and even a long cardigan over it for those cool, fall days. Look for several options of these when you shop, in the pretty colors of the autumn season.

Off the Shoulder – It's still in! This pretty shoulder-baring blouse is from [Target](#), and it allows you to still wear what you need to underneath! Check out the beautiful colors and the long flowy sleeves.

Something Crocheted – Look at this pretty sweater in the hues of fall. It can be worn with jeans for a Saturday afternoon around town, or paired with a denim pencil skirt and booties for a date night out. It's from [Zara](#).

Lace it up – I actually have this shirt and I love it. It's only 10 bucks from [Cotton On](#)! I like the feel of the material, and it's so nice that it comes in three colors. It's comfy AND cute!

Olive is in – Not everyone can wear olive in their clothing, but as a bag or purse, anyone can! This cute one with a tassel is from [Just Fab](#) and it will keep your hands free, because it's a backpack! It also comes in burgundy.

Shearling, Anyone? – This new style might not be for you...or again it might! I like this store which is in our outlet mall, but you can shop online, too. Look how cute this vest from [Tillys](#) looks over denim!

Suede Shooties – They're Dr.Scholls, they're suede, they're gray, they have the heel you can wear all day, and they are in for the fall season at [Macy's](#). Wait for a coupon or a sale, and then snag these!

Will you buy any of these?

Put together an outfit, or find something in your closet that's a keeper and just shop for a new top for those jeans, a new skirt for that blouse, or a pair of new shoes for all of the above!

Seven for You - Bitter Roots – by Marcy Lytle

My friends and I have talked often about how we want to end our day jolly and not bitter, be women that others want to be around not avoid, and end up full of faith not anger. I've realized that task isn't really as easy as it might sound, because it requires pulling up bitter roots, much like tending my herb garden. If I don't pull up the weeds that grow there from seeds being blown by the wind, my herb garden full of aromatic and tasty greens will be choked out and unrecognizable by the end of the season.

I've lived almost five full decades now and here is a list of bitter roots that have to be pulled, at some point, if we want to stay fragrant and attractive as we age gracefully toward the last half of our lives. Everyone has bitter roots that take hold, because everyone lives in this world where seeds blow and land and sprout.

Just recognizing and knowing these seven, I believe, will enable all of us to let go more easily. And eventually, the big and full leafy greens will tower above the entire garden so thick that no trace of outside *unwanted's* can have a chance of taking root any more.

1. **Childhood trauma.** Whether it's a biggie like losing a parent or something smaller like having a friend move across the country, wounds of the hurt in the area of loss are huge. And when we equate that loss to God and call him a "taker" instead of the Giver that he is, we hold the back of our hand to him our entire lives, questioning his goodness and his character.
2. **Teen disappointment.** That first love, that best friend, that missed opportunity in sports, whatever it is that we tried and gave our all to, wanes or leaves or evades us and all of a sudden our confident self becomes afraid to try anything with anyone again.
3. **Church cuts.** Many of us who were raised in church know that wounds from Christians run deep because they're supposed to be "family" and "righteous" and "full of love." But we all find out that church people are just normal people with issues, some having made it further along in their walk than others, and they're going to mess up. And when their mess-up involves our heart, we want to leave!
4. **Father issues.** Our dad is *supposed* (there's that word again) to represent God in our lives by leading us, caring for us, and loving us always. However, that's not the case in so many families, and when dad is a mess, the children wear dim glasses and cannot see God clearly, either.
5. **Adult failure.** Maybe we got promoted, made strides at work, received accolades and monies and then – crash – it all burned. We lost our job, we failed at marriage, we lost our integrity and ruined our reputation, etc. and we're marked and labeled and lost and lonely.
6. **Faith-wreck.** We learned bible verses, we sang hymns, and we thought we knew God and how he operates by answering our prayers and rewarding us for being good. But the fan blew the stinky stuff in the wrong direction anyway, and it landed our laps, and it shook the foundation on which we stood.
7. **Wrong choices.** We chose a career to please our parents, we married a person for the wrong reasons, we didn't go to school and we wish we had, or we moved to this town

when we should have stayed. Whatever it is, we beat ourselves up because we took a wrong turn and there was no getting back to the right choice again.

Maybe you find yourself among those seven, or maybe you have another bitter root to add to the list. The point is that all of those wounds and hurts land on all of us, because we live in a world full of flawed people. If we interact with others at all, which we will, we will at some point be disappointed, hurt, disillusioned, mad, or confused.

What then do we do about these bitter roots that are crowding out our aromatic garden?

Here's a [quote](#) I found about bitterness: *If you have something rich and you match it with something bitter, they play off each other and make each other taste even better.* In fact, this author said to embrace bitterness.

For example, bitter greens paired with the richness of a dressing make the salad extremely tasty.

Isn't that interesting? Bitterness is complex and not pleasant, but it's necessary to experience the best in life!

I'm learning that adding the richness of spending time in his presence, talking out bitter roots as they fester and surface over time, and feeding on the richness of his word makes my bitterness turn sweet, as I realize how I was only allowing the bitter flavors to come through. In other words, I was leaving my salad undressed, and life was not being enjoyed one bit, not in a single bite.

Bitterness is part of life, but left undressed and unflavored with the rich things in life, it will kill us and destroy us. However, dressed up and covered with rich flavors of mercy and grace, it becomes something palatable and even tasty.

Selah's Style – School Uniforms that Pop! – by Selah Irwin

This is my 5 year-old cousin Zoelle, but everyone calls her Zoe. She started kindergarten this year. She may have to wear a uniform to school but there is no reason why she can't jazz it up with some accessories!

Check out these fantastic My Little Pony socks I found at Target! Throw them on with a bright hat and sunglasses and you will cheer up any school day!

During the winter, the best way to accessorize is with a scarf and beanie! I knitted this hat myself! It was very easy, using a kit I bought at Michaels! You can make it in any color!

Jewelry is magical! It can add color to a dark outfit. It can add sparkle to boring fabric. And it can just make you in a good mood and change your attitude. The more jewelry the merrier!

Hats and headbands can do the trick to give you that back to school kick! Be creative with your patterns, colors and textures! Adding unique headwear to your uniform is sure to give some sizzle to your style!

If you wear a uniform to school I hope these tips keep you fashionable and fun! Happy school year everyone!

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The Fearless Kitchen – Corn a Plenty – by Marcy Lytle

I love corn. I love it on the cob, out of a can, in a quesadilla, atop a salad, just about any way I can eat it tastes good to me. Corn is one of those vegetables that looks pretty too in its yellow hue and tiny shape. It's abundant in decorations for the fall, with corn on the cob in husks being something cute to display. And if you haven't run through a corn maze at a fall festival, you're missing out!

So why not let our recipes be all about corn this month of September, as we usher in the next season of autumn?

Here are a few I dare you to try:

Yum in the Skillet – My daughter makes this corn concoction and it's a requested side when we have dinner together. She just added this and that, and came up with the yummiest flavors that brighten up corn that I've ever eaten.

Corn and Cheese Enchiladas – No chicken, no beef, just corn! I rarely make Mexican food at home, unless it's something different from what I get at the restaurants, because Mexican food in Central Texas is SO GOOD! However, if I run across a unique recipe, I try it! This one was from All You Magazine, and it's so tasty and delish!

Cheddar Cornbread – Did you know the Food Network Magazine has little pull-out booklets each month with 50 ways to cook a highlighted ingredient for the month? One month a few years back it was corn! I like to use the Jiffy cornbread mix, and when you add in the following ingredients, you've got a cornbread that's over the top. I recently purchased this old cornbread baker at a treasure yard and used it, and I love it!

Of course, there's popcorn – my favorite kind of corn. But we will wait until another time to feature it! I even have a popcorn cookbook with recipes that use popcorn in salads and savory dishes! For the month of September, try out something new with corn OR popcorn, and share your ideas with our readers by commenting below!

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Tried and True – Brands to Trust – by Marcy Lytle

I don't spend a lot on makeup or toiletries or lotions or soaps by purchasing them at a department store or from a makeup artist or dealer, I just don't. I do, however, love a good buy, a good product, and a good brand. Some brands I've held on to for years, because they just work for me. I've strayed to look for something better; then I've come back to these faithful few. One in the list IS from a friend who sells makeup, so I'm listing it because I haven't found one in the drugstores comparable to it! I'm even including one brand that my husband swears by...

Oil of Olay – Night Cream and Beauty Fluid are my two faves in this line. I've been using both for years, and I especially like that they're not oily, and that they smell great. And I feel like they moisturize just right.

Garnier Fructis – I've tried lots of hair products and nothing compares to these. I have fine wavy hair, and the curl shaping gel is a great spray for scrunching and going. I can then spritz with a bit of the holding spray and I'm set to go. The next day, I can use just water on my hands to reactivate the curls and the waves, without washing until the third day...

Loreal – The voluminous mascara is my absolute favorite – the waterproof version. It does get dry over time and clumpy – but that just means I need to buy a new one. It thickens my thin lashes like no other mascara I've tried – and I've tried many.

Younique – My friend sells this line of makeup and so far, I've only used the eye liner. It goes on smooth, the tip doesn't break, and it's very silky. And the best part? It lasts all day long.

Sunshine Farms – I've featured this website before, and I'll keep promoting their products! My favorite is the Cucumber Spearmint cream that tightens and refreshes, and the Moisturizing Winks that is great for dry face days.

Meyers – I just really love the clean scents of this product for my kitchen dish soap of choice. The basil is nice, as well as the lemon and geranium. You can find these in your local grocery store or at Target.

AAA and Apothecary – These hand soaps for the bathroom caught my eye because of the colors of the bottle – I just liked them. But when we tried the lavender rosemary version, and the Grapefruit/ Tangerine, I was hooked – line and sinker! They smell divine, and the bottle is a nice addition to the décor of bathroom.

Physicians Formula – The CC cream and the concealer are a great combo for the face. The cream is like foundation but not caky or heavy, at all. And the concealer goes hand in hand with it, as it lightens those dark circles under my eyes and blends so well.

Cerave' – My husband spends the bucks on this – it's not cheap – because it is GREAT for skin issues. He is on a medication that causes him to burn easily and experience dry skin. Cerave clears it up quickly.

Jergens – I like a lotion for my legs and arms that has a tint to it – goes on smoothly – and moisturizes as well. Jergens has a cream in a tube, it isn't an icky smell, and it's easy to throw in the bag and take with you on trips, as well!

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HOME

Practical Parenting – Orderly Chaos – by Marcy Lytle

Organizing our kids' rooms seems like a contradictory statement doesn't it? How does anyone keep a room organized where kids are involved? Or what about multiple kids in one room? What about tiny floor spaces? What about full lives with no time to keep order?

Obviously, kids are going to make messes that have to be cleaned. But there are some good pointers I've heard, observed, and used along the way when raising my kids that keep a parent sane when it comes to walking into the kids' rooms without smelling, tripping, or crying...

Some of these may sound simple, but the main goal is to pick a few routines that work for you and yours and do them. It's when the routine falls to the wayside that we all panic at the heap of a mess that can pile up in such a short time of neglect!

TOYS

Bins are friends. Get the ones that are clear, so you can see what's inside. Cut out pictures for little ones who can't yet read, or write on labels, designating what's inside. Legos, puzzles, games with small pieces, play dough, etc. can all have their place in bins of different sizes. They are really very inexpensive if you watch for them to go on sale. Look at what you have; then go buy the sizes you need. Fill them, label them, and stack them.

One comes down, another goes up. It's the law of reciprocity. Train your kids to pull out one box at a time. They are not allowed to get another until that one is filled again and put away. This sounds easy, but I know it's not. And it requires patience on mom's part. If the bins are stacked on closet shelves, then the kids can't get out multiple ones at a time. Yes, they have to ask, and yes, you have to get up and get one down, but it's worth the trouble to do it.

Something is received, something is given. When birthdays and Christmas roll around, kids often get a full bin of toys in one fell swoop. Prior to that occasion, let your kids go through their toys and give. Throw away the broken and irreparable (or fix if it's easy), and take the others to a place that receives gently used toys.

CLOTHES

As soon as kids are old enough to dress themselves, they want to choose their clothes and put them on without our help! However, if left to themselves, every sock, every pair of shorts and pants, and every shirt may be on the floor when they finally arrive to present themselves for inspection! If you keep clothes in drawers that they can reach, chaos may ensue. Hanging clothes enables you to see what's clean and requires kids to ask before grabbing. Here are a few options:

Once a week. Spend time on one day a week where kids sort their outfits (socks, shorts, shirt or dress) and let them place each one on one of those hanging closet shelves. This way, each day their outfit is ready to go, and all they have to do is take it out and put it on, placing their pj's in the same slot (if that's how you want it) or in a hamper.

Daily. If your kids take a while to pick, then have them decide the night before what they're going to wear the next day, as part of their go-to-bed routine. Lay it out, so they just dress and go. If you live in a weather-changing place like I do, you may want to listen to the forecast together before you prepare (good way to reinforce math skills too!)

Storage. One of the hardest things as a mom is getting to that pile of laundry to put it away. One of the best ideas I've heard is to get the kids involved on a certain day(s) of the week, to make it a family affair. Keep small laundry baskets in the washroom or stacked out of the way until laundry is dried. Then sort each person's clothing into their own basket. (Check out cute colors at the [Dollar Tree](#)). On the special day for clothes, each kid, dad, and mom grabs their basket and goes to their room. Kids can help the parents, and the parents can help the kids if needed. Everything has its place. If kids can't reach the hangers, give them a few in their basket, then hang them up when they're done. Make it a game. Play music. Clap when you're done.

Washing. Prior to putting clothes away, they have to be washed and dried. It's a pain, even for a couple with no kids. And when kids come along, it's a bigger pain. I found it easiest to only wash on certain days of the week, where I knew I had an allotted time to be home to wash, dry, and sort. Others wash one load daily in the morning, dry it in the evening and put away – as part of their daily routine. Find a method that works for you. My husband washes all the towels, dries them and puts them away. This always helped me tremendously, to have that one batch of wash off my list.

SHOES

These are a category all to themselves, because they get tossed, thrown and slipped off in the most unusual places, don't they? Ready to leave for an important event, and they're nowhere to be found. Coming in late at night, and you trip over the same shoe you couldn't find earlier.

Somehow, we all seem to end up with lots of shoes for our feet!

A great idea for corralling shoes is simply...

Baskets. Place one near the front door, by the back door, in each room or closet, and wherever else you think one is needed. They can be pretty ones, and you can find them on sale, often half off. If shoes come off, wherever, each family member is taught to place or toss them in a basket. At night, that basket is taken by (mom, dad, or take turns) to each person's room and they are tossed into that person's own room basket or placed on the shelf, if that's your preferred storage method. Every night the big family room basket is dumped. Look at these cute baskets from the [Container Store](#).

There will still be days where the toys are strewn, the clothes are piled, and shoes are missing. It happens to all of us. But seriously, if a routine is established when the kids are young, and adhered to as much as possible, pretty soon the house will run smoothly like a well-oiled machine. (*A mom can hope, can't she?*)

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I Don't Do Teens – Why Should They Go? – by Marcy Lytle

Having attended a youth camp this summer where my kids were leaders, I got to observe teens at their worst. What I mean by that is they were dirty, sweaty, and oh so gross because it was 100+ degrees outside. I also had the privilege of observing them at their best. They joined in and made new friends, circled around each other in prayer, and worshiped together nightly with a passion that is contagious. And all of this happens because they're with other teens their age, in their element, and learning on their level.

So why should teens go to camp, be a part of a youth group, get connected with a pack of other stinky, wonderful kids ages 13 and up? I'll just say it. I think youth group is a lifesaver for many, and your teen might be one of the ones who needs saving. Before dismissing the thought because of past hurts, not having the time or energy to drive them there, or being afraid of letting them mingle, please hear me out.

Teens want to belong.

If they don't belong to a group at church, they'll find a group on line, at school, or on the streets where they fit in. Church groups aren't perfect; in fact they're full of imperfect teens, just like your son or daughter. So one of the best investments of your time you can spend is searching for and being faithful to a group and a leader, and taking your teens every week, so that they find friends who will pray, sing, and play with them...and yes, annoy them.

Teens have issues.

Let's face it. Everything foul thing surfaces in the teen years, from attitude, to body odor, to eye rolling, it's all going to show up. Sure, you can deal with it all at home, but sometimes a fresh perspective, a lesson taught by a youth leader, a song sung that's got lyrics and notes suited for their ears will speak volumes to our kids. In fact, there are days when parents of teens want to scream because they don't understand why their son just failed that test again, when they stayed up nights with them, studying. Maybe your son needs a lift, a hand up, or an encouraging word to try again. And a youth group can give that.

Teens need to grow.

If we snatch our teens out of youth groups every time someone says something ugly, when they feel judged, or when they don't think they have a place, we are not doing them any favors. There's a point during the teen years when they've heard enough of the truth, and it's time they start giving to the younger ones who are coming up behind them. There's a transition that takes place from feeding and gorging themselves, to starting to lead and feed those who are hungry. If we pull them when we hear a few disgruntled comments, we're stunting their growth. Teach them to serve and not always to be served.

Teens like freedom.

They're testing their wings, they're learning to drive, they're noticing the opposite sex, they're having a few grown-up thoughts, and all of that is a bit much for parents to take on, all by

themselves. It's nice to know that our kids can be themselves in a group of other kids, in a safe environment, among their peers, so that they can be free to be and to hear and to listen and to be transformed into His image, without us breathing or preaching at them all the time. Give them the space and freedom to do that.

If your family has been hurt by church, your teens are grumbling or asking to stay home, or if your activities have snuffed out time in the schedule for a good youth group setting, reconsider and rediscover the value of youth group. Pray for your youth leaders. Allow your kids to stumble in relationships with peers, and guide them back to forgiveness and love.

And by all means, don't talk and grumble about your church in front of your teens. They will do likewise, and you'll all end up alone, away, and annoyed.

Youth groups, when led well, supported by in prayer, and attended by a diverse bunch of kids are healthy for our teens' well-being. And camp memories, when made under the umbrella of support and prayer, produce a lifetime of good feelings and a foundation that will never be shaken.

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A Night to Remember - BUTTON UP – by Marcy Lytle

Did you know that leaving things exposed causes damage? If a tool is left out in the rain for a long time, it begins to rust. If a window is left open in a house and the rain blows hard, objects in the house will ruin. If you don't wear a cap on a sunny day, your head could burn! There are times when things need to be covered up, locked up, put away, etc. in order to protect those items that are exposed, to preserve them and keep them fresh.

And now that the school year is back in session, fall temps are on the horizon, and the cold of winter is just around the corner, what fun it will be to learn how we can "button up" our lives so that the bugs, the wind, and the heat don't destroy the things we hold near to our hearts!

Preparation: *You will need to have one door of the house unlocked and one window cracked open. Also, pull back the shower curtain and have a pot on the stove uncovered, with the lid near by. Lay out a tube of toothpaste with the lid off, and turn on the TV to a "white noise" station, to be turned up later. Finally, lay out an open storage box revealing the things inside (i.e. anything of value that you have stored away to keep.)*

As you read along, follow the directions in italics, "buttoning up" your house and things as you go...

Lock the door: We lock the doors of our houses so that unwelcome visitors won't intrude and steal from us. *Read Matthew 6:19-21.* When we store up treasures in heaven that have eternal value, they cannot be stolen. Joy, peace, a friend who comes to Christ and believes in him, and other friends in Christ, are examples of things that cannot be stolen or taken from us. Seeking eternal things is like locking the door, sealing up the things that are precious to us so no one can take them from us. *(Have one person get up and find the unlocked door and lock it.)*

Shut the window: We open our windows to let the cool breezes in, but there is a time to shut them to keep the extreme cold or hot out, so that we can regulate the temperature in our home. Our mind is like a window. It needs to be open to the Holy Spirit to guide us and open to the wisdom in the Bible to teach us. However, when foul odors blow by (gossip, slander) or negative thoughts ("no one likes me", "I'm ugly", etc.), we need to shut the window of our minds and think on things that are true. *Read Philippians 4:8. (Hunt for the open window and shut it.)*

Cover the pot: If we have prepared a great meal and want to put it away, we must cover the pot, or the nice meal will take on the odors or pests that fly around it; and the once tasty meal will become very distasteful. God's word is good food for our soul. If we mix up the word of God with lies of the world by allowing those lies to filter in along with the truth, it makes us confused and weak. God's word says we are to be holy, pure in heart. The world says we can do whatever feels good. God's word says to love and honor our parents. The world says our parents are stupid and we don't need them. Get the idea? Fill your pot with the truth and put a lid on it to keep out the lies. *(Find the open pot and put a lid on it.) (Read Psalm 25: 4, 5).*

Close the curtain: If we are taking a shower, the curtain must be closed. This protects us from shame or embarrassment and it also keeps the water from spilling out onto the bathroom floor. When we allow the water of the Word to wash us, it takes away any shame we have, due to sin. *Read Romans 10:11.* Jesus took away our sin and shame when he died on the cross. There is no need to feel ashamed or guilty anymore. Close the curtain and let Jesus wash you clean. *(Go to the bathroom and close the shower curtain.)*

Put a cap on it: Have you ever left the cap off of the toothpaste? The end of the tube becomes caked with dried toothpaste and if left in the drawer that way, hair and dust collects on the very paste that is supposed to clean our teeth! Have you ever felt like a squeezed tube of toothpaste? Someone used you as a friend to get what they wanted, and then they just left you when they found someone else to “squeeze?” That’s how it feels when we are “used.” Maybe a friend just wants to hang out with us as long as we listen to their gossip and complaining. But when we try to encourage them or get them to talk nicely, they leave us for someone else. When we feel used, we can come to Jesus and he will wipe away our tears and cover us with his love. (*Wipe off the end of the tube of toothpaste and screw on the cap.*) Read Psalm 119: 76, 77.

Turn it off: (*Turn up the TV so all can hear the noise.*) When the radio or TV is on an unclear station, we hear noise. If this noise is left on for a long time, it drives us crazy! Turn it off! (*Turn off the TV.*) There’s no need to have background noise ruining the lovely sounds around us. You don’t have to listen to white noise or static, because you can be tuned in clearly to the heart of Jesus. Tune out the noises around you, get quiet and still and just listen. Read John 10:27, 28.

Store it: When we want to keep things that are dear to our hearts for years to come, we store them. Old baby photos, our first trophy, a favorite toy, etc. are put away for safekeeping, not left out to get broken or lost. Read *Proverbs 7: 1, 2*. We must store up God’s word within us by listening to it, reading the truth, believing what we read and practicing what it says. By doing this, we will have an abundant life for years to come. (*Close the lid to the storage box.*)

When storms are coming, the forecasters encourage people to “button up” their houses to protect them from being ruined by high winds and rain. We encounter “storms” in our lives too, and if we are secure in Him, we have no worries. Button up, cover up and close the door to anything could harm your relationship with Jesus. Let him hold you, securely protected in his arms...

Life as We Know It - Trust and Obey – by Erica Simmons

The Accident

Friday June 10th I am in my room relaxing, the first Friday off of our summer three day weekend schedule, when Jordan bursts out of his room and announces Jeremiah has been in an accident. No words any parent wants to hear EVER. I hurry out of the house to the scene as quickly as I can. When I get there Jeri is in an ambulance, very shaken up by what occurred. And then I see that the only way my car is leaving the scene is on the bed of a tow truck. After about 20 minutes, Jeri is calm enough to take home, and he just suffered high levels of anxiety because of the event.

The Car

After hearing the police officer state that the car that hit Jeri was the 3rd car in line coming from a stopped position, all the damage that was done did not make sense. It was limited to the passenger side quarter panel. The wheel was tilted out so badly the tow truck driver had trouble loading the car, because Jeri was in the turn motion when hit and the wheel could not be turned straight after the damage. Standing there at the scene, I thought briefly that the car could be totaled, but later looking at the pictures it seemed unlikely. Turns out my original thought was correct, the car was a total loss.

The Command

Early on, even before it became official about the car being a total loss, I felt strongly that the Lord did not want me to get another car. I recall sharing this word at a lunch I had with some of the church ladies. At the time, I took it as Him not wanting me to buy another car, which was fine with me (as who wants a car payment?) if the Lord was going to provide one for free!

The Obedience

It was not hard the first week, as a co-worker's daughter had a car, the daughter no longer lives here, but they keep the car for when she is home. However, after that first week, I went on my two week summer break. After I went back to work, things became more of a concerted act of knowing everyone's work schedules. Going back to work after vacation means many meetings for me, as we work to get ready for the upcoming school year. Things came to a head when I had a meeting and Jordan had work and my back-up, who was a work friend, could not pick him up. So on July 18th, I took the plunge and got a new car.

What about The Command?

I did not feel convicted that I was going against what God told me. I think it was yet another instance of me putting my expectations on God's plans. Why? For four weeks I was put back into the world of my children.

You see, when they got their drivers' licenses we all sort of went our separate ways, they had their car and I had mine. Because I did not have to pick them up anymore, I was staying later at work. They had gotten jobs and were working at least three days a week, there was Wednesday night youth group, and on Sundays we were going in our own cars.

This was fresh on the heels of me discovering Jordan's lapse in judgment, and there was a rift in my family that I did not fully understand - until the accident.

The biggest convincer for me was the reason I only drove the other car for one week, as the gas pump went out on it. What are the chances that the loaner car would go down after one week? You see, I don't think God was telling not to buy a car, I think He did not want me to accept the use of any car. He wanted to cut the enemy off at the path, to stop the family isolation we were headed toward. So initially I did not heed the command, but when the loaner car went down, I did, because I was still thinking He did not want me to buy another car.

I quickly realized not only had my family of three began to lose relationship, my young drivers had started to let their driving get sloppy, and reinforcement of good driving habits needed and did happen. In an effort to spend more deliberate time with them, over my break we started a new family tradition of cooking meals together. The plan is to continue the tradition on Sundays during the school year.

The Outcome

The rift that I was totally unaware of is healing with my boys, we talk more, and we go to church together in one car. This is not hard with the NEW car. I also got a totally unexpected outcome. The wound in my heart, created between me and Jordan, is completely healed.

This story could have gone a completely different way. We were under attack, within a week of the accident the boys car needed hundreds of dollars of work on the back brakes, Jeri managed to get a speeding ticket and the following week their car needed front brake work, not to mention still trying to get a rim for a reasonable price. We were reeling for a while, but I learned a valuable lesson to add to "my life as I know it moments."

Take care of what needs to be done today. Don't worry about tomorrow.

The boys were saving money to take care of another issue with the car, but we had this issue today to deal with, so we did. The money for everything was there when we needed it and will continue to be.

This is also a valuable lesson for me as a parent. The mistakes that my children make are the mistakes of today, but I had a tendency to make them lifelong mistakes. Don't get me wrong, if not dealt with swiftly, immediately, and properly they indeed can be lifelong issues, but as parents that is why we deal with them now. There is no time for *head in the sand* parenting in today's world; no longer can we be okay with saying that is it just a phase. The enemy has a plan and as a parent I have to be diligent in the schemes of the enemy and quickly apply the word of God to make the enemy flee.

So did God put Jerimiah in an accident just to save my family?

No. The enemy attacked and God stepped in and showed how ALL things work together for good for those who love Him, for those who are called according to His will (Romans 8:28).

And I am eternally grateful for His faithfulness.

Everything Home - My Jesus To-Do List – by Mikaela Cain

August was tense. Many of us tried to squeeze in some last-minute summer fun, while preparing for the new school year. As if that wasn't enough for a children's pastor to handle, I was also focused on helping with a building expansion for our church and cheering my husband on to finding a new job. All that has understandably lead to some shortness of breath and an occasional headache! There was a lot to do, but there was even more going on that I cared about, but couldn't control—and that's usually where the worry sneaks up.

In times like this, I turn to making a Jesus To-Do list.

Some people have a Honey-Do list, but I have a Jesus To-Do List. The first time I remember officially making a Jesus To-Do List was when I was sitting in a college desk at an early morning class. My sociology professor was late, and while we waited for him, my mind raced through all the things I needed to do that weekend. So—knowing me—I started a list in my binder:

Study for Mid-Terms in Sociology

Prof. Bednar paper

Read that book for my other soc. Class...

Laundry

EAT LUNCH

Then, something horrible happened. Suddenly every responsibility in my life became an urgent priority!

Put away my winter clothes/pull out summer clothes

Call mom

Go home for sister's volleyball game Fri night...

Start a blog

Pray about upcoming elections

Research candidates

Oh, did I mention that it was April of 2008 and the elections were months away? Everything felt very urgent. Underneath some of these “needs,” though, lied valid swirling burdens and concerns. What I truly needed to do was take time to give them to God. That's when I took a deep breath and started a Jesus To-Do list.

God has responsibilities to us. We could also call them “His promises.” God promises to care for us, to never leave us, to help us to pray, and to take our burdens.

In *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No*, authors Cloud and Townsend write that God and people have differing responsibilities in life. When we don't believe that God is committed to fulfilling His promises to us, we start trying to do His job. Worry, in a general sense, often lies in a valid recognition that some problem needs to be fixed. But, worry often lies about whose job it is to fix it. Our nation does need peace. I do need help! But Jesus is the peace-bringer and the Holy Spirit is the helper, not me. **I've noticed that I often land in anxiety and in being overwhelmed when I try to do someone else's job.**

Writing out To-Do lists is my way of building God's and my relationship by recognizing the responsibilities He has in my life that I've picked up, and letting Him take them back from me.

Here's what I recently wrote:

Bring our nation peace

Remind me to pray when it's a good time to do that

Give my sister confidence no matter how she plays

Give me strength during mid-terms and help me to stay focused

But, of course, I have responsibilities, too. Next to Jesus' To-Do, I include a Mikaela To-Do, which looks something like this:

Pray when God prompts you!

Text sister encouragement before the game, if you can't make it

Study for soc. tomorrow morning

Study for children's lit Friday night...

It's amazing how much peace I feel after writing out His responsibilities and mine.

One overwhelmed day, I wrote out a list of things I needed to do. During this time, I was in the middle of a horrible conflict with a friend. I wrote on my list,

Make friend like me again.

"Wow," I thought to myself. "That's not good."

Writing it down was very freeing, though. It caused me to admit this false-responsibility and deal with it. It's not my job to make a friend like me. Nor is it God's. It's actually hers, if it's even a responsibility at all. After processing, I came to realize that God's responsibility—His promise—was to be with me, to protect me from her grudge, and to give me *and* her wisdom. My responsibility was to try to understand her as much as I could and be honoring toward her until things were resolved. It was my responsibility to let it go of what I couldn't control (other people and God) and focus on my other responsibilities. **I saved myself a lot of energy by recognizing that false burden and sorting it out with God.**

This is one reason I value actually writing the list down. It helps me see what's going on inside my brain. Another reason I prefer to write the list on paper (or iPhone notes) is to celebrate when God comes through for me. I love finding the list later when all of the needs have been answered by God! I've found lists from months, even years after writing them (and forgetting them!) and been amazed at what God did! From practical lists like furniture and decorations I've wanted for my house, to very spiritual and emotional ones like the list with my friend, God came through every time.

Enjoy making your own Jesus To-Do list the next time you feel overwhelmed and watch how God fulfills all of His promises to you in a way that you can see and understand! In fact—in light of so many of the children in my ministry going back to school, I think I'll make one right now:

Jesus To-Do List:

Give our parents comfort as they send their kids back to school

Help our kids have joy and confident about the new school year

Mikaela To-Do list:

Have patience

Stay focused

Love well

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The Family Practice – They Prefer Less – Rachel Toalson

“It’ll slow down soon.”

Husband and I say this a whole lot.

The school year has just begun, and here we are, already, telling ourselves that, eventually, it’s going to slow down. Just let us get our bearings for a minute. Just let us get our feet under us. Just let us ease into things and then it’ll start slowing down enough to take a breath and fight our way back to simple.

The summer ended on a crazy chord, because six boys cooped up in the house for most of the summer got really tired of each other by the end of it all, and just when Husband and I had gotten used to managing a household with all of them home and ready to fight and argue with a small side of play, it was time to start school again, so now there’s a time limit on my morning and my anxiety has puffed up and the mornings feel heavy and rushed again.

And that’s just the school part of it. There are also the music lessons and the Wednesday night church and the birthday parties every weekend.

Fortunately, my boys aren’t in a whole lot of extracurricular activities, although one is asking to take some piano lessons and another is asking if we might put him in gymnastics this year, and yes, yes, I want to do it all, but there’s just no time.

There’s no time.

I start to feel a little guilty about this when I think about what my boys are “missing.” How will the one who loves to dance ever learn how to channel that rhythm gift, if he doesn’t start now, while he’s young? How does the one who writes his own comic books ever learn to draw properly if not for the extra art lesson? How does the one who loves to play soccer ever get a leg up on the sport and all its competition if he doesn’t start now, when he can’t even spell the word?

We can get carried away in this world of “make sure we’re preparing them for their future.”

We think we have to put them in everything: science camp, voice lessons, chess club, the advanced reading group, mini league football. We think we have to create for them all of these opportunities, nurture a cultured child, help them know and experience what it is the world has to offer.

But the truth is; less is more.

A few years ago, Husband and I went through every room in our house and cleaned out everything we didn’t need. We threw away buckets and buckets of stuff—donated what was still salvageable and sold what might have been valuable, and it felt incredibly good. Our house had gotten cluttered with all sorts of unnecessary stuff, and we hadn’t even noticed it happening.

And what about our lives? The same can be true for them.

The times I’ve felt the most stress in my life are the times when there are eight things seven nights a week and I need a clone of myself to even get to some of them. I don’t want my boys to grow up in an environment where they learn that this is protocol.

What our kids feel when they see overfilled calendars or overfilled toy bins is a gnawing sense of overwhelm. They don't know how to make sense of so much activity, so much stuff. Their anxiety worsens. Their ability to make decisions becomes practically nonexistent, because they don't know how to make a choice.

I know exactly why we do it—because it can feel like our kids are missing out on something important, like we are denying something that will impact their future if we limit their activities, like we're ruining their lives in a small or large way. How else will they learn whether they're going to be a professional karate kid if we don't let them sign up for the class? How do we know they'll be the genius we already think they are if we don't send them to that math camp for a few days out of the summer? How do we know they won't miss out on something important if we don't force them into the chess club and make them participate in every competition?

Our kids are happy when their lives aren't cluttered with stuff.

**If our kids actually had the vocabulary to say it,
they would tell us that they prefer less to more,
because it gives them room to breathe deep and long and wide.**

And we all need room to breathe.

How to cut down on your stuff (physical or calendar):

1. Assess what's really important. What do you want your home to look like? What do you want your life to look like? Then take steps backward to see what you need to do to get yourself there. Maybe you need to cut down on after school activities by half. Maybe you need to clean out the garage. Make a plan to do it, and watch how much your life opens up for the things that really matter.
2. Don't be afraid to get rid of it. I know, I know. The educational program that says they'll be great readers if you just sit them in front of it? You can cultivate good readers in other ways. The soccer program that promises they'll have a leg up in the pro world? It's all fun and games and shouldn't be anything different until after they hit puberty. And even then, it's questionable (in my opinion).
3. Ask your kids. Our kids have an amazing ability to tell us what they like and what they don't like, if we'd just make the move and ask. So many times I've stressed over whether we should add this or that to our schedule, and when we've actually brought the dilemma before our boys in a family meeting, they can solve it in three seconds flat. Kids have a lot to say if we'll just learn to listen.

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YOU

Strengthening Your Core - I Wanted a Zebra – by Marcy Lytle

Two kids in car seats behind us, opening their “busy bags” I had prepared for a road trip, and he got a kangaroo toy – she got a zebra toy. They were perfectly happy and thrilled as they both realized their new toys made noises, and they played contentedly until...

A day later, we pile in the car again and she takes out her zebra toy. He whines, “I wanted a zebra toy.” The kangaroo toy that brought such delight the day before now was discarded, and he wanted what she had, even though these two toys sounded alike – they just had different animal heads.

Isn't that the life of kids? They always love their toys...until they see what the other one has that they don't.

I'm not much different than my grandkids. And neither are you. Most of us suffer from the “I wanted a zebra” syndrome, as well, only it's not zebra and kangaroo toys that we're squabbling over, and it's not our grandparents that we're whining too. It's Him.

We were given a head full of curly hair from the time it grew in, and we loved it until we saw that she had straight hair, and we wanted those smooth silky strands. Curiously enough, she wanted our bouncy waves.

We landed a job in our field of study, one with an office with a view, and we were absolutely taken aback at the joy from our accomplishments, until we saw that she had two kids and husband and a family...and we wanted that...instead of this.

We moved into our “dream home” and decorated it, lived in it, enjoyed it and loved it, because it was just what we wanted for our sweet family, with all the amenities we loved, until she bought and built a new home with all of the amenities we never knew existed but we now want.

I am pretty sure just as many adults are eyeing zebras and wishing for them, as there are kids in car seats whining for them. It doesn't matter how much we have, all that we've been given, the pile of love heaped upon us and ours, we have these eyes that see and want what THEY have.

We all know the end of the story I began with. If we give that whiny kid the zebra, it won't be long until we find that zebra on the floor, broken and discarded as a thing of little value, when it once held the highest status in the list of wants in that little boy's heart.

What are our wandering eyes to do?

I think it's a lifelong process of being thankful for what we've been given from the time we unwrap the gift until our life is over. As long as we have eyes that see, we will always observe what others have that we don't.

However, here are a few tips on staying thankful for your kangaroo:

1. Seek contentment by giving thanks daily for all things.
2. Realize that your gifts were selected for you, and use them to their fullest potential.

3. Encourage others in the gifts they have been given, instead of sitting by them envying.
4. Train your eyes to see the beauty in what you have and learn to love it all.
5. Remember the whiny children and how annoying they are, and stop complaining.

I suppose I could always buy the exact same gifts for all of the kids so that nothing is different, everything is alike, and there is no variation in the surprises in the bag. But really, is that the kind of life we want? Do we really want to all live in cookie-cutter houses, see the same face in the mirror everywhere we go, and work the same job in the same office with the same view?

I think not.

In fact, that thought is downright absurd.

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Under the Influence – Stirred then Settled – by Marcy Lytle

We recently had the privilege of hearing a young lady speak on her passion in life, her work across the world, where she takes care of orphaned children. This young lady is one of the most humble, genuine people I've ever had the honor to know, and after she speaks and shares, there's not a dry eye in the building. We are all moved to tears. In fact, many of us are stirred to action, to sponsor a child monthly. After the meeting is over, we get in our car and my husband and I discuss what we heard, how we were moved, and we marvel at how a young lady can leave her "normal" life in the U.S. and give it all up to work in a place that's hard, where money is scarce, the needs are so great, and the burdens are heavy.

Within a few days, we have settled back into our normal routines and that meeting, that young lady, her story, and those kids are a distant memory. We're watching the news, we're flooded with emails, we're engrossed in posts on Facebook, and life is back to "normal." We might think of that girl's story now and then, but that's her life – not ours.

I thought about this, and I think about this, occasionally – how we're all crying in the moment of realizing the needs of others – then we're back to work making a living and coping with our own immediate day-to-day needs and struggles.

It's no wonder people like this young lady become wearing in well doing.

It's no wonder those who serve afar have to come visit us often, to remind us.

It's no wonder we forget to pray and to give because we're so busy.

I myself want to remember these people, from the young ladies who share like Rebecca Sorensen, to the friends whose kids have left it all to make relationships across the globe, to other lady I know who teaches kids music in Guatemala. We all know a list of people out there, away from here, working harder than we do with no amenities, no opportunities for vacations of leisure, and no accolades or support from very many at all.

I know we all have our own passions here. We all have our own worries and concerns with our own children, our own health issues, our own financial problems. But most of us have churches full of people to surround us, options and paths for hope, and we hear sermons week after week that encourage us. We struggle, and it's real. But we might be able to alleviate our own struggles by caring for those who have very little support, if any.

Here are five things that might help us remember the things that stirred us, instead of settling back into routines and forgetting:

1. **Keep a visual reminder in front you.** We have cards, pictures, and letters from kids we sponsor. It helps us to keep these hanging in full view, so that we're reminded to pray and to give.
2. **Organize a folder of emails.** If you're like me and you have several friends out there serving abroad, organize their updates into a folder in your emails, print them out, and pick one to pray for, give to, or bless each month.

3. **Form a small group to pray.** Maybe you have a set of friends who also sponsor, give, or help others who serve. Get together once a quarter and discuss the needs, the letters, the stories, and pray together or give one big sum to the one who needs it.
4. **Place a jar on the counter.** Label a jar “giving” and ask the whole family to drop in change or dollar bills. Empty it every so often and mail a gift to one of the people for whom you pray or purchase a product from one of the organizations that sells handmade pretties.
5. **Personalize.** Every so often, instead of giving to the children or the needs, send a letter or a gift to the person who’s giving and serving. Strengthen them with a basket of lotions, a box of chocolate, or just an inspiring letter of encouragement. Find out their personal preferences, things they might not get because they’re out of the country, and surprise them.

I need reminders. I forget about others when I get so caught up in my work, my own burdens, and my situation here. I know they are over there and I skim their emails, but then they’re forgotten. I’m stirred, and then I settle.

Hopefully, with a little planning and purposing, the pot can be stirred continually so that all who are hungry are fed.

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Healthy Habits – School Season – by Ginny Hurley

School is now in session, yet the fall breezes are still a distant longing. Mosquito spray remains propped up as a focal point next to my back door. Leaves may have fallen, but not from the autumn winds. Daylight hangs on into the evening, and yet fall ball has already started.

Therefore, I have some ideas for a healthy and happy season.

- Wake up with a SMILE! Your children will remember it, and it creates an atmosphere of pleasure and safety. If you don't have children, your spouse or friends will appreciate it! Be purposeful about it!
- Now that everyone has to rise early, the best habit to start first is, "GET the KIDS to BED in a timely manner!" If your children are early childhood age, try to say NO to the late night sports teams and activities that can wait until they are older. Sleep is probably the most important source of renewing little ones' energy! Dragging them out of bed in the morning after a late night creates a day of tears and difficulties. Even if you work late, make sure someone puts them safely to bed on a regular basis.
- CONSISTENCY also creates a safe place for children, and adults, too. Having a schedule gives safe boundaries and makes everyone feel organized. It must be FLEXIBLE, but hey, those two words can work together with good planning.
- We all need to carry a filled water bottle every day. Even when the weather begins to cooperate, we need to keep hydrated. The best water bottles are the ones you fill at home that can stay in the car without becoming toxic. Prepare your water bottles the night before and keep them in the refrigerator, so you can grab them as you leave.
- If you designate a day each week to slice veggies, fruit, and healthy snacks, it will save you money and time when you are searching for a quick snack. Nuts are great choices if there are no severe allergies with classmates or team members.
- Everyone loves a treat, so set aside a day each week to place something special in your lunch or your child's lunch. Surprise them with a variety and change the day each week, so they can look forward to it. Sugar is not a good idea, but on occasion, it makes for a happy day.
- Give homework breaks with outdoor activities every day, if possible. This includes adults who work inside all day. A little sunshine makes our hearts sing.

"For you were bought with a price;
glorify God in your body and in your spirit,
which are God's."
I Corinthians 6:20

ENJOY THIS NEW SEASON AND LET YOUR HEART SING!

Beauty for Ashes - Not a Victim – by Pam Charro

After the recent Dallas shootings, our pastor shared an article that was written by a well-known man of God. The writer shared that he believed that our society is falling apart largely because those of us who know the Lord are not sharing our knowledge of him.

What happened in Chronicles 15 is happening today: God and knowledge of him is rejected or not acknowledged, so darkness and negativity are becoming increasingly powerful.

The world needs Christians to shine their lights more brightly than ever; otherwise, things will continue to get darker and darker. And, while it's a duty, it's also a privilege because we are the only ones who can make God known at a time when it is so crucial to do so. We are the only ones with the message of hope, the only ones who even have a choice to not be overcome by despair and violence. If we don't speak up, no one else will, and the enemy will have much more of an impact than necessary.

I was greatly challenged by these statements, not only in the way the author intended, but also because it caused me to question my beliefs in other areas of my life.

- Why do I give the negativity in my life such power?
- Do I truly see myself as powerful over the darkness or am I spending way too much time feeling helpless and sorry for myself?
- Do I see the challenging people around me as my enemies or am I able to view them as loved by God and either deceived by the enemy or simply imperfect people who are still worthy of love and patience?

I often dream that I am running away from something undesirable. In my dreams, that which is pursuing me usually catches me. However, the night before last, as I began running away, I stopped and said, "I will not be bullied - I am the powerful one." I let my pursuer catch me, and it turned out to be a very small thing.

I believe I need to apply this concept much more often in my waking life as well. It is time for me to be what God put me here to be because I carry God's hope in this world and the world desperately needs it.

Will I believe it and live powerfully ... or waste precious time seeing myself as a victim?

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Created for Life - The Most Important Times – by Ginny Hurley

*But I will hope continually, and I will praise You yet more and more.
My mouth shall tell of Your righteousness, and Your salvation all the day,
for I do not know their limits.*

*I will go in the strength of the Lord God;
I will make mention of Your righteousness, of Yours only.
Psalm 71:14-16*

What do you believe are the most important moments for a Christian? I'm not talking about the moments you believed or received Holy Spirit, but the times in life when you walk the walk of faith afterward. Is it the *encounters with God*, the moments of seeing a miracle, the times of answered prayer? Could it be the moment your child was born, when someone you loved was healed, or when you heard a great word for the church?

I believe the most important times in the life of a Christian that have the greatest effect on our lives and future are when we fail, or have an experience that doesn't line up with the promises of God, or our understanding of who He is. During these moments, we have the opportunity to choose how we deal with them, and what we believe about God.

- Do I keep my identity when I have failed and made a huge mistake?
- When I have an accident and didn't feel protected, is He still with me?
- What are my thoughts concerning loss?

My opportunity to indulge in negative thoughts or beliefs grows when these experiences happen. It doesn't seem to line up with my core value that God is GOOD.

- How do I react?

I go back to my core values and beliefs. I delve into what I KNOW to be true.

The first thought that rises to my mind is this verse:

*...nevertheless, I am not ashamed, for I KNOW whom I have believed and am
PERSUADED that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day!
2 Timothy 1:12*

I actually KNOW without doubt that God is GOOD!
I absolutely KNOW that He is always with me!
I totally KNOW that He loves me!
He will surely make good, whatever mess I've gotten into!
His covenant never ceases!
When I am faithless, He is FAITHFUL!
He is not a man, that He should lie!
Jesus exchanged all of my sin for His perfection!
He became a curse, so I could be a blessing!
He is who He says He is!
I can do what He says I can do!
I have a purpose and a destiny that cannot be removed!

The enemy is a liar!
With God ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE!

Therefore, I WILL HOPE continually!
I will choose life!
I will not let the circumstances around me dictate who I am and who God is!
My mouth shall tell of His goodness!
I will go in the strength of the Lord!
I will trust and look at the limitless opportunities hidden and not yet revealed!

I choose to HOPE for the promises and wait for the day it will all be revealed... what an adventure!

MARRIAGE

In This Together - Like a Garden – by Jackie Skanderup

I'm not much of a gardener but there are a few things (literally a few) I do know about it. I know that when I plant something I must water it often. I also know it takes time before there are any signs of life. I am always a little impatient when gardening because I want the garden to be full of beautiful flowers and veggies now! My son especially has a hard time realizing that it sometimes takes weeks before you see anything start to grow.

When we are tending to our gardens, though there may be no proof of life on the surface, there is something amazing going on beneath the dirt. Roots are beginning to form! That little seed that was planted is getting ready to bloom into something beautiful. But before that happens we have to make sure we give that seed what it needs. We have to feed it, water it, and protect it. If we leave that little seed on its own, nothing will come of it.

Marriage is a lot like gardening. We must tend to it daily.

If left alone, not much will come of it and it may even die. When we plant a seed and we don't see a flower the next day we don't give up and quit watering it. We know the seed needs nutrients to grow, and we know it needs time to grow. It actually takes faith to grow a garden. We choose to believe that there is something bigger going on below the surface that will produce a harvest and that is why we continue to tend to it. In the same way it takes faith and effort to see a marriage grow. We have to choose to believe that though we may not see any fruit from our labor on the surface right away, that there is again something bigger going on behind the scenes that will bring fruit in due season.

This week while I was praying for marriages, I saw a picture of a woman down on her knees and next to a garden that was just dirt. She was working it but there was nothing to show for her labor. When I think about this picture I see so much faith in this woman. She continues to work the garden though there are no signs of life on the surface, nothing that proves her work is accomplishing anything. Yet she believes that one day she will find joy in her sowing!

Psalm 126:5 says,

“Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!”(ESV).

Psalm 128:2 says,

“You will enjoy the fruit of your labor. How joyful and prosperous you will be!” (NLT).

If today you are feeling discouraged because you are not seeing any fruit from your labor in your marriage, I want to encourage you to not give up. Keep tending to your marriage. Keep praying fervent prayers over your marriage, over yourself and over your spouse. Prayer is an amazing tool that God has given us and we need to use it more.

Prayer is not a last resort, it is our only hope to see breakthrough!

When we are down and discouraged the enemy swoops in to tell us it's no use, things will never change, our efforts are accomplishing nothing. These are all lies! We need to

remember that, though we may not see change in the natural, there is always something bigger going on in the supernatural. God hears everyone one of our prayers.

Trust in Him and trust in His timing.

Romans 8:28 says,

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,
who have been called according to his purpose.” (NIV)

#

Date Night Fun – Stories – by Marcy Lytle

How fun would it be to incorporate childhood stories into your date night fun this month? Some of the stories we learn from childhood shape our lives, they are committed to memory, and we fall in love with the characters. Either these stories were read to us by our parents just before falling asleep, or we learned them at church, or we read them ourselves when we learned to love books. Sharing these with our spouse while enjoying time together can be great fun.

Here are five ideas:

- 1) **Loaves and fishes** – Remember this one? It's a miracle of how a small boy's lunch fed a crowd of thousands, because Jesus gave thanks and blessed it. Plan a night out for seafood – with bread – and enjoy every bite. Or make this meal together at home. Put together or order one extra meal and deliver to a friend, or a homeless person on the street. Find a nice hill in your town to sit and share miracles you've experienced or are praying for, and journal them. Pray together. Look over your city and imagine Jesus talking to thousands who are hungry.
- 2) **The Boxcar Children** – We just watched this story with the kids on a trip, and it was also one of my favorite children's books! A family of orphaned kids takes up residence in an old railroad boxcar, "making do" with what they find, to create a cozy home. For this date, take a train trip somewhere. It can be just across town, or to another city. Sit close and enjoy the scenery out the window. Pack or purchase a box lunch to enjoy on the ride. Talk over or decide on one project to spruce up your home and purchase the needed materials before you end your night.
- 3) **Daniel in the Lions' Den** – You know this one well. A young man refused to bow to the king but kept praying to his God, and he was thrown into a pit of hungry lions. God stopped the mouths of the lions and they didn't harm Daniel, one bit. Take your date and visit a zoo. Seriously, make this an adult zoo experience of observing God's creation in animals. Lay aside all of your worries from jobs, finances, kids, etc. and trust that God is going to miraculously "stop the mouths" of all that threatens to devour you. Find a place after you leave the zoo to bow, on your knees, by a window to pray in faith, together. End the night at your favorite restaurant for dessert of your choice.
- 4) **Curious George** – one of my all-time favorite characters! He's a little monkey who's curious and that curiosity gets him into a heap of trouble, until the man with the yellow hat always rescues him and takes him back home to safety. When's the last time you and he were just curious on your dates? Let your curiosity lead you to a new store, a new restaurant, a new coffee shop, and a new part of town you've not visited before – perhaps to a new park. Finally, give thanks together for newness and for the Big Man (does he wear a hat? I don't know!) upstairs who always brings you back to his safe arms, no matter where you roam...
- 5) **Creation** – the story of all stories, the foundation of faith. I recently revisited this story in Genesis and found that God's character is revealed through each day's creation. Take your Bible, read the story together out loud, and write down what you learn. For example, when he set the waters apart from the land, it speaks of his power to create boundaries of protection in our lives. Pray and ask God to reveal to you his great love

as you read. Plan your date around one of the creation days. Enjoy a walk under a moon/starlit night with a dinner outside on a patio, or park by a lake and fish, observing all of the sounds of nature on land and in the water. Finally, create something together: a painting, a Popsicle stick house, a recipe, a project. Give thanks for the Creator and his creation.

Aren't these fun ideas? Think outside the box when it comes to having a date night out! This idea of story time could be repeated every few months, because the stories we've all learned and enjoyed are many! And sometimes, you could take the kids along for a family story time, as well.

Enjoy this new fall season about to unfold...

After 30 Years - When Feet Talk – by Marcy Lytle

The camera closes in, under the table, focusing on the two feet – hers with shoe off – his with shoe on – as she reaches with her toes and brushes against the side of his foot to say – I love you. I've seen that angle many times, especially in old movies, where affection was a lot more subtle than it is today. However, it's still true that our feet talk to each other, and it's healthy in a marriage to hear what the other is saying...and respond.

On any given night, when the lights go out and it's time to roll over and start dreaming, my husband's feet and my feet intertwine like a braided piece of rope, unlikely to come loose for a long while. It's the way we work. Somehow, that connection of our feet gives us a feeling of security and tells the other one,

“This is where I want to be...forever.”

When we're at home on the sofa (on a rare occasion when we actually stay home!), my feet end up in his lap. In fact, when our kids were home, we often all three found a spot for at least one foot on his lap when the family was together. His hands are amazing, and when they rub my feet, I'm in heaven...almost. His attention to my tired feet, with his strong hands, brings release from all the cares of the world for that moment, and that massage speaks to me,

“It is well.”

At church, we enjoy sitting close during the sermon. Sometimes I cross my legs and place one foot under the calf of his leg, almost like a shepherd's hook around the neck of a sheep. I'm letting him know that he's mine, and I'm so thankful that he is, and I want him close. I hope he hears that gesture of love by my foot as I'm saying,

“You belong to me...and you are a treasure.”

And yes, sometimes at dinner – at a restaurant – or at a picnic table in a park – we swing our feet and accidentally touch the other one. It's one of those pleasant surprises, like when we accidentally brush up against something royal, and we lock eyes. Our feet sort of play for a second and then...he lifts up my foot and pats it lovingly before placing it back on the ground, where I slide it back on my side of the table, and we eat our dinner together. That little footsy encounter speaks loudly,

“You're there! How fun!”

It's amazing, isn't it, how feet – a part of the body with no voice or no words – can speak such loving things to one another? It's also amazing how we can let those words spoken with our feet either stay unspoken or never get noticed because we're too focused on the busyness of life.

Next time your husband crawls into bed behind you, sits beside you on the sofa, wiggles into a seat next to you at an event, or slides into his place across from you at a table for two, reach out with your feet...and let them speak.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – Silent Leaders – by Rachel Critz

1 Timothy 4:12 says,

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.

What kind of person do you think of when you hear the word *leader*? You probably think of someone who is loud, confident, and motivated.

For me, the word leader defined around me is someone who is not easily angered, someone who is a great motivator, someone who does not give up on themselves or the people around them, someone who always brings it back to God, someone who never fails to encourage, and someone who is Christ-like.

I guess to be a leader one has to be a perfect human being, right?

Nope. I am almost the opposite of half those things. I can be loud around my friends, I can motivate my volleyball teammates, I can encourage, and I do put up a good fight in volleyball games. But sometimes I fail. Like sometimes I get caught up in the moment and forget to give God the glory, or I forget that I am not the most important person on the team.

It is so easy to bring it all back to myself and expect to earn glory from the people around me.

So how could someone like me be a leader?

I like to define myself as a silent leader. I am quiet on the volleyball court and I am not loud about my encouraging words. I usually go to the person directly after a play or during a time out to tell them how well they did, because I like to make it a bit more personal. And I am not saying there is anything wrong with being a loud and extremely motivating leader, but I am making a point that if we are all born a leader in some way, then why did God create a quieter personality like mine?

Whatever personality you may have, someone sees you and looks up to you. You can be a leader, but stop trying so hard to be the “ideal” leader, and just be your own self.

I may never get the title of Captain on the volleyball court but I know I do make an impact on my teammates.

There is one thing about being a silent leader that strikes people. Since your mouth usually remains shut, when you speak up, people will hear your voice and they will remember it. So do not believe you have to be someone else to lead a group of people.

Be you - the You God created you to be.

You may be like me and not receive the glory you see the others receive, but know that your God is pleased with you as He sees you succeed.

One more thing...

When I was growing up, I thought I had to be an adult to be a leader. I just want to tell you that adults never stop learning, just like you. You are living in the generation that will step up and lead.

Isaiah 40:29-31 says,

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

We are young, but we are leaders to our generation. #

Firmly Planted – Pillar of Faith – by Dina Cavazos

I believe there's more to life than meets the eye, but sometimes I momentarily lose sight of the big picture. Sometimes I get dragged down by the humdrum routines and activities of life. I wonder if I'm just spinning my wheels, doing things that, in the end, will be cast into the "bonfire of the vanities." But then something happens that rekindles my excitement and affirmation that "we walk by faith and not by sight."

About six years ago, God set my course to create a prayer garden. (See *February 2016 issue for story*.) It's been a long slow process, however, and there have been times of doubt, of questioning my choices, of wondering why and where this would lead—after all, I'm following faith, not a written plan.

After my mother passed away in 2012, I made a trip to the family ranch in South Texas to sort through and choose some things to keep. The barn was a musty storehouse of wood, metal objects, old tools...the stuff of gardens and outdoor spaces! In a dark corner were four split tree trunks—two about 9 ft. tall and two 4 ft. One side was perfectly flat and the other was rounded, bark peeled off. They were interesting looking wood pillars but I had no way to transport them. I had no idea of their origin or history. I left them.

Soon after coming back home, I had a vision during worship at church. The worship leader read some verses from Isaiah and I saw the words engraved on one of those tall pillars as a testimony of God in the prayer garden. **God was speaking to me—I had to go back and get them!** So I rented a trailer to pull with my truck, even though I'd never maneuvered a trailer before. My friend Albert went with me for support and muscle and we brought back the pillars plus a few other outdoor treasures I found.

I knew the verses had to be either burned or engraved into the wood, and it was beyond my skill level to do it right and beautifully. I made two swings for the patio out of the smaller pieces of wood, but the two 9 ft. pillars have been stored in my garage for the last 4 ½ years awaiting the fulfillment of their purpose.

During that time I had a wooden sign made that was only three words: "Enter with Thanksgiving." From that experience, I knew it would be hard to find someone to create a work of art that consisted of a few verses from Isaiah, especially someone affordable. Was that vision just my imagination? How many years should I let those pillars take up space in my garage?

This past spring, I consulted with my Project Foreman who suggested I hire someone to finish the last major hardscape project of the prayer garden—a circular granite-filled area for the fire pit (*another story for a future article!*). This someone happened to live in my neighborhood and happened to have a landscaping business. He also happened to have a father-in-law in Guatemala who does beautiful wood-art. As I looked at the pictures of his art, I got excited. This is what I was looking for! Carlos said he'd be coming to visit in the summer, but I had no idea what he would charge.

So it's summer—he came over a few days ago and I showed him the wood, told him about the prayer garden and my vision of the pillar, and we made a deal—a deal so good that I can bless

him with more than he's asking for. But that's not all....I knew the verses were in Isaiah 44 or 45 but I wasn't exactly sure—it had been a few years! I looked back in my notes: Isaiah 45. I looked in my Bible and I had marked Is. 45:5-7. As I read, I knew I had to include 8. I made a model for him to go by and used a combination of versions to get the best fit and meaning.

Considering the current state of our world and the placement of this pillar in the midst of a garden dedicated to the One and Only God.....these verses couldn't be more perfect.

Saddle Up - GO Horse – Melissa Critz

I just love the photo for this article. It takes me back to some very special ride times on Domingo.

Domingo is a *go horse*.

What that means in the barrel racing world is that the rider doesn't have to make him go. In fact, the rider may have to hold him back and direct and control. While tuning Domingo, there would be times of wait or basically resting till the next practice tune. This horse did not like those times. He would stand for a wee bit and then turn his head to grab my boot with his mouth. He was ready to go and did not want to wait. Once it was our turn, he was ready! There are other times as well that Domingo would do this, as well. Those times weren't so much as *go* but more as if he wanted to just let me know he was there; that he was happy to join with me on the ride; that he was content and loyal.

When you have an animal in your life for years and years, you just know stuff like this. They learn to trust and just have different mannerisms and habits with their longtime owner different than with anyone else. While looking at this photo, I was given such peace and comfort.

Trust is a big thing with animals. Once the person has that trust then loyalty is a given. And loyal some animals can be!

Loyal

This has been a big word as of late. Our sweet family dog of 16 years passed away recently. She truly was the definition of loyalty. I honestly cannot recall a time that she wasn't always next to me. Sometimes it got frustrating as I would trip over her trying to get chores done around the house. Of course, she didn't understand my frustration. She just wanted to be close – she had a strong sense of protection. She was loyal.

The Lord brings words to me like this during times like this and I know He is talking.

“I'm listening, Saddle Partner.”

When I look up the word *loyal* the word *faithful* abounds. It is in every definition.

Faithful

So I looked up *faithful* - loyal, constant, staunch, steadfast, resolute mean firm in adherence to whatever one owes allegiance.

Do you know that our Lord is faithful?

Psalm 119:90

“Your faithfulness endures to all generations; you have established the earth, and it stands fast.”

Psalms 86:15 “But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

There are so many more scriptures that I could share. My thoughts are that the Lord gives us the wonderful pictures in life to help us understand as best as possible what these words mean. He gives us animals to understand this better, too.

Faithful and Loyal – these are two big words that Our Lord IS. They don't just describe Him. God IS Faithful. God IS Loyal. It is who HE IS. And He lovingly gives us pictures in life for us to grab hold of and understand better.

Know that God is faithful and loyal to you:

Lamentations 3:22-23

“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

Moving Forward - A New Thing – by Pam Charro

Isaiah 43:18-19 is definitely one of my favorite passages of scripture.

*Do not call to mind the former things, or ponder things of the past.
Behold, I will do something new, now it will spring forth; will you not be aware of it?
I will even make a roadway in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.*

Those verses have gotten me through some of the major difficulties in my life. It is so encouraging to know that when life seems too hard to handle, God is doing a new thing and all of the transition will be worth it.

But I am learning to also apply this scripture when things don't seem at all overwhelming, except for maybe overwhelmingly dull.

Does life seem too routine?
Stuck in a rut?

Look for the new things.
They are always there.

Recently, a friend at the gym and I ended up in a discussion that took longer than usual. She started talking to me about working for her in her company. I hadn't even been looking for a job but the new thing came to me. It hasn't panned out yet, but I have updated my resume and anything could come of it. If nothing else, my acquaintance is now a friend!

This week, my husband went to what he expected to be his usual company meeting, only to find out the company had been sold! He was quite surprised and didn't know what to expect, but it looks like this change will bring about nothing but positive for him. He didn't do anything to bring it about, but God did!

**God is an exciting God who is always doing something for our good,
and new things are always on the horizon.**

Whether you're feeling overwhelmed or bored, ask him to show you how exciting life is and will continue to be!

#

Real Stories – The Prince and the Frog - by Janette Wright

Janette is a friend of mine, from way back, one of those friends that will always be close no matter how far away she lives. We don't live by each other anymore, but she writes a blog. She's raised five children. She's gone through hard times.

I recently read this blog entry that she wrote years ago, and I thought it was so good that I asked if I could post it in our magazine this month. What a great reminder that He is in the little things that matter to us...

Without going into unnecessary details, our family recently went through a forced move. Not the excited anticipation and dreaming of the future while boxing up all of your items, but a move where tears were shed, items were sold, my stomach wanted to throw up... move. We were blessed to find a house that would accommodate six people very comfortably, while allowing us to keep most of our 28 years of possessions. What we left behind was a lot with trees and nature sounds along with plane noises, as well as the death of a dream.

Our new lot is very small and planes still fly overhead, but they are bi-planes, a delightful sound. Gone are the days of planes landing at DFW Airport...this I have not missed.

As I settled in, still healing from our loss, I cried at night over dumb things. One of my dumb things was the silence of our new dwelling. There weren't any nature sounds. There couldn't be the birds, bobcats, screech owls, turkeys, rabbits of our other dwellings, because there wasn't a place for them to take up habitation. I so longed to hear even the sound of a locust.

Then the other night, when all hope of ever hearing nature had vanished from our barren dwelling, I heard the strangest noise.

I got up and examined the electronic items in the house to see if we had something shorting out. I checked to see what the kids were fooling with (give me a break... it was after my bedtime!). I couldn't find the source!

My husband looked at me with a funny expression and asked, "What's the problem?"

I answered, "Stop....what is THAT? I can't SLEEP."

He laughed....and now I have to go back in time to fill in the story.

Just weeks ago, my son and I had decided to put our 16-year-old pond into the temporary ground we call home. We filled it up with plants, goldfish and a fountain to bring wonderful water trickling sounds into our yard. This new ecosystem had invited frogs. My four-year-old has so enjoyed fishing them out in the morning.

So...my husband turns to me with a smile and announces that the noise is the weird, rumbling, mating moan of a male FROG!

Isn't God good?

I had cried about not hearing nature sounds and he had brought me a FROG! I had to just laugh. I wouldn't have asked for a frog, but that is what God sent me. The Prince of Peace sent me joy in my journey... through a frog.

He sees our tears, he hears our hurts and frustrations....and HE ANSWERS PRAYERS. He didn't answer the way I wanted – large trees and birds – but He answered. I felt His touch and was reminded He was still there.

He talks to us, but do we hear Him?

Do we realize that He is expressing His love and encouragement?

How many times have I missed something He wanted to bless me with?

Last night I called my son into my room to hear the noise. I told him what it was and we both laughed. It is a wonderful sound to me now, but I sure hope that male frog finds his mate soon!

May you hear God today...

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Can't Hurry – by Marcy Lytle

There are some things in life you just can't hurry. Perhaps you remember the song "You Can't Hurry Love" by the Supremes. If you're not old enough to have heard it, look it up – it's a classic! And I suppose it's true, you can't hurry love. You can't make someone love you when you demand it, love has to take its time and course in your heart and life.

Sometimes, I think about this and realize that it's the things in life that I can't hurry, the things I can't control, that shape me and form me into a better person. Here's a few of the things we all encounter in any given week, or maybe on any given day:

Nail polish drying. You can put your nails under heated air, or wave your hands violently in the wind, but you really can't hurry your nail polish – it has to set and dry – or you'll have streaks and jabs. I've hurried this process many times, only to have to start all over, or go on with a messed up nail. When a new coat goes on, it takes time to adhere. This is true when we take on new attitudes as well. We must give them time to scoot over the old attitudes and emerge at the forefront in our lives.

Computer updating. Isn't this just maddening? You're typing away, not noticing that little flicker at the bottom of your screen alerting you that an update is taking place in a few minutes, and then it happens – your screen goes black and your computer is restarting. You can do nothing but wait, be patient, get up and do something else, and come back when it's through. This is true when we need a rethinking of an old thought. Sometimes, we just need to shut down and let God's word reboot our mind, so that we think clearly and freshly, without getting bogged down in too much information.

Red lights. If we don't stop for these and wait our turn, wait for the green, and wait for traffic to clear, sure disaster is bound to happen. But when we're in a hurry and it seems as if every light we come to is red, we're frustrated. We just HAVE to be on time, arrive at our destination NOW, and we need the GREEN. This is true when we are learning to drive, but it's also true in life with him. He says stop, rest, wait, let things clear, wait for the go, and we MUST – or bad things happen.

Baking a cake. You've mixed, you've stirred, you've added in this and that and you've poured the liquid glop into the pan and inserted the pan into the hot oven. It doesn't matter if you're hungry, if you've got to be somewhere in 30 minutes and the cake has to bake 45 minutes, you just have to wait. The cake won't set or taste good unless it bakes all the way through. This is true when life gets tough and there is too much stirring, too many additions and too much glop. We just want the "life is good" mantra – not the "life is full" madness. But God is working things together for good – he promises that – when we love him. So we just have to be patient, let him add, stir, pour and turn up the heat, until we arrive tasty and sweet.

Toddlers. Little kids have their own agenda, their own pace, and their own la-la attitudes, don't they? You can say, "We've got to leave – put on your shoes!" a dozen times. However, he will get distracted by that toy over there, or she will inadvertently spill her cereal bowl which will then require you to clean before you leave. You can tell them to hurry, but they don't understand the

concept. Their little legs can only run so fast, and their little eyes can only take in so much – without stopping to smell the roses. This is true for any parents of little ones, and we know that hurrying our kids only makes them fall to the floor in a heap of fits and screams. Littles teach us so much. They slow us down, enable us to smell that freshly picked flower too, or to pick them up and hold them in their fit of rage. It's good for us to slow down to their pace, sometimes.

Movie previews. They start and they seem to never end. I swear that movie previews have gotten longer and longer over the years. We see clips of sometimes six or seven films, and we see way more than we'd like because we feel we know the whole story before the movie ever actually hits the theater! It's maddening, but there we sit in every movie, watching the previews and waiting for the real show to begin. We can wish they'd go away, but we have to sit through them. Those who made them want us to see and be drawn in, so that we'll come back when they are released. This is true in life. There are prerequisites that we must experience before that "real" job, the promotion, the move, etc. There are things God wants us to see in his Word, hear from others, or realize from his heart, before we get to what it is we're called to do. And the best things we can do are watch and wait, anticipate, and then settle in and watch the show.

Garden growth. No matter how much I desire it, hope for it, and long for it, my flowers are not going to bloom, my herbs are not going to stand tall, and my grass is not going to grow today, right when I place these things in the ground. In fact, not only does the growth take time, it takes watering, sunshine, rain, etc. And I either tend my garden, and see things grow over time or I get frustrated after planting and let the heat and drought kill all of my hard work, never seeing a bloom at all. This is true in all of life. Planting takes place in our hearts of the Word, but it takes time and care to see fruit produced. We can't get in a hurry. We have to wait patiently and soak in the rain and the sunshine, and wait.

There are so many other things to add to this list; in fact, the list is probably endless. In a hurried, fast-paced world that we live in, it's easy to have the attitude of "I want it now." We are all accustomed to pushing buttons and seeing that snack fall to the bottom of the machine, insert our hand and grab what we want, and go. Until that day when we're starving for a snack, the machine is broken, and we find ourselves kicking it in anger, demanding that it release and let go!

Slowing down, waiting, watching, learning, etc. are just as important – maybe more than important – as getting there on time, climbing to the top of that ladder, or sliding through that light in a near miss.

You can't hurry some things in life...like walking across a tightrope with tiny legs...like pictured here.

FRESH THYME – Guarantees – by Marcy Lytle

One morning I was whining to God and asking why we don't have any guarantees about tomorrow. Some days, I just find that reality hard to live with. Do you?

I'd like to wake up and know for sure that I will see my husband when he returns home from work, that I will live to see all of my grandchildren grow up to be adults, and that they will all be "safe" from the evils of this world, and live a life for God, full of success and blessings. I'd like to be assured of excellent health until the day I breathe my last breath, and then to know that that last breath would be pain-free. Oh, and I would like guarantees about all of these things for all of those I know and love...

We recently bought a new television and as usual, we were asked, "Would you like an extended warranty?" to which we replied, "Yes," but only after we saw the cost and deemed it was worth it to purchase. They weren't selling guarantees, because there's always the off-chance that something will go wrong with the appliance that you buy, but they do sell these warranties that will allow you to get a new version or at least get yours fixed, should that off-chance actually occur.

But what if they could sell guarantees?

What if God could guarantee all that I asked him to?

I'm not sure that God was amused or entertained with my questioning, but I'm certain that he heard me, because I belong to him and his ears are always open to our prayers...right?

Actually, he began reminding me that he has given me plenty of guarantees, but I just don't think it's enough.

For example:

- He's guaranteed eternal life, no more sorrow or pain, and to grant us wisdom if we ask.
- He's promised to never leave us, to send goodness and mercy, and to guide us even in the dark.
- He's certain that nothing can separate us from his love, and he's sure to provide all that we need in this life.

That's just a few things he's guaranteed to us, as his children.

So why do I fret over the things he has not guaranteed me in this life here on earth? Why does peace elude me unless I know that everything's going to be all right with me and mine? Why do I pine and long for guarantees for these things?

The answer might lie in the fact that I haven't purchased any of these things for which I'm asking for a guarantee. Quite the opposite is true. He has purchased ME with the price he paid on the cross – his death. I am the purchased, and he is the purchaser.

In other words, he has purchased my life, given me an extended warranty, and promises to heal everything that I break or mess up while I'm using that life here on earth. He's given me that guarantee, and yet the truth of the matter is that he didn't have to purchase me at all – but he did!

He loves me!

To me, love looks like swooping down to snatch me from every evil in this world so that I'm protected from pain, misery, and sorrow. But to Him, love looks like transforming me through a process over time and relationship and yes – even sorrow – so that I can experience every part of His amazing love. To Him, the guarantee has been given and set – but it's not the one I'm demanding.

Every time I wander along that path of questioning the love of God and why He doesn't guarantee "more" according to my standards and my stipulations, he draws me in close so that I realize that this time on earth is a mere speck in the time he's given me to live through the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus. And this time is not my own, and neither is my body, it all belongs to him – the One who purchased me away FROM death.

That's the reality. That's the clincher. That's the silencer.

That's the truth.

No guarantees with God? Of course, there are. They're just not written by our hand, but rather by the One who bought us with a price.

FRESH THYME - Ode to Maisy – by Melissa Critz

Melissa Critz, writer of the column titled “Saddle Up,” recently loss her beloved dog Maisy. She poured out her heart in this amazing tribute to her four-legged friend, and we thought it might be a nice read for all of you who have also lost pets and are still grieving, or for those you with a pet who is aging or ill...

A crisp winter day
Dog hunting for our first family pet
Many woofs and howls abound
Many anxious eyes and wiggly bodies
“Will you choose me?”
Wondering from cage to cage
Voila!
Our hearts latch
Our eyes catch
She is ours
Tail wagging
Eyes catching
Looking Loyal

Early in the years, she captures us day by day
Grab the leash and head out for that daily jog
Grab that ball and play catch and watch clouds for hours in the park
Loves the kids and all the attention
Gives it all back with playing and protecting
Always wagging
Always watching
Always loyal

Buddies come and go but she stays
She is the keeper
Kids grow and she does as well – in age
But this does not deter
Squirrels and birds tease but she chases with glee
Tail wagging
Eyes catching
Being loyal

House from suburbs to country come about
A new buddy in the form of a Siamese enters life
She finds a new stage of discover
She hunts and seeks
But always at my side
Always wagging
Always watching

Always loyal

Legs slowing down
Eyes clouding
Hearing degrading
But always trying to keep by me
Always knowing and watching
Always wagging
Always watching
Always loyal

The day comes
Legs do not work
Appetite is gone
I walk in the room
Only the tail can wag
Only the eyes can follow
She is loyal

I miss her
I miss her tail wagging
I miss her eyes watching
I miss her loyalty
So Loyal
So Loyal
Always there to the end

I love you, Maisy
Thank you for being
Thank you, Lord, for the gift of animals

#

FRESH THYME - The Roam – by Marcy Lytle

We took my daughter's three kids to the movies – ages 4, 3 and 1. I'm not sure if we were brave or crazy, but we did it. 30 minutes into the movie, the 1 year old was done. 45 minutes into the movie, the 3 year old was yelling, "It's over!" Since I'm not a fan of animated movies, it was my choice to take the kids out and let my husband and the 4 year old enjoy the rest of the movie.

There's a long hallway running the length of the theaters, so I let them roam. We went back and forth, back and forth, but it was never a straight line they ran. They stopped along the way to observe many things:

- The cardboard display of an upcoming "creepy" movie: This fascinated them the most. There were cardboard characters, a "real rope" dangling, and fang-like teeth on one scary monster.
- The back door: This was the exit, but they were content to stand there and look outside and then run the other way.
- The people building a display: They wanted to sit and watch as the duo punched out holes and put together cardboard pieces like a giant puzzle. "Let's stay longer," the 3-year old begged.
- The booster chair stack: There were child booster seats stacked along the wall, and the 1-year old enjoyed climbing on these and sitting, smiling as if he'd reached the top of Mount Everest.
- The doors to other theaters: They were curious what was behind these doors. So we actually went in one, where another kids' movie was showing, and we watched for a few minutes. Until "stupid," "idiots" and "shut up" were exclaimed in less than five minutes – and then we were then *outta' there*.

This morning I was thinking about how tired those two made me as we chased back and forth, waiting for Mister (my husband's name to our grandkids) and Gideon to exit the movie we all started out seeing. We were all comfy in our chairs with snacks in hand, but then the roam began. I recalled the smiles on the faces of the two escapees as they discovered all sorts of things in one tiny hallway in a big movie house.

I go from point A to point B across my city daily and I often arrive without having noticed a thing, except annoying drivers beside and behind me. I also go from my lists A to Z without seeing anything in my day except the items on those lists. I don't watch with wonder at beauty unfolding in the skies or on landscaped lawns, I miss cute characters, places to sit and smile, or doors of discovery. It's all because I'm an adult and I've lost my sense of wonder and adventure, when it comes to duty and responsibility.

What I learned from those kids last night was that life is an adventure, and one doesn't have to sit in a boring movie from start to finish if one doesn't want to. One can get up, walk and look, stop and smell, run and play, and open and see.

Too soon, those two will be old enough to sit through an entire movie. But it will only be after they've discovered and learned and marveled at all of the things that their curious minds can hold while they are growing and learning. Part of being a 1-year old and a 3-year old is discovery and wonder.

Being like a child in some areas of our life should never leave us.

Today, I'm about to start my list. I will be in the car before long. And I plan to take a different path, look out a few windows, and stop to sit and smile.

#

A BUNDLE OF

TH  ME

October 2016

TIPS

The Dressing – The Shorts – by Marcy Lytle

I love them. They're the short ankle-style boots, or booties, and I have several of them. From suede, to leather, to ones with fringe or tassels, to low or high heels, there are booties everywhere to choose from! They even come in all sorts of cool fall colors like different shades of brown, taupe, dark eggplant and a pretty khaki green. I like them better than the tall boots, because I feel outfits are so limited with the tall ones...

However, booties can be worn a multitude of ways with a lot of different styles!

Tights. These brown leather booties look great with tights. Wear your favorite jean skirt and a sweater, then pop on a pair of tights and your booties, and you're stylin' it well! This way, your legs stay warm on those chilly morns...

Cuffs. I have a couple pairs of these jeans with the cuffs. The Gap has them and they fit oh, so well. The boyfriend style is my favorite. These jeans are cropped so they land just above your booties, and they create a casual look that can also be transformed into a dressy one at night, by changing your top!

Skinny jeans. Maybe cuffs aren't your thing. That's cool, because there are plenty of the tapered or "skinny" legs out there. Try pairing them with an extra-long shirt that hits mid-thigh, either belted or not, put on your booties, and go, go, go!

Bare Legs. On warm fall days, it's super okay to wear your short boots with skirts that hit right above the knee. I even like wearing them without any socks at all, and these fun booties are great to wear around town all day while shopping for cooler days ahead.

Leggins. Aren't these navy booties so deliciously cute with the colored leggings! They just exude fun! Worn with a long top, leggings look great atop any pair of short boots you might have in your closet...or ones you might buy!

Tucked in. I've seen a lot of cute outfits where the jeans are actually tucked into the booties. These need to be carefully crafted, but when done right, they look really cute and casual. And they certainly draw attention to the cute cutouts, designs or tassels hanging around the edge of your footwear!

Shorts. Shorts, tights, and booties – a great combo for those who can pull it off! Fall shorts are pretty when paired with a complimentary pair of tights. These can even be dressy! Check out these cute fall shorts at...

If you've got a black, a brown and a pretty colored pair of booties – you're in good shape! Look around for sales. I was able to snag a pair at Charlotte Russe half off! Booties are a bit less pricier than full knee boots, so you can get two for the price of one of those!

Enjoy the fall...booties and all...

Seven 4 You – The Colors of the Season – by Marcy Lytle

I absolutely love the fall season. All seasons have their glory, but the fall season and the warm colors of the leaves, the candles, and all things pumpkin, just make me feel cozy and comfortable! Bringing those colors into our homes through various means is one of the joys of the season, as well. Our homes become these inviting dens that welcome family and visitors to sit, smell, look, and enjoy every part of the color scheme this time of year.

Here's how to bring the colors of fall into your home.

Brown. Gather twigs from your yard or a park, ones of all different lengths. Place candy corn or burnt peanuts in the base of your vase, then arrange the twigs so that they are willowy and tall. You're done! You can place this on an entry table, or on a mantel, or even in the center of your table. If you have a crabapple tree available, those branches are very nice in a vase, as well. It's also time to bring in your wood for the fireplace, soon to be used!

Orange. I think my favorite for this color is the pumpkin scented candle or a few throw pillows to replace the ones on your sofa. Do you have hooks by your front door? Hang a pretty orange coat or sweater, or other colored scarves or even bags to bring in the color of orange or other hues of fall.

Yellow. The yellow leaves on the trees, when mixed in with the other colors of fall, really stand out...don't they? Try adding a pretty yellow dish towel in your kitchen or dark yellows in your bathroom. Or use your tiered servers, alongside a chalkboard, to add pops of yellow, orange and brown!

Purple. This color is gorgeous and breathtakingly beautiful in the fall. What if you switched out your sofa pillows for ones in this pretty color - maybe eggplant? This hue actually blends and brightens up a room of almost any color scheme!

Green. Pears are pretty in a bowl. Green leaves from magnolia trees are beautiful, up against brown pinecones. Spray paint wooden or crafted letters that spell F-A-L-L and place up against a stack of books, with a pumpkin beside.

Red. I've never seen such pretty reds as I saw last year in upstate New York. We just don't have that beauty here in central Texas, so I love to bring that color inside or on the front porch through lanterns and apples, and pomegranates too!

The Mix. Find a pretty plaid blanket or throw, toss several pumpkins of different colors in a basket, and set these by a chair for an inviting porch arrangement or in the corner of a room! Or place a mix of fall gourds in your cake dome.

Selah's Style – Make it Yourself – by Selah Irwin

I am so excited! Halloween is almost here! It is absolutely, positively my favorite holiday ever! One..... I get to dress up. Two.....THE CANDY! I have never bought my costume in my entire life. I love to put one together and create a masterpiece. This month, I thought I would share some of my costume making brilliance with you!

A couple of years ago, I dressed up as a Monster High Doll. The best thing to do when dressing up like a specific character from a specific show is to start by looking up a picture on the internet. You may think you know what they look like, but do you really? You will want to capture all the crucial details. We usually start with the wig or head and work our way down to the shoes. In this case, I needed a curly whirly wig which I found on Amazon. As you can see by the photo of my doll, the outfit would be hard to find. We bought similar colored fabric and splattered paint to give the same effect. We purchased a purple leotard and glued trim and buttons to the front. To give the appearance of the blue body, we bought two pair of blue tights and used them on my legs and arms! Obviously we used blue face paint as well. Monster madness achieved!

Check out this picture of Sandy and Danny (also known as my parents). In this case, all they had to do was buy awesome wigs and voila! They were instantly transformed into the magical set of *Grease*!

He steals from the rich and gives to the poor! He is ROBIN HOOD! If you know how to sew, all you'll need is a bow! My mom used fake leather fabric we had left over from another costume to stitch up a vest. She cut off the hood from my old Jawa costume she made me when I was three. Without buying a thing, we pieced together the perfect Robin Hood. We didn't spend a dime!

Who doesn't love *Nacho Libre*? Again, the wig tied this costume all together. It is the centerpiece, the *creme de la creme*. We spray painted boots red, glued red felt patches to the knees of blue leggings, found my mom's old, red cheerleader lollies and sewed a simple cape out of red fabric. This costume is sure to get a chuckle from every door where you trick or treat.

Sometimes I am a little insane. This costume came straight from my brain. I had the owl beanie so I decided to be an owl for *Halloweeny*! To the untrained eye it may seem simple, but look closer to realize we made the cape by sewing individual different colored triangles to represent feathers. We glued a feather boa on a blue tutu and more fabric feather triangles to a brown leotard. You can have a hoot in this owl suit.

P.S. This year I am going to be a Lalaloopsy doll. Look her up. Her name is Peanut!

Happy Halloween!

#

Tried and True – Serving up Fun – by Marcy Lytle

When I have my family over for dinner, I like to make the tablescape something that's attractive to the eye by placing food in something "other than" a normal Pyrex bowl or white plate. It's also fun to serve up dessert in cute dishes, instead of on paper plates, even if it's just my husband and me at home. There are creative ways to dress up our own serving dishes, but then there are also fun finds that we can look for when we're out shopping around.

Antique stores have old dishes that we can sometimes snag for a fun piece. Discount stores often have pretty trays or cute bowls. You might run across something really cute, even at the Dollar Store! Or maybe you enjoy looking through catalogs that come in the mail. The best finds are the ones that just catch your eye, even when you're not really looking!

Here's a few of my favorites that I've collected. Maybe they will inspire you to start serving it up a little more fun and colorful and whimsical!

Apple (or other fruit you love) dishes. I love to make apple pie or crumble in the fall. It's fun to serve it in these individual dishes that are shaped or have the apple pie image on them. I even found these cute pear shaped plates for serving! These just pop up around town, at junk shops or discount stores.

A big colorful bowl. You probably have your standard set of serving dishes, but what if you got a serving a bowl in a pop of color to accent your table! Look for a large bowl for serving up spaghetti or another one-pot meal, add some pretty cloth napkins, and you've got a lovely but simple tablescape for dinner!

Plastic baskets. These are from the Dollar Store and they're great for burgers, hot dogs, or other finger foods. You can purchase paper liners for them from World Market. Just stack up the baskets and let your guests serve themselves from your buffet of goodies. You can also serve up fried pickles in these lined baskets, just like they do at restaurants!

Seasonal Servers. Sometimes, these show up and they catch your eye, and you want to buy! I love this big pasta server with a huge pumpkin in the center. I even set it up for display when I'm not using it. It's great for serving up a huge bowl of pasta covered in my favorite veggies and sauce!

Just for Fun. I found these French-fry holders at World Market (again, you can find the paper liners there, too) and this big tray at Walmart. You can line the tray and set 2-3 dishes of food on it, place the French-fry holders out and fill them with popcorn, fries, fried pickles, nuts, or whatever you'd like! Add colorful napkins, and you've got a whimsical serving area set up for fun!

For the Game. I've had this football bowl for a long time, and I don't remember where I purchased it. It's so fun to fill it with chips or pretzels, or other snack-type foods and set out, when a game is on and everyone wants a snack. You can find football napkins, toothpicks and all sorts of servers. I just keep it up in the cabinet stored away, until I want to bring it out for play!

Individual pots. One time, my grocery store had these for \$3 each, and I'd seen the "real" pots for much more than that at kitchen stores. So I grabbed up several. It is SO FUN and everyone feels SO SPECIAL when they get their own little pot of beans, mac-n-cheese or potatoes, etc. with a lid on top!

Tiny cake servers. These were out a while back in the dollar area of Target – I think it was three bucks! It's small, but it adds so much to a table, with a tiny cake on top, or a small bowl of dip. It adds a little height and looks so cute!

I don't have a huge house or a lot of storage. However, I do keep a cabinet shelf or two just for these fun servers, to pull out to make dinner more interesting and appealing. It even makes preparing the dinner a bit more enticing, when I know I'm going to serve it all up on fun trays, platters or in pretty bowls or dishes.

Color, texture, light and whimsy – go for it this fall when you're serving it up!

#

Bind it or Loose It – My Mexican Heritage – by Erica Simmons

This is our first column so this month, we will start out with some background inspiration for our column. This was the first summer the boys worked (I have twin teens) and it made me realize that time with them is more precious than ever before. In an effort to spend more time together as a family, I introduced cooking. This activity would give us time together and at the end of it, if done right, a good meal. I then wanted to keep it rolling at the end of summer and asked the boys if they wanted to continue. *A Bundle of THYME* needed a new food writer, so me being me, I had to have a catchy name. We agreed to call it “Bind it or Loose it.” This name is catchy and Christian-y at the same time.

Here is how the column will work. We will scour the internet for food recipes that tickle our fancy and we will cook them (I usually go with the recipe with the highest star rating). At the end, we talk about whether the recipe is good enough to keep and go into our binder (bind it) or not (loose it).

We jokingly refer to ourselves as *Blexican*, a mashup of love for Mexican food and our heritage and so it made sense (to us) to start here.

Mexican Stuffed Shells – (food.com 5 stars)

Rating: Bind It

I looked for this recipe to entice my niece with a meal to visit and bring my new great-nephew. She knew she wanted the stuffed shells and found this one. It is very easy to make. It was a hit with the entire family so I cooked it for our Tuesday luncheons we had at work this summer.

I sent Jerimiah to the store and he came home with ground turkey instead of ground beef, and it was just as good using the turkey.

Ingredients

- 1lb ground beef
 - 1(1 1/4 ounce) package taco seasoning (can use low-sodium)
 - 1(4 ounce) package cream cheese
 - 14 -16 large pasta shells
 - 1cup salsa
 - 1cup taco sauce (NOT enchilada sauce)
 - 1cup cheddar cheese, shredded
 - 1cup Monterey jack cheese, shredded
 - 1 ½cups tortilla chips, crushed (optional)
 - 3green onions, chopped
-
- 1cup sour cream

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 350°.
2. In a frying pan cook ground beef; add taco seasoning and prepare according to package directions. Add cream cheese, cover and simmer until cheese is melted. Blend well. Set aside and cool completely.
3. While the ground beef is cooking, cook the pasta shells according to directions; drain. Set shells out individually on baking sheet so that they don't stick together.
4. Pour salsa on bottom of a 9×13 inch baking dish. Stuff each shell with the meat mixture placing shells in dish open side up. Cover shells with taco sauce. Cover with foil and bake for 30 minutes.
5. After 30 minutes, add shredded cheese and bake for 10-15 more minutes, with the foil removed. Top with green onions and serve with sour cream and/or more salsa.

Taco Sauce (allrecipes.com 4.9 stars)

Rating: Bind It

I love Jeremiah but going to the store and getting the right things is not his strong suit. He forgot the taco sauce, but he bought enough extra stuff so that I actually had the ingredients I needed to make taco sauce - so I did. It brought so much authenticity to the recipe that I make the sauce every time I cook the shells.

Ingredients

- (16 ounce) can tomato sauce
- 2/3 cup water
- 2 tablespoons white vinegar
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 2 teaspoons onion powder
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon garlic salt
- 1/2 teaspoon chili powder
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika
- 1/2 teaspoon white sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper

Directions

Stir tomato sauce, water, vinegar, cumin, onion powder, garlic powder, garlic salt, chili powder, paprika, sugar, and cayenne pepper together in a saucepan over low heat; cook at a simmer until slightly thickened, about 20 minutes. Cool sauce slightly before serving.

Mexican Rice Food.com (5 stars)

Rating: Bind It

To round out our meal we cooked this Mexican rice. The first time we cooked it we used regular white rice and the rice was still a little firm. The next time we cooked it we used instant rice and it was perfect. This has a lot of prep and I am a do-it-as-I-go kinda gal, but next time I will do all the chopping beforehand. I used can tomatoes each time I cooked it.

Ingredients

- 12ounces tomatoes, very ripe and cored
 - 1medium white onion
 - 3medium jalapenos
 - 2cups long grain white rice
 - 1/3cup canola oil
 - 4minced garlic cloves
 - 2cups chicken broth
 - 1tablespoon tomato paste (may omit if using canned tomatoes)
 - 1 1/2teaspoons salt
 - 1/2cup fresh cilantro, minced
-
- 1lime

Directions

1. Adjust rack to middle position and preheat oven to 350.
2. Process tomato and onion in processor or blender until pureed and thoroughly smooth. Transfer mixture to measuring cup and reserve exactly 2 cups. Discard excess.
3. Remove ribs and seeds from 2 jalapenos and discard. Mince flesh and set aside. Mince remaining jalapeno. Set aside.
4. Place rice in a fine mesh strainer and rinse under cold running water until water runs clear- about 1 1/2 minutes. Shake rice vigorously to remove excess water. This step removes the starch from the rice so it will not stick. IF YOU OMIT THIS STEP YOUR RICE WILL NOT BE DRY AND FLUFFY.
5. Heat oil in heavy bottomed oven-safe 12 inch straight sided sauté pan or Dutch oven with tight fitting lid over low-medium heat about 2 minutes. (The recipe is very specific about this but I used a 10 inch Dutch oven and it worked out fine.) Drop a few rice grains in and if they sizzle then it is ready. Add rice and fry stirring until rice is light golden and translucent, about 6-8 minutes. Be careful that the oil doesn't get too hot too fast or the oil will splatter.

6. Reduce heat to medium, add garlic and 2 minced jalapenos and cook , stirring constantly until fragrant, about 1 1/2 minutes.
7. Stir in broth, pureed mixture, tomato paste, and salt. Increase heat to medium high, and bring to a boil.
8. Cover pan and transfer pan to oven to bake until liquid is absorbed and rice is tender, 30-35 minutes. Stir well after 15 minutes.
9. Stir in cilantro, minced jalapeno to taste, and pass lime wedges separately.
10. Edited to add 6-15-05: If you can't get good fresh tomatoes you are better off using canned tomatoes. Don't use those awful hard and under ripe tomatoes that are at most supermarket chains. Just be sure that the processed tomatoes and the one onion equals 2 cups. One the other hand- if you find that after processing your tomatoes and onions that you have less than 2 cups- simply add enough bottled salsa to make up the difference.
11. Edited 8-21-06: Do not skip any of the steps. It may seem stupid- but rinsing the rice to remove the starch is very important if you want fluffy rice. It will only take two minutes of your time but it makes the difference.
12. Edited 8-15-08: Leftovers are just as delicious the next day so this is a perfect dish to make ahead time for potlucks. This rice also freezes well. For Freezing Ahead: Cool, portion and freeze in a Ziploc bag. To reheat from frozen: Place in a Pyrex dish and warm in the microwave, stirring every 2-3 minutes until heated through.

#

HOME

Practical Parenting – I Can Swing Myself, Now – by Marcy Lytle

A couple of months ago we wrote about little girls and their love for style and clothing, and I promised an article for boys – so here it is.

I was on the playground with Gideon, four years old, and I began pushing him on the swing like I always do when he reminded me, “I can swing myself now, Ella.” I quickly moved to allow him freedom to soar as I praised him and stated my amazement at what he could now do.

After that experience, I realized that swinging is a great parallel for raising our little boys into men.

The Lift. When they’re small, our boys need help just getting into the swing. They are too small to climb in, the swing is too high, and they need our assistance. This is the carrying stage, where we carry them and place them in places that are fun yet safe, to a table that is set with good things, and to bed where they can rest and grow. We give them that sense of security as we hold them tight, never letting them out of our sight or away from our presence for a moment. It grounds them and plants them solidly into a life that is ever moving and oh, so unstable.

The Grip. When they’re a bit older, our boys learn to hold on tight to the swing so they don’t fall out. It’s then that they migrate to the seat swing instead of the “baby” swing. It’s a little scary because they might let go and fall out, but we remind them often, “Hold on!” as we push them back and forth. It’s not long at all before they reply, “Higher, higher!” They’re bound to fall out once, on their head, or jump out and land on their feet at a moment’s notice, because that’s what boys do – they like adventure. But this is the time in their lives where we teach them what to hold on to, when to let go, how to move their legs back and forth, the importance of the grip – holding onto that which is eternal – like the Word of God and the truth of who Jesus is.

The Swing. For a long time, it seemed, Gideon had been content to allow me to swing him back and forth. He asked that I grab his ankles and pull really far back and then let go, so that he could soar very high in the air. Of course, I had to stand right by him constantly as I pushed, so that he never slowed down, never lost his momentum, never stopped swinging. These are the times in our boys’ lives when we’re beside them on the playground, with them on those hard projects, and rooting for them in the audience when they have that solo in the band. It’s when we show up at a game to see him play on the field, if only for five minutes. They want us and they need us constantly to be their cheerleader, their encourager, and their applause. And we moms love that time in life – when they still reach for our hands to hold as we walk down the street.

The Self. Now, Gideon has it down. He’s been lifted, seated, taught to grip, shown how to move his legs back and forth, and he’s grown into this strong little boy that can carry himself back and forth with no assistance at all. And man, is he proud. He still enjoys an initial push, but once he’s soaring, he’s ready for me to move aside and over to his little sister who still needs the push. This time arrives in our boys’ lives way before we moms are ready for it to do so. We’ve done our jobs, and now they’re grown and ready to take flight out of our arms, holding

fast to that which we've taught them, moving their own two legs to where HE now tells them to go, and they're not holding our hand any longer – but they're holding onto HIS.

That is the progression of raising boys. From placing them, teaching them, showing them, pushing them and letting them go, it's a long tedious, thankless job, but it's what we all want – grown men who let go of our hand and grab onto HIS.

This doesn't mean it's easy. We're going to be tired from pushing and pulling, we're going to want to sit and watch him swing way before he's ready, we're going to cringe when he asks for one more time when we're tired and want to sleep, and we're going to be frustrated when he requires that we sit next to him while he's too afraid to go up there on that stage and speak. He's going to completely wear us out when he asks us to stay in his room three nights in a row, because he's afraid of the shadows. We won't believe it when his lanky legs and strong arms become awkward and end up all over our laps.

And then suddenly, one day we will hear that phrase, "I can swing by myself, mom," and our hearts will break but at the same time soar with pride as he really does fly. We're going to stand amazed as his hands hold tight and we have no fear that he is going to fall. His gangly legs will now move back and forth in a rhythm all his own, as he moves smoothly, without a hand or a push from us.

We'll cry. We'll smile. We'll reach out one more time, but he'll wave instead of grabbing our hand.

If your boys are in the baby swing, still being pushed, or swinging alone, or maybe they're not even visiting the playground any more, you know about all these stages of the swing.

Be encouraged. Lift them and carry them while you can. Teach them to grip and hold on to that which is good. Show them by example how to move their legs back and forth in answer to obedience and faith. Fly them high, watch them soar, and stand amazed at the good job you've done...

As you glance once more at the swing.

#

Life as We Know It – Identity – by Erica Simmons

“You are the spitting image of your dad, with hair.”

I can't tell you the number of times I heard that comment, coming up as a young girl. Being from a small town, there were not many people who did not know who I was, based on how I looked. My identity was my family. So often, if someone was not immediately recognized, the first question asked was, “Who are your people?”

My parents played an integral role in my development. It is from my parents that so much of my moral foundation was formed. My dad was a hard-working, honest, “my word is my bond” man and was a great provider. We wanted for nothing in those simpler times. My mom made sure we went to church and understood the importance of keeping a clean home. My physical appearance and non-tangible characteristics are two ways to identify me, but not the way I want to be identified.

As I grew from child, to teen, to adulthood, much of what my parents demonstrated and taught me drove that development. This was fine, but there came a time when someone much greater began to take over. This transition was not easy for me as my mom was a strong force in my life and she was not willing to give up without a fight. The Word tells us we cannot have two masters, for we will love the one and hate the other or we will be devoted to one and despair the other. We cannot serve God and mammon (Matthew 6:24). For so many, that verse means God and money, but for me it was God and my mom. Since I am writing for this Christian magazine, you all know which one I chose with no regrets.

So what does this have to do with parenting?

As I evolve as not just a parent, but a Christian parent, it came to me that my boys too are developing their identity. I fuss and fret over the fact that I don't spend enough time with them in the Word. This task has become harder as they are both now working. We all know that anytime we have a fret or a worry, the enemy is right there in our ear reinforcing those negative thoughts. There are days I won't see one of my sons or the other until bed time. That means they had more contact with influences that are more and more moving away from the Christian foundation of our country, than Godly influences. No matter how much peace it would bring me, I know cannot lock up my children in our house. What I have been doing and will continue to do is live a life and deal with them in a way that demonstrates the identity of Christ, knowing their identity is continuously being developed. This is the foundation of my live-as-I-know-it moments.

This month I had two live-as-I-know-it moments.

The first came in dealing with Jordan. He is a strong minded young man and has definite thoughts about life and how to do things. The most challenging thing to me is helping him understand that he is young and there is so much he does not know yet, and there are some things he will have trust my word on. As such, I had to lay out to him consequences for the next time he broke my rules, which he did with the excuse that he did not think I would know. If my children would just realize that God has my back and puts me where I need to be when I need to be there, their lives would be much easier. I suppose they are still learning that *fat meat is indeed greasy*. When I reminded him of the consequences, he was flabbergasted because he had forgotten. As I dealt with the aftermath of the situation, I started to feel bad. My boys really

do not realize it is hard for me to deal harshly with them, as I want it to be all love and easy times.

Here's the moment: If I as his mother don't enforce the consequences, then I am setting him up for failure. Like our Heavenly Father, I don't want him to obey me out of fear or because he is afraid of the consequences. I have put things in place to protect him and keep him safe. When we as children natural and spiritually step outside of the protective boundaries we put ourselves in harm's way, and that is bigger than the consequences we receive as reminders to stay within those boundaries.

My other moment happened one morning when I was getting ready for work. Most mornings I look out my bathroom window just to make sure the pool does not need any attention. One morning the Lord brought to me the practice I had of addressing the issues the boys come to me with, with what the Word says about them. It is something I moved away from because I worried I would come off too religious. He reminded me that my original reason for doing so was to always point my boys to the Word as the right way to make the right decision in difficult times. It is a practice I am once again going to implement.

So why is identity so important?

I am reminded of the movies and television shows where the people have their identity erased and how it made them vulnerable and put them at the mercy of their enemies. These are the same potential risks that my boys will have if I fail to create an identity and one that is firmly rooted and grounded in Christ. Therefore I go forward displaying the identity of Christ in my life and imparting in them those qualities and characteristics that will help them build and form their identity.

That is all I can do as a parent.

God will do the rest.

I Don't Do Teens – Don't Make Them – by Marcy Lytle

I remember when I was a kid and my mom would plead with me to play the piano for guests or other family members. I didn't want to do that! My brother was a math whiz and he was called on many times to figure insane calculations in his head, to wow onlookers. I think most parents enjoy putting their children on display to demonstrate their creativity, talents, or genius. It makes us proud, and makes them...cringe.

There are some kids who love being put on display, and they gladly perform. But many, many kids do not appreciate being asked to perform on cue, just to make mom and dad proud. In fact, many teens really come to despise being "chosen" by mom or dad to stand up and perform like a circus monkey, especially if they don't feel good at what they do...or if they're not as good as their siblings!

In fact, there are a number of reasons we shouldn't MAKE our kids show off, when they don't want to do so...or at least a few things to consider before we do it.

Be sensitive. If your teen shrinks back, gives you "a look," or says no – this is one time you need to listen. Performing in front of others to show off talents should not be a demand, but rather a want-to on their part.

Be aware. Why are you asking them? Is it so your friends will think more highly of you, or be jealous of you? We should never show off our kids to increase our self-image...or theirs. Let them shine in character over credits.

Be considerate. Try asking your teens prior to your guest's arrival if they'd like to play that piano piece, recite that poem they wrote, display the trophy they won or talk about their achievements. Perhaps your guest has a child who suffers with a learning disability, and shouting off your kid's successes would only make them sad. Think. Ask ahead. Then act kindly.

Be normal. Okay, that's a relative word, I know. But by "normal" I mean don't be one of "those" parents who only talks about their kids' awards and scores, because when we push that out in front, we make our kids think that's the most important thing. And it's not...by any means.

Be thankful. Give thanks to the Lord for all of the blessings and talents your kids have been given, and thank Him together, so that your kids know where these blessings originate. Encourage them to thank Him often and display their gift before Him...and he will exalt them...is His way and at His time.

There are some teens who enjoy showing off their abilities and they don't mind you asking them to do so. But even those kids need to be sensitive, aware, considerate, normal and thankful. Or pretty soon, our guests, their kids, and even siblings will avoid the performers at every turn.

We parents place our kids into all sorts of extra activities from the time they can walk, hoping our kids will succeed, be picked first, win honors, and end up on top. We want our kids to have the best, be the best, and peak when we speak. But if we're not careful, and we push too hard

and lose sight of what's important, our teens will end up with the same self-esteem issues we have that cause us to act the crazy ways we do.

Is your teen a brain?

Is your daughter a starter on the team?

Is your son a true artist?

Of course, we are all proud of our kids. But let them enjoy their art, their skills, and their craft at their own leisure and let others around them applaud them, for a job well done, not for a job we made them do or else...

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Everything Home - Let Whimsy Lead – by Mikaela Cain

When I'm not writing for *A Bundle of THYME* Magazine, I'm ministering as a children's pastor at True Life, a church in Round Rock. Currently, I'm helping my fellow staff members remodel and expand the building, including all of the children's rooms! It's quite an endeavor—one that has taught me how to create imaginative spaces for children that are safe, cheap and easily fixable! The decorative pieces that are going in the after all the paint, carpeting and furniture are the crowning jewels that help solidify our theme. The tactile elements really draw children into the whimsy. Several of the Do It Yourself (DIY) patterns we're using are too precious not to pass along.

If you're looking to take your own nursery or toddler's room up to the next level, you'll want to check these out!

Here are four of my favorite decorative finds:

1. [Clouds](#). Hanging clouds are inexpensive to make and very fun. All you need is some stuffing, thin-wire or metal clothes hangers, and tape. When they hang from a blue-painted ceiling, you instantly feel drawn into the great outdoors!
2. [Hot-air balloons](#). This link is to purchase these adorable hanging hot-air balloons. We used the picture as a pattern and made our own using paper lanterns, washi tape, scrapbook paper, cardboard planters (for the basket), dowel rods and lots and lots of hot glue. We hung them from the ceiling using fishing line.
3. [Log Pillows](#). These are probably my personal favorite of all the DIY decorations listed here. These versatile, little cotton-filled cloth logs add decoration, provide a cushion for early walkers and make-believing toddlers, a headrest for reading kids. What a way to knock out several birds with one... log.
4. [Glowing Mushrooms](#). This one, we didn't make. It's very intricate and we didn't have the time this go-round of remodeling. However, I include it because, well, it's amazing, but also it served a purpose for me: it pushed me to dream bigger!

The glowing mushroom, like all of the projects listed, really opened my mind when developing the design plans. Anything is possible in decorating and outfitting rooms for children—even the pillows can be thematic.

I hope I inspired you to dream outside of your box. We all need to adopt the mind of a child at times and look into the great unknown, and to say, "Why not?" to the seemingly impossible. The place you imagine can be created. You just need a little creativity, a whole lot of fun and to dream with your heart wide open!

#

A Night to Remember – Costumed in Character – by Marcy Lytle

This is the time of year when kids want to dress up in costume and eat candy! I don't know a kid who doesn't like to wear a costume of some kind. Super heroes, princesses, turtles, and this year probably Pokemon characters will fill the streets at the end of the month. It's so fun to pretend with our kids when they dress up and become the character they love.

It's also a good time of year to talk to our kids about how we are supposed to "dress up" or be "put together" as a follower of Jesus. As we walk with Him, he gives us awesome pieces to our wardrobe to wear, so that when people look at us, they say, "He shines!" or "She's beautiful!" Only they won't be seeing a sparkly crown or a literal sword in our hand. They will see Him! And we need to look different from those who don't follow Jesus. We don't look different because we wear certain clothes, but we look different in attitude and spirit.

Let's look at the garments (attitudes) that we wear...the ones He gives us that make us feel dressed up and ready to hit the streets!

Preparation: *You will need to cut out the pictures below and spread them out on the table so that they are all mixed up. Also, have a piece of cardboard or construction paper on which to glue the parts of the person you will be putting together.*

Having each one use their Bible, let them look up the verses and place the person together by gluing the appropriate parts together until you have a whole, complete person. After you have completed the person, review all of the parts. End the study by having each one pray for a particular area where they need to be more like Him in the way we appear to others.

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid. (Proverbs 12:1) *(Glue the head on the paper. This is the head of the righteous that listen and learn...)*

The way of a fool seems right to him but a wise man listens to advice. (Proverbs 12:15) *(Glue one ear to the side of the head)*

A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel. (Proverbs 12:10) *(Glue the dog in the bottom right corner)*

Truthful lips endure forever but a lying tongue lasts only a moment (Proverbs 12:19) *(Glue on the lips)*

An anxious heart weighs a man down but a kind word cheers him up (Proverbs 12:25) *(Glue on the shirt and the heart on top of it)*

Diligent hands will rule but laziness ends in slave labor (Proverbs 12:24) *(Glue on the strong arm)*

A man cannot be established through wickedness, but the righteous cannot be uprooted. (Proverbs 12:3) *(Glue on the strong legs)*

A gossip betrays a confidence but a trustworthy man keeps a secret (Proverbs 11:13) *(Glue on one ear.)*

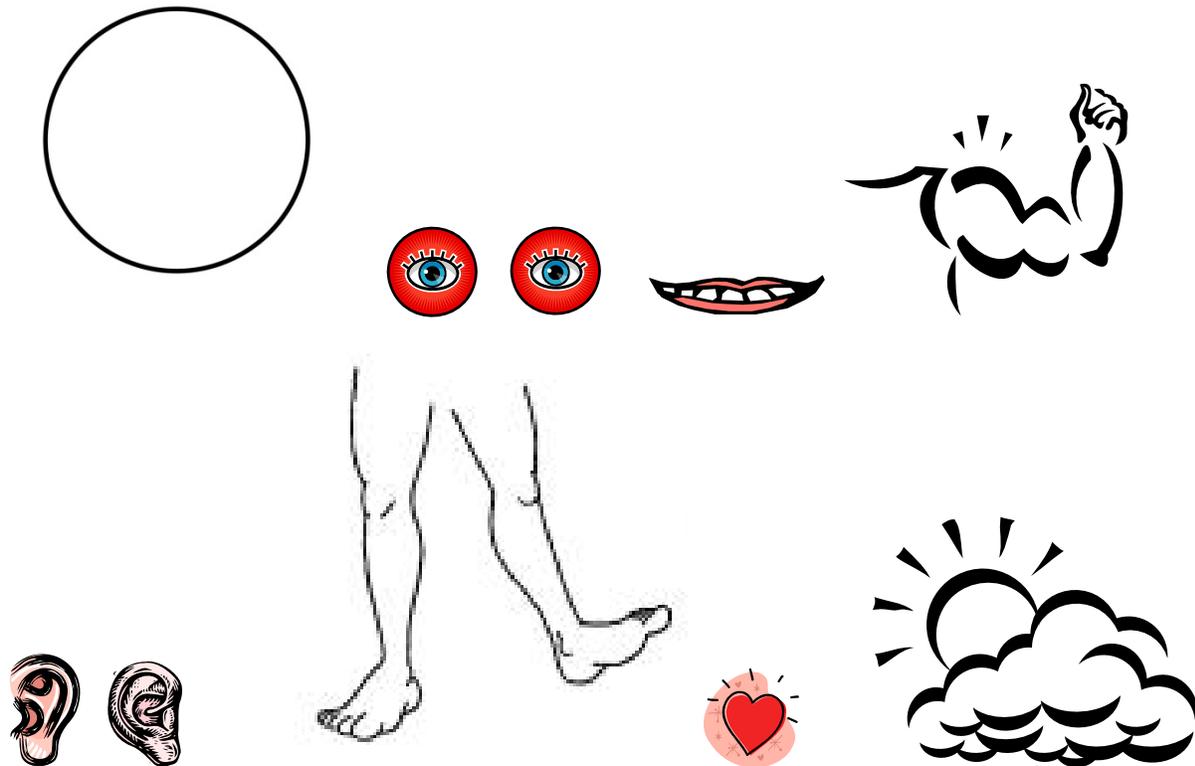
The light of the righteous shines brightly but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out (Proverbs 13:9) (*Glue on the eyes.*)

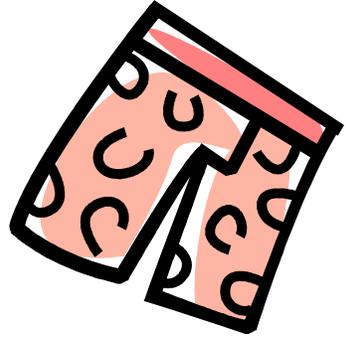
He who walks with the wise grows wise but a companion of fools suffers harm (Proverbs 13:20) (*Glue on the walking pants*)

The house of the wicked will be destroyed but the tent of the upright will flourish (Proverbs 14:11) (*Glue the tent in the bottom left corner.*)

The tongue of the righteous is choice silver but the heart of the wicked is of little value (Proverbs 10:20) (*Glue on the other arm and glue the coins in the hand.*)

When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone but the righteous stand firm forever (Proverbs 10:25) (*Glue the sun peeking out of the clouds on the top left.*)





The Family Practice – Dream Believers – by Rachel Toalson

I've dreamed of being a writer for a very long time.

I'm mostly living that dream now. Every morning I wake up and fix my boys breakfast and clean up and play and prepare lunch and clean up and put them all down for naps, and then I hole away in my home office and write. I write between 5,000 and 10,000 words every day. Some of those words turn into essays. Most of them become fiction stories. I've published some of those words. Some only live on my computer.

But when it comes to money and supporting my family? Well, that's a different story.

Husband and I own our own businesses, and, honestly, we thought it would be going a little better than it is by now. It's never easy being entrepreneurs, because sometimes there are we-made-it-months and sometimes there are we-didn't-even-come-close months, and we don't really know which one we're going to get when we start the month. And still, having been through several of the we-didn't-eve-come-close-months, something just won't let us give up.

We press on, keep going, try harder—because maybe the one more try will be the one that does it.

Sometimes you feel all beat up by a dream when the month closes and you don't really know how you're going to pay for the next grocery trip.

Sometimes it can feel like a dream has packed up and left without our even knowing it—didn't even leave a note this time—and we can feel betrayed and frustrated and terrified about the implications of a dream gone wrong.

With all of these natural forces working against the whole “living a dream” thing, how do we even begin to teach our children to dream when it feels like the only thing dreaming has ever done for us is betray us?

We don't really have to teach them. It turns out children are really good at dreaming already. It turns out they will teach us how. They will pull us along farther along the road of chasing our own dreams.

I know, because just this morning, my 9-year-old asked me to read the first fiction story I wrote out loud to him, again, for the third time, and when we'd finished a chapter he interrupted me to talk about how he wants to make a graphic novel based on it and he wants to be the one to illustrate it, okay?—because he's so in love with the story and he believes that a graphic novel is something he can create to contribute to my dream. I looked at him and marveled at his generosity and his faith and also that something I produced could make such an impact on a kid like him.

I know, because this afternoon, my 7-year-old came to me and said he really wants to write a picture book like I did, and he wants me to create it with him and he thinks we could sell it and he could get a bit of money for his illustration contribution, and will I help him with his? Yes, yes, yes, I said, we can do this together. And then he told me about all the things he would buy with the money from sales—the first thing is a trip to the children's museum for all his brothers.

I know, because this evening, my 5-year-old told me that he really wants to be an artist when he

grows up, and, look, he started a journal where he can write the happenings of the day and then draw a little picture for it, and I can't wait to get my hands on that treasure when he's all finished with it, because you better believe I'm keeping everything they create so they can see it later and remember the dreams of their heart that were made when they were too young to know anything about foolishness.

When I've forgotten how to dream, my children show me how.

I have only to follow.

Three ways to practice dreaming:

1. Conduct a dream session. A dream session is where everyone present writes down their dream—something they want to accomplish in their lifetime or in the next five years or next year. They write down what they want to be when they grow up and why. They envision their successful future and write about what that looks like to them and (if you want to take it a step farther) the necessary steps it will take to get there.

2. Talk about dreams as a family. It's important that we tell our kids about the hard work of chasing dreams, because if they just think that dreams are simple and easy to accomplish, they'll become disillusioned when they hit the first road block. Chasing dreams is not an easy pursuit. But it's a worthwhile one.

3. Start a dream journal. Keep track of your dreams throughout the years so that you can see what you've envisioned, what's come to pass and what you still hope to accomplish or do. This is great practice for children, who will probably be changing their dreams quite frequently as they grow and learn and develop new interests. Sometimes the earliest stirrings of desire in our hearts are the ones most rewarding to follow—because when young kids dream, they don't know how to be afraid. So ask kids what they dream. And be sure to record them.

#

YOU

Under the Influence – What if My Legs Aren't Pretty? – by Marcy Lytle

We were shopping recently and my husband noted a wild pair of shorts on a mannequin in a window and asked, "Would you wear those?"

My reply was simple and short, "That ship has sailed."

I'm not of the age to wear short shorts. In fact, the shorts I wear are knee-length, because anything above the knees I'm not willing to share with other shoppers...or anyone, for that matter! Even though "they say" the legs are the last thing to go, they just mean from the knees down...surely.

All of us have body parts that we are ashamed of, ones that give us grief, or ones we wish we could trade in for others. Some of us have big noses or prominent eyebrows and we're self-conscious everywhere we go. Maybe we have big thighs or long skinny feet, or fat arms or crepey necks (yes, that's a word – haven't you seen all of the infomercials on how to get rid of crepey skin?). Some of us have thick locks of curly hair but we want to trade them in for sleek locks for that straight look.

Which brings me back to the question posed above...

"What if my legs aren't pretty?"

If your legs aren't pretty, your arms are too flabby, your butt is too flat, or your skin is too splotchy...here's what you do:

Embrace and enhance. Accept your beautiful and not so beautiful parts and embrace them all. Enhance them if you must, but don't be ashamed of any part of the way you're made. Seriously, take a hard look at that one thing that frustrates you and laugh, smile, shake it and go.

Adore and ignore. If she has the beautiful hair you seem to be missing, then adore it, compliment her, and then forget about it. Take your thinning hair and compliment yourself, wear cute hats, curl it for volume, and learn to adore what you've been given...and ignore what you haven't.

Give thanks and wear Spanx. Okay, so you're growing older, your skin is looser, your belly's not so flat anymore, and "things" have shifted. Give thanks that you're still alive and kicking and ticking, and put on some Spanx, and be done with it.

Jiggle and giggle. I exercise, I dance, I move, and I lift and squeeze...but my arms still jiggle. I can hide them from the world forever, or I can let them see once...and they'll point or not...and then I'm free. I'm free to laugh at how aging appears and giggle in glee at how good I feel in the process.

Style and smile. We can all learn ways to adjust our dress so that we still look good, no matter our age. My sweet mom is 89 this month and she's shrunk in stature, her hair is thin, she's slow

and unsteady, but she looks beautiful. She has learned the value of color, jewelry, a bit of lipstick and a big smile at those she greets. And she's absolutely beautiful.

And to summarize, here's a quote from this wise woman that I call mom...

"I might not think I'm pretty, but what's my opinion against thousands of others."

Strengthening Your Core – The Whisperer – by Marcy Lytle

There was a character in a recent movie we saw that intrigued me. He sat on a bench by one of the main characters – a man who was grieving the loss of his brother. As he sat there, he often made negative comments about God and life, while at the same time whittled on a piece of wood. It wasn't too long until the grieving man realized that his bench partner was whittling the man's own face.

I thought this part of the movie, this added character who really only had a small part, was brilliant. In my estimation, this character represented Satan – the whisperer of all lies – the one who shows up near us when we are down, discouraged and despondent. We all know this and are aware of his silly lies about God, but we all sit and listen for a while before we get up and move on.

Or do we?

This man who had lost his brother was angry with God for taking his brother away at such a young age, just the young man was about to sign for the NFL. The older brother had been upset with God just a short while before this, when his father died, as well. He couldn't understand why God would take away these important individuals in his life, to leave him grieving and at a loss for answers. The whittler observed the man's face and knew he was suffering, so he chimed in with jabbing remarks about how God just gives nice things for a while and then takes them away, and other such remarks to fully poke holes in the character of a loving God.

The man sat there and listened each time the whittler spoke, and he watched as the whittler cut and shaped a face that looked more and more like his own. However, the man soon grew tired of the whittler's jabbing remarks and was irritated that this stranger dared to presume to give shape to the man's face, when he hardly knew him.

Finally, the man stood up and listened to the whittler one more time and then said something to the effect of, "Leave me alone and go away," as he grabbed the wooden face out of the whittler's hand and threw it away.

This action – the one of denying the lies – and throwing away the speaker of lies' formation of who he thought the man to be – was a pivotal scene in the movie.

The man had been sitting on a football field watching his brother's fellow players bring a truck load of flowers in and line them down the field. This too irritated the man, because although it was a gesture of love and affection from the team, why would they waste time and money placing pretty flowers on a field? These flowers too would fade and die.

As the man thought back on his brother's life and what his brother stood for – God and integrity – he rallied himself and got up from the bench to make his way to the gymnasium for the funeral. The whispering whittler left the scene, as the man climbed his way up the bleachers to exit the stadium.

He turned around one last time to look at the flowers and was stunned by what he'd missed while down on eye-level of the spread. The boys had placed the flowers so that they spelled "We Trust" and that phrase was impossible to read until the man climbed up high, where his perspective was different than it was when he was down below.

Earlier in the movie, a coach had said something like this...

Players on the field only see what's in front of them. The coach is in the press box and he sees the entire playing field and the game plan to win.

These two things made this movie a winner for me. The whittler who sat and formed the face of the one he wanted to destroy, and the perspective that came from going up higher, both spoke to me about the importance of recognizing and resisting lies and trusting and believing God – no matter what I see in front of me.

Greater is the name of the movie. It's an inspirational film and often these are cheesy and not well-acted at all. I think this one has a few of those scenes, but overall it addresses the issues and thoughts we all have when a loss occurs that seems cruel and out of time, in our own view.

We've been taught and have learned the character of God, that he is loving and good. But there's another shady character that arrives on the bench beside us at times who whispers and annoys and carves and whittles.

It's up to us to rally ourselves, to stand up and quiet the whisperer, to turn away from the image that is not being made by HIS hands, and to walk up higher, climb those steps of truth, and turn around and observe from His perspective what is real...what is true.

It's then that we can show up where death truly stings but has no victory, as we stand by those who grieve with us and believe together in the goodness of our God who sees all things and works it all together for good.

How Great is Our God.

#

Healthy Habits - Physical Remedies for Aching Hearts by Marcy Lytle

This time of year, from now through the Christmas holidays, can be one of the saddest times for many people who have lost loved ones or experienced a severe hardship during the time of year when others are laughing and rejoicing because all is well. And many take medicines, drink potions, or look for other outside remedies for their aching hearts. But sometimes...we forget how many remedies are mentioned in the Word for aching hearts that we forget to try on a regular basis.

If you're hurting this month as the holiday season approaches, we hope and pray you find strength in trying some of these healthy habits found in the Word...and in our hearts...if we just let them out...

Whistling – According to some health experts, whistling improves heart and lung capacity, as well as lightens your mood. In fact, when I hear someone whistling, I usually smile, because it means someone nearby is enjoying what they are doing. It's hard to whistle when you're down, but try it. It might lift your mood more than you realize. Did you know the word "whistle" is in the Bible? I was surprised to find it three times. Here's a pretty cool verse:

"I will *whistle* for them to gather them together, for I have redeemed them; and they will be as numerous as they were before.

(Zechariah 10:8)

Skipping – There are times when my husband and I are out on a date and we decide to skip (when no one is looking). I can't tell you how it makes us smile, pumps up our heart, and makes us feel good all over. Don't just leave skipping to the kiddos. Practice it. Do it often. You'll need some space, so that requires you to get out and go to a park, a large parking lot, or in your own backyard. Look at this cool verse:

"But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and *skip* about like calves from the stall.

(Malachi 4:2)

Singing – We all know what singing does for the soul. Imagine what singing truthful lyrics does for the soul and the body! Find some great songs with lyrics that exalt Him and who He is, and what He will do, and what He has done – and sing them out loud! Sing them with your children, with your spouse, alone in the shower, or while driving down the road. Open your mouth and sing! The book of Psalm is full of verses about singing, and singing is good for an unsteady heart!

"My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will *sing*, yes, I will *sing* praises!"

(Psalm 57:7)

Laughing – We all know that laughing is good medicine. Psychologist Steve Wilson says, "Combining laughter and movement, like waving your arms, is a great way to boost your heart

rate." Sometimes, when I laugh my ribs hurt so I think it must be doing something to the mid-section of my body! Laughter is also contagious. So instead of spreading germs, let's spread the joy! Don't feel like laughing? Laugh anyway.

"Then our mouth was filled with *laughter* and our tongue with joyful shouting; Then they said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.'"

(Psalm 126:2)

Dancing – I'd rather dance than do any other form of exercise. I love to dance alone, to worship music, as I move and jump and extend my arms as far as I can in praise. I love to dance with my husband. I love to dance with kids, jumping and leaping and wiggling, however we want to move! Dancing certainly pumps up the heart and is good for the body and the soul.

"Let them praise His name with *dancing*; Let them sing praises to Him with timbrel and lyre."

(Psalm 149:3)

There's a reason the bible mentions all of these activities. They get us up and moving, away from focusing on the bad toward focusing on the good, and they use our body's organs that are in bad shape and need some healing.

It's amazing to me, how often we try other remedies before we try these simple ones. I want to intentionally whistle, skip, sing, laugh and dance my way through the end of the year. Won't you join me?

#

Beauty for Ashes – Embrace the Journey – by Pam Charro

I don't remember who said it, but I recently heard a quote that really challenged me:

"You can't fully love yourself if you hate any of the journey that brought you here."

I have since meditated on how true this is and why it is so difficult to NOT hate parts of the journey.

For me, several parts of the road have been embarrassing. I haven't always liked how I have behaved and I have really not liked how I feel others have viewed me. I have felt out of control and disgraced. I have been naive and been taken advantage of. I have lost my temper and said stupid things. I have felt ugly.

If I were to sum it up, I guess I would say that I have felt my own particular less-than-perfect moments were worse than every else's, but that would not be true if I really looked more closely. There is not a person on this planet that is proud of every moment they have been here, or has felt secure in everyone else's opinion of them in every situation. Part of being here has been learning that we all have felt humiliated because we have had to face our own lack of perfection. If that were not true, we would not need a savior; we would not need hope of something better.

- I need to stop comparing my worse moments to everyone else's "normal" days.
- I need to remember that we have all felt that *yuckiness* that we wish we could forget, and that our Creator knew about all of those moments long before they happened and still wanted us badly enough to die for us.
- I need to let those parts of the journey that would normally make me feel badly about myself cause me to feel incredible gratitude and love because I am not stuck in them. Those moments are not who I am destined to be, I was only shown them so that I could appreciate the growth that I am experiencing since then, and to love others who may still be going through them.
- Perhaps, most importantly, I need to know that I would still be just as loved even if I were still acting those yucky ways, and that I would still have just as much hope for my future because no person or situation can take that hope away.

The journey that has brought me here has not always been pretty, but it has always been sacred. It, along with God, has made me who I am today. I am honored that I was chosen to live it up to this moment, and I am excited about the person God is making me to be.

#

CREATED FOR LIFE - OCTOBER OPPORTUNITIES – by Ginny Hurley

Take the opportunity to BELIEVE God!

Take the opportunity to HEAR what He has to say about you!

Take the opportunity to LISTEN when He tells you!

Take the opportunity to REST in His Presence!

Take the opportunity to WAIT for His Promises!

Take the opportunity to LIVE in faith!

Take the opportunity to OBSERVE flowers and birds, clouds and skies!

Take the opportunity to PLAY with your children!

Take the opportunity to READ His Word!

Take the opportunity to TELL Him how you feel about Him!

Take the opportunity to SHARE something special with a friend!

Take the opportunity to ACT like a child with a child's abandon!

Take the opportunity to GAIN what you cannot lose!

Take the opportunity to FIND the gold in everyone!

Take the opportunity to WAKE UP with a smile!

Take the opportunity to SMILE with delight while working!

Take the opportunity to PRAISE the ones you love!

Take the opportunity to SING with delight all day long!

Take the opportunity to REMEMBER His Promises!

Take the opportunity to DWELL in His Presence always!

Take the opportunity to KNOW whose you are and who you are!

Take the opportunity to LEAP about for joy just because!

Take the opportunity to PRAY for someone sick or lost!

Take the opportunity to THANK someone for being kind!

Take the opportunity to be KIND to someone today!

Take the opportunity to BE that person you are called to BE!

Take the opportunity to DEMONSTRATE the Kingdom!

Take the opportunity to CREATE a new dish, picture, song, or craft!

Take the opportunity to HOLD and cuddle a baby!

Take the opportunity to FREE a friend of lies and hopelessness!

Take the opportunity to ENCOURAGE those around you!

Take the opportunity to ATTACK your fears with power!

Take the opportunity to HUG someone around you!

Take the opportunity to REJOICE because you woke up!

Take the opportunity to BEFRIEND the lonely!

Take the opportunity to DISCOVER yours and others value!

Take the opportunity to WRITE out your Blessings!

Take the opportunity to IGNITE another's faith!

Take the opportunity to DELIVER a message of Hope!

Take the opportunity to HOPE for the best always!

Take the opportunity to CROSSOVER the lines of failure!

Take the opportunity to FORGIVE even when you feel it is validated!

Take the opportunity to RUN from darkness!

Take the opportunity to GAZE into HIS EYES!

Take the opportunity to VIEW from Heaven's perspective!

Take the opportunity to STRENGTHEN yourself in the LORD!

Take the opportunity to BASK in His Glory!

Take the opportunity to ALLOW change and transformation!

Take the opportunity to FEEL those angel's wings!

Take the opportunity to WORSHIP with all your heart!

Take the opportunity to DANCE with abandon!

AND finally, take the opportunity to LOVE UNCONDITIONALLY in every moment of
everyday!

MARRIAGE

In This Together - Say Yes to Him – by Jackie Skanderup

Those who know me know that I am a very outgoing person. I love going to social events and spending time with people. I also hate feeling like I'm missing out on something. I like to be included in everything...but to a fault. When I am given an invitation to a social event my response is usually a quick yes. I don't even think about it. There are people, there's food, so I say, "Yes, of course I'll be there!" I also love serving people and love serving the church, so if there is an opportunity to help out I often jump on board.

A few months ago, I found that with saying yes to so many things, and good things at that, I was exhausted and overwhelmed. I was becoming stressed and my husband was noticing it.

There were times when I said yes to so many things but said no to him.

I didn't have time for him, or if I did it wasn't very much time, and my mind was usually distracted by everything else that was going on in my life. I didn't like what was happening to me. I was beginning to notice I didn't even enjoy doing the things that I usually loved doing.

Something needed to change but I didn't know how to make that change.

Shortly after this revelation, I went for coffee with my mentor and filled her in on how I was feeling. She explained to me several things:

- It's important to cultivate my relationship with my husband.
- My relationship with him needs to come first; everything else needs to come second.
- Sometimes the best thing I can do is say no even when an opportunity looks good.

I know this sounds obvious, but it is so easy to forget. I love my friends and I love hanging out with them, but there are times where I have to say no to "girls' night" and "yes" to my husband.

I love serving people and I love my church, but again, my husband and family comes first. There are limitations on how much I can do. When I spread myself too thin I'm not doing anyone any good. This not only affects my marriage, but my friendships and other responsibilities as well.

I think we often take advantage of our relationships with our spouses. We forget that in order for a marriage to thrive, it needs to have our attention daily. The more we take it for granted, the less we feel we need to put effort into it. This produces fruit that we didn't but should have expected.

"Great marriages don't happen by luck or by accident. They are the result of a **consistent investment of time**, thoughtfulness, forgiveness, affection, prayer, mutual respect, and a rock solid commitment between a husband and a wife."

(DaveWillis.org.)#

Date Night Fun – In the Millions – by Marcy Lytle

I found this website that listed five things that cost under \$5 each that made millions. Isn't that amazing? Don't you wish you were the person who invented that inexpensive item? Lots of people dream of making their millions, but when you have a spouse that you love to date, that's worth a million bucks right there!

This month we're going to look at those five items that made millions and incorporate them into date night, so that we can remind ourselves of how rich we truly are when we have someone to love, to be with, to laugh with, and to do life with.

As you try each idea, give thanks that you're a millionaire when it comes to true riches, and enjoy these little things that made profits "in the millions."

The crazy straw – You can find this most anywhere in all sorts of colors. Purchase several and make the night about enjoying drinks together. Be sure you insert the [crazy straw](#) in your water, your beverage, and finally in that shake you'll have to end the night. Whichever color is inserted in your drink – talk about that color. For example, if it's purple, share your favorite purple things, what purple makes you feel, what person you think of when you see purple, and see who can think of the most rhyming words with purple...and do this for each straw throughout the night.

Fun fact: The crazy straw was invented by and was designed by Arthur Gildersleeve, to create interest for kids, to get them to drink their juice or milk!

The [slinky](#) – This little toy is one that kids find exciting because it can somersault down steps. But slinky also has another meaning is to be graceful and sinuous in movement (tight fitting). Make date night about wearing something "slinky" and dancing the night away sharing your "slinky" moves. Can't find a place to dance? It's October and cool outside, so set up in a park on a moonlit night and dance to your iTunes under the light of the moon. And the best dessert for a slinky date is a cannoli. Visit your favorite Italian bakery before the date, pack them up, and enjoy at the end of the night over a cup a coffee.

Fun fact: The first 400 Slinkies sold out in 90 minutes, in 1945!

The Pet Rock: This is no longer a fad, but when it was – people bought them like crazy. These pets don't require any attention at all, but they remain faithful and loyal to sit by you and not move. Show your loyalty to your date on this night. Sit close, hold hands, speak your love, and do all of this while visiting several places with rocks: a small stream where you can skip rocks, a giant rock on which you can stand and give thanks for THE ROCK, enjoy some rocking music with lyrics you both know and love, and actually design your own rock for your pathway or garden.

Fun fact: The creator of the Pet Rock made over \$15 million in the first half-year of production.

Antenna Balls – Remember these? They're long gone, as well, but they were everywhere back in the late 90's. [Antenna balls](#) were used for all sorts of reasons in all sorts of places, to spot one's car in a crowded parking lot, to adorn a drum set in church. They are colorful and

have smiley faces. Since these started out being just for car antennas, make your date night about your car. Have a picnic supper with the back open, sit on the hood to watch the stars, lay back your seats to listen to music, and drive out of town with the windows down for an adventure. End the night driving through a car wash...before you head home.

Fun fact: Jason Wall, the inventor, was inspired by a Jack-in-the-Box commercial!

Koosh ball: That rubber band ball that's soft and "kooshy" made millions. This ball made it easy for children to catch, because it's soft and didn't require an entire hand to wrap around. How did you "catch" each other's attention when you were first dating? Reminisce about that, and make your date night all about the catch. Throw a ball to each other, go fishing, catch a ride on a train downtown or on a horse and buggy, if your town offers these fun modes of transport. Catch a vision for your future, and actually chase and catch each other as you embrace and laugh out loud.

Fun fact: [The Koosh ball](#) consists of about 2000 natural rubber filaments.

Instead of pining to be a millionaire, hoping you'll create the next fad that goes viral, or counting and saving pennies, look into his/her eyes and see the gold. There's nothing more valuable on this earth than relationship. And a relationship that's fun – well that's worth a billion bucks!

After 30 Years – Road Tripping – by Marcy Lytle

We get out on the road on any given weekend...often. It's honestly one of the best things we do for our marriage. It's one of my favorite things to plan, and we both go to bed excited the night before one of our adventures in the car the next day. It always begins at Starbucks, because he loves a latte. And I always have a bag of books in the back floorboard, because the day includes a stop under a shade tree or near a picture-perfect lake or park – where we read and rest.

We started road trips with our kids when they were little, and we've continued them, now that the kids are gone. There's something about getting out of town, driving back roads, and experiencing another world all in the span of 24-48 hours, and then driving back to start a new week.

Here's what road tripping does for us:

It pauses our busyness. We can stay in town, catch a movie, and meet someone for dinner, but getting out of the city onto a stretch of country for a few hours is like a breath of fresh air. In fact, it literally is a breath of fresh air that we both need.

It enables us to notice. We see wheels of hay (my favorite), we experience countryside beauty, we drive past fallen down farmhouses and wonder about who lived there and how long ago they did, and we take in sights of animals and trees and sunsets and ponds...things we don't have time to notice when we're working nonstop.

It causes connection. In the car, just the two of us, we can talk about anything, play music that we both like and sing along with it, hold hands and just sit in silence as we are stilled by the sound of the tires across country roads, or we can share spiritual blessings out loud.

It produces fun snacks. There's nothing quite like packing a container of trail mix, a cooler of waters, and perhaps sandwiches for a picnic at a roadside park or inside a national park, if we happen to be near one. Somehow, driving makes us hungry. And when we're hungry, we like to have something to munch on while we drive from town to town. Diets aren't allowed on the road.

It awakens our sense of adventure. Some people ask how we find things to do. We use the internet, of course! We set out in a direction, find the cities we will be near, and we google them – no matter how big or small they are. There's always a piece of history to witness in each little town, even if it's only one gas station or a junk store. It's quite fun!

It reminds us of others. We pray before we go for opportunities to connect or bless or talk with others, those who are different than we are, live lifestyles other than we do, and who experience a different landscape than we experience. And that's a good thing to do, once in a while.

It renews our strength. When we're tired from weeks of work, duty, responsibility and all that jazz...getting out of town and on the road is just the thing we need. It's like a drink of cool water,

a cup of hot cocoa, a brownie with ice cream...all of which makes us smile at each other, at life, and sometimes even makes us laugh out loud.

Maybe you already live in the country and road tripping doesn't sound so fun. Then drive to the big city and experience that. Maybe you don't think you have the time for a day away. Yes, you do, and you need to take it often. Maybe you think he won't go with you; that he'll frown and pout. Try it and see, before you dismiss the idea.

If road tripping is not your thing, then find your thing – the thing that takes you away often – to another place and another set of scenic views – and do it.

Your marriage needs it. And it just might become part of the fabric of your future together.

#

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – I Heard Him – by Rachel Critz

Have you ever wondered if God is actually listening to you? I have. Almost every single prayer I say, I wonder if God is actually hearing me.

If you think about it, God has what – about 500 million prayers and more, being sent his way. It seems impossible for a human to hear every single prayer. But then I stop myself and actually look at my reason as to why I think God could not hear that many prayers. He is not human. He is God.

However, I still can't fathom how he can possibly hear all prayers.

1 John 5:14 says,

“And this is the confidence that we have toward him,
that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.”

I still struggle with wondering if God hears me when I speak. I hear of all these incredible life-changing prayers that have been answered around me but, none of that is exactly happening to me. Well, except one time a generator for our trailer was not working and I prayed for it to start working, and it did. It was summer, in Texas, I was at a rodeo, all day, and I really wanted that thing to work so I could have air conditioning. That was one time God heard me.

But most of the time I feel like I am sort of invisible to God. Like why would God choose to listen to me out of every other person on this earth? Their problems are most likely bigger than just wanting to pass this test so I can get a scholarship and go to my dream college, right?

WRONG.

I lived like that for about a year. I prayed without any faith behind my prayer, until I went to my youth group's summer camp called Encounter and the theme was “Break Out.” I had gone through the nights wondering if God could even hear me singing his praise during the worship services. The last night is when God did not just hear me, but I heard Him.

As I was worshipping, I felt this heat all over my body, but I couldn't tell if it was the fact my friends and I were all standing so close to each other or if I had gotten a fever, or if the air conditioning just wasn't turned on. So I looked up from where I stood and there was only about seven of us scattered around by the stage, and the rest of the some 70 kids were all stretched out behind us arm in arm, singing. So it couldn't be that people were standing close to me. The AC would be loud and audible, and my friends always complained about how cold it was in that room. And I obviously wasn't catching a cold or else I would've gone through the other stages of sickness before the fever.

I faced my palms up and held my hands out a little just waiting in silence. There were no words, nothing. And in that moment, God heard my every single prayer I had ever prayed to him during that whole year drought of *having no faith behind it*. And all I had to do was become silent.

Sometimes, for God to hear you, you just have to shut up and listen to what He has to say to you. I listened to God so much that I did something I would have never done in my life. I got up and prayed for at least 25 people.

God is always listening...no matter what. If it's something small like a test or something big like healing in someone's body, it is all important to God. If you feel like He can't hear you then maybe you need to stop and hear Him.

Romans 10:17 says,

"So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."#

Saddle Up - Balance: A Tricky Word – by Melissa Critz

Life with two high schoolers is still exhausting just like it was when we had four preschoolers here in the house; it's just as emotionally and mentally exhausting as it is physically. I recall a good friend telling me this about raising kids – *more physical when younger and more emotional when older*. It's true for the most part, but I am finding that the two coincide many times.

In our household, we have chosen home schooling as our option for our kids. I am therefore the teacher, counselor, curriculum finder, schedule determiner, and assistant principal. My husband thankfully has the role of principal but doesn't have to use it all too often. This is not to discount the role of parents of teens in public or other private schools. I do know that we all have our work cut out for us when we want our children to succeed in the academic world.

What also comes with the territory of being in the home school world is the work involved with athletics. Due to UIL rules, home school students are not allowed to participate on teams in public schools and private schools (in Texas), so it is left to the parents to figure out sports, completely.

My son plays on a 6-man football team and my daughter plays volleyball for the Austin Royals – both groups are composed of home schoolers. It took many hours, days, and years of work by many dedicated parents to make these programs what they are today. And still does.

Adding all this with the norm of work and keeping house can make one head to burn out quickly. I know my Saddle Partner does not desire this for me. My desire as this school year approached was to make sure that I kept as good as a balance as possible in all areas. Now that I am in the midst of it, well, I'm teetering.

I finally got to ride Elijah yesterday – just at a walk, though – as the ground is still quite slick and muddy from the rains. I was listening to my Saddle Partner remind me of the tricky word – balance. If you lean too much one way, well, off you go! If you lean too much the other way, again, down you go! Let's face it; there will always be turmoil...always. Just as I think that we have come around the fence with a car repair, there goes an AC unit.

My mind wrestled with this thought, as it seems to require work to keep the balance...hard work.

I saw the picture of Peter walking on water in Matthew 14:22-33.

In this text, Jesus is walking on buffeting water to the boat where His disciples are. Peter asks to walk to Jesus on the water if Jesus is who He says He is. Peter does this but then starts looking at the storm around him and begins to sink (loses his balance). However, Jesus reaches to him and pulls him up and into the boat with some chastisement in regards to his faith.

When I read this, I don't think Peter is being bad; I think he is being real.

THIS is real life.

We can lose our balance but being children of the King, He is there to uphold us and guide us back. We WILL get off balance, it's guaranteed. We will mess up. But we have Someone that will bring us back to balance. He is the Guide in the storm. He is the Balance Keeper. He is the Rock.

Is work required? Well, that seems to be a fine line, too. What I see from this text is that any work involved is just keeping focus on Him. After all, Peter started sinking when he took his eyes off Jesus. So the 'work' of Peter walking was what kept him focused on Christ.

I encourage you today to know that:

- keeping balance in life is not easy
- keeping balance is very tricky and you can and will falter
- He is there and WILL catch you
- your work is to just keep your focus on Him as you follow His path before you
- He loves you.

He will walk through every storm to you, with you, and by you.

We can try our best to keep that tricky word of balance where it needs to be but when we falter He is there.

Grab hold to Him.
Seek Him.
The Lord loves you.

Be blessed!

Firmly Planted - The Grace of Solitude – by Dina Cavazos

For the last several months I've wrestled with a feeling of solitude, loneliness, aloneness. I went through periods of checking my phone like a teen-ager...no texts, no calls, no invitations. I sighed and wondered if I had any true friends. As I pondered my solitary state, I realized that maybe God was using this estranged condition to highlight something beneath the surface, as He often does. Rarely (if ever) obvious, He hides in the background of feelings and events, waiting for us to discover Truth in our ordinary, often dull, sometimes painful lives.

I decided to embrace this sense of aloneness and go on a three day retreat—alone. It was my birthday month; it was the five year anniversary of my brother's death. I found a quiet place with a fantastic view and took my Bible, books, music, and some sealed unopened letters my brother had written long ago. My daughters thoughtfully gave me sweet affirming notes and gifts to help me through the reading. A dear friend spent the afternoon and evening with me. Then it began.

The first day was interrupted by some unexpected urgent business—the tail of the snake revealed as he tried to make waves—but by God's grace my boat barely rocked. The rest of the time I was able to just relax and enjoy *solitude*. No social media, email, phone calls or TV. No trips to the store, errands, or shopping. Time slowed down, my mind slowed down, my spirit slowed down. I read, I soaked in music; I gazed in awed silence at the beauty of God's creation. As the sun rose and colored the trees and hills with mysterious light, I gave reverent thanks for the beauty of the world He created for us. I thought about the many ways Jesus has changed my life, and the many times He's shown His faithfulness by answering the cries of my heart.

Solitude together with silence creates a still, quiet environment that's conducive to listening. There, deep speaks to deep. I identified a need to be “doing” rather than “being.” I identified a need to be affirmed by external relationships rather than the internal awareness of God's presence. I re-centered and settled into the peace of “I AM.”

In his book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster writes, “The purpose of silence and solitude is to be able to see and hear.” Embracing rather than resisting my discomfort with solitude enabled me to see and hear beneath the surface experience. It's hard to see and hear the hidden things, the most important things, when our senses are otherwise occupied, so it's important to carve out time and be intentional about using it.

But what if your circumstances don't allow the luxury of getting away as I did? Foster has a lot to say on the subject that's worth reading, along with suggestions for making the most of little moments and making room for solitude, such as:

- Consider using the early morning moments before the family wakes up, even in bed while your eyes are still closed.
- Use the solitude of a morning cup of coffee before the day begins.
- Take advantage of the solitude available while sitting in traffic.
- Make a “quiet place” at home—a room, garden, or closet.
- Find a quiet place of refuge at a park, a church, or even at work.

- Try talking less, or go another step and devote several hours or a day to silence.

Maybe you sometimes wrestle with feeling alone.....take a step back and ask if God wants your company for Himself. You might see and hear something that changes your life for the better. Your desire and obedience alone will cause you to become more rooted and grounded in the Lord who inhabits the secret places—more firmly planted in Him.

And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. Matthew 14:23

Moving Forward - No Better Place to Be – by Pam Charro

I was lying in bed early one morning last week, just laying a couple of prayer requests before God...doing my dutiful Christian duty, remembering people and situations that had been on my heart that I had promised to pray about.

As I finished, I was just lying there, wondering what else to say.

Oh, yes, "Good morning, Lord! Help me to use this day wisely."

It occurred to me that I was being somewhat businesslike in my approach instead of treating God like the friend he has been to me all these years, and I started to feel a little guilty. It was then that he gave me what I like to call a "flash picture."

I saw a young man probably around 30 years old, wearing casual clothes, with long-ish hair parted to the side, standing in front of me and looking at me. His eyes and his body language seemed to say,

"I'm really listening and I'm really interested in what you're saying. I have plenty of other things to do and we can move along with the day if you want to, but right now I have absolutely nothing that is more important than being here with you. I have no better place to be."

I know that I have been a hard case as far as understanding that God really enjoys being with me. This "flash picture" was a gentle, yet powerful validation that he accepts my communication and my less than perfect love for him, and that I can relax and allow him to enjoy my company as I am enjoying his.

#

Real Stories – Military Mom

I met Kimi at church and immediately fell in love with her and her children, and quickly found out why they attended without their dad. He was serving our country across the world. However, this mom of three was all smiles, even as she asked prayer for safety and wisdom as he returned home and they began to prepare to move to a new place...again.

Kimi's smile and her beautiful family made me want to know more about the life of a military mom, what it's like and how she manages, because I have no idea. Sure, I think about it from time to time, but I don't really know what it's like to have your husband, the father of your children, and your best friend away on deployment for long periods of time while you are left to manage the house and the kids...and life.

Kimi was gracious enough to answer my questions as I interviewed her, and I'm happy to share her answers so that all of us can become a bit more aware of our neighbors who have family members who serve, and we can remind ourselves to be grateful and lend a hand and/or a prayer as often as we can.

Here's what I learned.

Kimi Sisti-Waite married Anthony and they immediately became a blended family with five kids: Noah – age 23; Aletta – age 21; Ashli – age 18, Kyle – age 16; and Jaden – age 10. Anthony is an NCO (non-commissioned officer) in the army, working as an active reservist, and Kimi is a high school track coach, as well as an educator on using essential oils and removing toxins from the home. She also homeschools her children. Her husband has been deployed four times in the seven years they have been married, two times for 9 months, two times for a year, with home visits every four months. I cannot even imagine that kind of life, yet many of our friends and neighbors experience the absence of their spouse for long periods of time, so that the spouse can protect our homeland.

While Anthony is away, I asked Kimi, "Are you fearful while he's gone?" She said she is, but she really tries not to think about it. She was a single mom before she married Anthony, and lived that life for nine years. "I just continue doing what I did before...having a great support group and church helps a lot. If I had to do any of this on my own, there's no way we'd make it." She says she is thankful that they all stay very busy, and time goes by fast that way.

Then our chat gets real, as Kimi confesses,

"To be honest, I respect what he does but it wasn't what I wanted for a marriage."

Kimi (like all of us) wanted a father and a husband to be home daily, but that's not what she has. "God had other plans, and He's shown me that I'm stronger than I think I am." The hardest thing about being a military wife, she says, is the unknown. Never knowing when or if he'll be deployed is hard, as well as the loneliness that comes along when he's gone. All of the holidays he misses are especially difficult.

“Each time he comes home it’s like starting all over again.” Maybe that sounds exciting, but Kimi says it’s very emotional and hard on everyone. “We have to learn to live independently of each other when he’s gone and then are expected to live dependently after nine months of separation.” Life goes on stateside while he does life and work “over there.” The kids and Kimi build community and relationships with people, and when Anthony arrives home, he wonders where he fits. This tears at their emotions until eventually things settle and comfort comes...and then he leaves again.

Even with all of the hardship, Kimi says she is proud of her husband and what he does. “He sacrifices everything for his country and his family. Not a lot of people can say that (about their husband).” She says that he does his job proudly with “total dedication and commitment.” And Kimi reveals that having the Lord in her life, who shows her what true marriage really is, helps her remain grateful. “It’s about love, compromise, sacrifice and commitment.” She says she leans on God and His word to carry her through on many occasions.

Kimi’s kids didn’t have a father for much of their childhood so that is mostly what they know. Again, Kimi admits that she did not desire that for them at all, but that God has always been a “father to the fatherless.” And when Anthony is home they adjust to him quickly, which is a good thing.

Being a military wife, as I quickly confirmed with Kimi, is not easy – by any means. She said many hours are spent in tears and in stuffing down feelings “just to get through the day.”

“But this life and its title I wear proudly and wouldn’t change it for any other.”

Finally, I asked Kimi how we – the moms and friends with our husbands at home and the realities of war at bay – can support our military families and their children. She said that many of them need help with their kids. Playing ball with them, taking them out to the movies, or just being there for support, means a lot. It’s hard to find people to fill those needs, but when they are filled – it’s a great support.

I admire Kimi. I’m amazed at the fortitude of her and her kids. I watched them attend church week after week, become involved in giving and coming and connecting with a body of believers – most of whom looked different than they. They came to church and saw moms and dads together with their kids, while their own dad/ husband was absent. That had to be hard. And when they got their orders to move across the country away from this community where they felt at home, I saw them take the news hard...but with resolve...and dignity. I can’t help but think that they have learned those skills from the life they have lived, one of letting their dad go to serve...yet knowing he’s going with the arms of their heavenly father wrapped tightly around him...and them.

If you know of a military mom or dad, one who is constantly left holding the fort here, consider offering your time to be with them, play with the kids, and just love on them in prayer and support. Invite them to dinner, chat with them at church or in the market, and get on your knees and pray. Pray for protection, provision and for assurance that their lives are blessed and noted

for the service they are giving, selflessly and sacrificially, to you and yours. And pray for our country, and for those who fight against us.

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FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – The Choice – by Marcy Lytle

What if God took away our ability to choose? In other words, way back in the garden, what if he never gave Adam and Eve the opportunity and choice to disobey, but rather stopped their minds, hands, and mouths from thinking, doing, or speaking anything that would hurt them or destroy their fellowship and life in the blissful garden?

God gave them the choice to believe his Word, obey, and live – or mistrust Him, disobey, and die. Why did he do that, knowing the suffering that would result?

And what if God took away our choices in today's world and stopped our hands and mouths every time they moved to disobey?

Guns would never go off and kill innocent people.

Marriages wouldn't dissolve over abuse and unfaithfulness.

Ill purchases wouldn't be made, ones that destroy our family time and waste our money.

Too much food would never be ingested, so obesity would be non-existent...maybe.

You can see that so much good would come out of God stopping and prohibiting us from ever making a wrong move...

But do we really want to serve a God who makes us, stops us, and slaps us if we step out of line? No one wants a parent like that. We want parents who love us, and we want to love and obey them because of that love – not because of their stick of discipline.

This incredible gift of choice that God placed in our hands at the beginning is one of the most amazing gifts in the world. It's the gift we have of whether or not to believe in the work Jesus did on the cross. We can believe and live...or not. It's the incredible gift we have to believe in his goodness even when all we feel is pain and sadness. We can believe and walk through to wholeness once again...or not. It's the incredible gift we have to believe in his wisdom even when we think he's not acting fast enough, not present at all, or disinterested at times. We can believe and wait and grow...or not.

God entrusted our hearts into our hands so that we have the choice to believe. What an amazing Father that is. And even though disobedience and unbelief ushered in a whole bundle of bad things on this earth, He had a plan of redemption and salvation set in place.

Because, you see, he knew there would be those who would make the choice to believe Him. He knew that given the choice, as he demonstrated his love over years and decades and centuries, that people everywhere would be longing to see and to know and to choose....

And he knew that in that choosing would result life, eternal life, where all things are made right once again.

God could have given us breath to breathe,

a garden to tend, and a strong hand to keep us there.

But instead, he gave us the choice to make – as our own – apart or alive with Him.

This world is in chaos and headed toward destruction, because of bad choices made by many.

But the one choice of believing in Jesus is ours to make...or not.

That part of God is amazing and incomprehensible to me.

However, as I have now raised children and have grandchildren, I see what a poor existence it would be if they loved me because I demanded it and forced it. The only love worth receiving is that which is given freely out of choice, because I first love them.

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FRESH THYME - Hang it Up – by Marcy Lytle

Every morning I wake up with a backpack on my pack. Oh, not literally, but it's there. I don't think I slept with it there, but somehow, the minute my feet hit the floor and I start getting ready for the day – it's loaded – and heavy.

Inside the backpack I have these worries that I've stashed so that I can remember to pray about them all through the day – like family issues, children concerns, fear of the future. You know, the usual. If those alone don't fill the backpack, I open the zippers and stuff inside things like the devastation of flooding I've seen on the news, the coming election and who to vote for, and "small" things like that. On the other side where a refreshing water bottle should rest, I've packed in heavy burdens that I'm carrying for friends and all of their needs. And besides stuffing all of the zippered compartments, I've even attached heavy things with hooks that dangle from the pack and annoy me – like am I doing enough, am I pleasing Him, am I being effective and all other questions that like to jiggle and swing while I walk.

By the time the day begins I've got quite a heavy load that I feel it is my duty to carry around, opening it often and revealing the contents to God in case he's forgotten what's inside.

It's a cute backpack; don't get me wrong, I make sure of that. And I've even found a way to balance it on both shoulders so that it's not going to cause me irreversible back damage. And off I go.

However, driving with this thing is nearly impossible. I have to take it off and put it on the seat beside me. So I do. I start to drive, and I sit comfortably in my seat as I stare out the window at the beauty of the sunrise, the light rain falling gently on the windshield, and I tune into encouraging lyrics from the radio as I drive to my destination.

When I arrive, I think about grabbing the pack but I'm feeling so light and free, I decide to leave it there, on the seat, and walk unencumbered by the heaviness of its contents. Oh no, what if someone sees it there and steals it? What if the heat of the day ruins its contents? What if I might need to pull out one of those worries and remind God while I'm working?

Today, on this morning, at the end of another month, I've decided to remove the backpack before I leave the house. In fact, I think it's a good practice for those of us who carry heavy loads to physically embrace a backpack; then let it go and hang it up, and leave it.

There's nothing in that pack he doesn't already know. There's nowhere in his word that says those things are ours to carry. He never forgets, sleeps or closes his eyes, so he's not going to forget those things that concern me. And the truth of the matter is, he's promised to catch and carry all of my burdens so that I can have a hand for him to hold, and shoulders for him to hug, as I walk through the day.

Here I go. I'm hanging it up now.

"Hey God, my shoulders are free, and my hands are open!"

And he smiles and nods like a father does as he takes his daughter's hand.

FRESH THYME - Go Public – by Marcy Lytle

I have an Instagram account for this magazine, and when I started it I didn't have many followers. What I didn't realize was that I had it set for private, instead of public. That means when I posted something I thought was fabulous, only my friends could see it. Therefore, when I finally changed my settings to public, the number of followers grew by leaps and bounds.

But here's the catch.

Now I have all sorts of followers ranging from people who have my same interests – women, moms, wives, fashion lovers and lovers of God – to those who are completely unlike me and a bit strange – like odd bloggers, people in business who just like my post to get me to like theirs, and others who are unlike me in every way.

But here's the deal.

Even if many followers or "likers" are unlike me and my interests, maybe they will see a quote or be interested enough to read the article and hear something encouraging or hopeful or life-changing. So in that respect, having all of these diverse followers is good for the magazine.

So what?

Our pastor has presented many sermons lately encouraging we who listen to get out there, be visible, or "go public" and be bold about our faith, to draw others in, into His love and mercy. Most of us sitting in the audience are set to "private" in our faith. We love God, we worship him at church, we pray often for our families, and we even pray for those *out there*. But we don't really want any visibility or attention.

However...

What if we all changed our "private" settings in our faith and walk with Him to "public" to see what happens? And what would that look like, anyway?

My husband and I talked about this one evening and how we want to spend more of our alone time with each other in looking for opportunities to go public with our faith. We're going to start sitting in public places like outdoor malls near music venues or coffee shops, and watch people. We're going to look for those that pique our interest and pray for them...silently. Then, as we feel prompted, we will speak to people with kindness and love, and see what kinds of conversations are started.

It's not a big change, but it's a shift in the way we do things toward a more outward look instead of an inward focus.

Just like on my Instagram feed, I get lots of traffic from those who are just looking to be noticed themselves, I'm sure we will encounter all sorts of people while out there in the marketplace. But we are hoping for encounters like Jesus had when he met the lady at the well and gave her living water to drink, or when he saw that blind man crying for sight and Jesus touched him – and the blind man was healed.

Are you private in your settings? There's a time and place for privacy, for sure. But consider joining us in switching your settings to public at times and in places where you can do so, in order to encounter a lot more traffic...and perhaps a lot more followers...of Him.

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FRESH THYME – “Be Careful” – by Marcy Lytle

When he leaves for work...

When they go on a trip...

When she’s headed out with the kids...

This two word phrase, “Be careful” might be the most common one said to friends and loved ones as they part ways, go home, or leave each other’s presence for a while. I say it to my husband just about every morning as he leaves to head to work. I suppose I’m hoping these two words will resonate with him, that they will remind him and keep him, as he drives in traffic – and he will actually be careful.

I thought about this one morning and wondered why we say it. Is it to alleviate our own fears that something bad might happen? Is it to really instruct those leaving to be careful, because if we didn’t say it, they might then be careless? Is it a rote response to someone walking out the door? Or is it wise instruction? I think it’s all of the above.

However, it’s good advice. And it’s advice that Jesus gives us in his Word, very often. In fact, he tells us to be careful about many things, and it’s not because he’s fearful or he’s giving a thoughtless warning. He’s seriously offering us wisdom that if we will indeed be careful, we will avoid many pitfalls in life.

Ephesians 5:15 says, *Therefore **be careful** how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise...*

This is a good thing to say to our kids as they’re growing, teaching them to make wise decisions based on truth, not careless ones based on impulse.

Numbers 23:12 says, *Must I not **be careful** to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?”*

This is a good thing to say to ourselves when we are tempted to gossip, slander or lie. God doesn’t put those things in our mouths. He puts love, truth, and encouragement in our hearts, and that’s what we must take care to speak.

Deuteronomy 6:25 says, *It will be righteousness for us if we are **careful** to observe all this commandment before the LORD our God, just as He commanded us.*

This is a good thing to remind our entire family to be obedient to his Word so that we remain pure and devoted to Him. What is his Word to us? To love Him and to love others.

I Corinthians 3:10 says, *According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it.*

This is a good thing to say to us daily, as a reminder of what we lay on the foundation of our faith in God. We are to build it with wisdom, love, honor, integrity, etc. Otherwise, our house might fall.

There are lots of other “warnings” in the bible that are for our good, not to reprimand or to scold. I am not upset when I leave my parents’ home and they say, “Be careful,” as we walk out the door, because I know they’re just loving us, reminding us, and wanting to see us safely home.

Next time you hear yourself or others say to you, “Be careful,” actually stop and think about what you are being careful to do...on the road...at home...and among friends.

“Be careful,” my friend.

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TIPS

The Dressing – Just One Thing – by Marcy Lytle

Christmas is already expensive enough with all the gift buying we do, but trying to find a party dress, a glittery sparkle, that perfect pair of heels, or look glamorous for that one big party is nerve-wrecking and can sometimes break our budget! It's so fun to dress up for a Christmas outing, but it's not fun to shop at 50 stores to find that perfect outfit when we've still got 50 gifts to buy! But there are ways to find just ONE THING to add to our outfits that we already have that will make us look festive and feel glamorous when we show up and hear the Christmas music play...

The scarf. If you've got a pair of nice black pants and a solid black shirt, just top the ensemble with an incredible scarf. Seriously, a pretty scarf can dress up the dullest of outfits! Look for one with Christmas color or sparkle and shine. We found this [pretty one](#) at Altar'd State in plaid and houndstooth – what a festive combo! And it's reversible, too!

The rings. Do you have a pretty dress already hanging in your closet, but it's plain and simple? Try pulling your hair up in a "do" and adding some [beautiful earrings](#) that will draw attention and compliment your outfit. 'Tis the season to be bold...so wear something grand. And add a pretty [ring\(s\)](#) to your finger. Check out these options from Charming Charlie. One choice of this duo and you'll be set!

The statement necklace. Perhaps you have a pretty v-neck sweater and a dressy pair of jeans. Look for a v-neck necklace to match your neckline. Same goes if you're wearing a round neck sweater. Look for a round necklace to match that neckline. There are some great [statement necklaces](#) at Kohls to go with any color you're wearing this season. And one necklace is all you need!

The belt. Maybe you've got a solid color cardigan you enjoying wearing over a white button-down shirt and a pair of pants. Have you tried cinching in your waist with a gorgeous belt? A belt can pull an outfit together perfectly. We love this [chevron stretchy belt](#) from Modcloth in brick red. Choose one with a bit of color or sparkle, and you've got your holiday ensemble with just this one accessory!

The jacket. A nice jacket can cover a multitude of blah. Pick your favorite tank top or simple white blouse, pair it with a nice skirt or jean or pants, and then shop for a jacket. It can be a sleeveless one, a short jacket, or a long one – but we're not going for business attire – we're going for Christmas cheer! Don't pick a jacket with Rudolph and his sleigh stitched on it – that's too much! Go for a jacket with exquisite trim or detail and one that fits you well! Here's [one jacket](#) that's beautiful and affordable from Lulu's.

The shoes. There are all sorts of gold and silver shoes out there, from flats to heels, and they are so pretty and cute! Maybe you have a cute one-color ensemble you like to wear, but you always choose your black or brown shoes to go with. Scour your favorite stores, find that dressy pair of shoes and wear them instead! We found a [pretty pair](#) at Forever 21.

The polish. If you don't ordinarily paint your toes and your fingers, Christmas is a fun time to do so. Opt for your prettiest sandals (yes, I know it's winter but hopefully your party is inside!).

Pick a bold holiday color like bright red or polish with some glimmer and sparkle, like [this one](#) from Ulta. A pretty accent color on your fingers and toes will brighten up whatever outfit you choose to wear!

Whatever you wear, you will look stunning this holiday season, because you're you. But you'll also feel stunning if you've just added one thing, that didn't empty your wallet, to your outfits you already have hanging in your closet. Have fun, try something new, be creative, and be you!

Merry Christmas.

Seven for You - Stocking Fluffers – by Marcy Lytle

Stocking stuffers are so fun, aren't they? We love filling our kids' stockings with small items and saving these for last, after the whole Christmas day is over, to open by the fire one at a time, pulling out sweet surprise gifts stuffed way down to the toes! Stocking stuffers can be all sorts of things from jewelry to small gadgets to toiletries, but this season we thought we'd share some "fluffy" ideas for giving your family this year! We're calling them stocking fluffers.

Cabin socks. These are found at Dick's Sporting Good and, oh my goodness, they're soft. They have them for guys and gals (and toddlers), and who doesn't need a pair of warm socks? Most likely, the warm socks your family has are mismatched and missing in that black hole where many socks reside! [These socks](#) also are aloe infused, so what's not to love?

Popcorn beanie. These cute [head-toppers](#) are found at Old Navy and they're at such a good price! They come in a big variety of colors, so pick one that matches their coat, and this fluffer is sure to be a hit!

Pancake mix. What about giving your family a box of mix to make fluffy pancakes on a cold winter morning? This [southern pecan praline mix](#) from World Market is already making me hungry just looking at the photo! You could even add a small bottle of syrup, too!

Elephant plush. This little [phone stand](#) is so fluffy and cute, and it's an elephant! These are the kinds of gifts that cause the recipient to smile, laugh, and squeal things like, "This is SO cute!" and it's something she would never buy for herself.

S'mores kits. Purchase small plastic cube containers, fill with graham crackers, a few chocolate bars, and top with marshmallows, then tie with pretty string. Give each person one of these for sitting by the fire on a cold night. Personal s'mores kits are so easy and delicious.

The Guinea Pig. Did you know there is a series of book about Fluffy the guinea pig? Check out [Fluffy Goes to School](#), or other titles, and include this fluffer in the stocking! I know, books are hard to place in a stocking, but sometimes our stockings are actually sacks, or we set little gifts beside the stockings, as well as in them!

Luggage tags. There are some cool luggage tags of your family's favorite fluffy animals on [Zazzle](#). What a fun find and a great thing to have, when traveling. When the baggage arrives at the air terminal, or when you're searching through the back of your car, each bag will be easily visible and identified! What a great fluffer!

There are all sorts of ideas to be had for stocking fluffers, or stocking puffers, or stocking bluffers, or any sort of creative theme you want to give your family this year. Sometimes, it's easier to shop when you have a theme, instead of random choosing. Whatever you do, enjoy stuffing the stockings and giving to all...

Selah's Style – Party Time – by Selah Irwin

Along with the holidays come many holiday parties.

What better way to celebrate than getting dressed up in all your festive clothes?

The stores are offering fabulous ways to accessorize and I have some suggestions on how to “spruce up!”

Bows. A way to add some excitement your locks is bows, bows, bows! Nothing says “jolly” like a pretty bow. You can't go wrong with black, red, silver or gold.

Shoes. Everyone should have comfy (but cute) pair of shoes for the holidays. Boots are my favorite winter option. They keep you warm but you can still *strut your stuff* on the dance floor.

Sweaters. The winter months can be chilly! Make sure you have a cute crop sweater to go over those short-sleeve party dresses.

Scarves. A great way to stay warm and look stylish while you do it is to wear a scarf! Look how wide of a variety they have out right now! You can basically find any color you want...

Gloves. Gloves are a must-have for the winter party season. They keep you toasty and don't take away from the look of your party dress!

Have a holly, jolly Christmas! It IS the best time of the year.

Say hello to friends you know and make sure your hair has a bow!

The Fearless Kitchen - Christmas Candies – by Christina Vetter

It's that time of year again! I just love Christmas time. The weather, the music, celebrating Jesus' birthday, everything is wonderful. One thing in particular that I love about this time of year is how generous people become. We want to give gifts to everyone we are in contact with, such as co-workers, our kids' teachers, and the mailman, but it isn't financially feasible. If you find yourself in that dilemma, I have the solution for you: Christmas Candies.

This month I'm so excited to share some very Christmas, very delicious homemade candy recipes that truly any level of cook can do. A gift of Bourbon Sea-Salt Caramels, Dark Chocolate Peppermint Bark, or Raspberry Dark Chocolate Truffles is sure to brighten anyone's day without breaking your bank. Have fun, get the kids involved, and make a night of it! The only thing missing is The [Rat Pack Christmas](#) album and a mug of your favorite hot chocolate.

Merry Christmas everyone!

Bourbon Sea-Salt Caramels

Makes 100 caramels

Recipe courtesy of *Bon Appetit*

Difficulty: 

*The sweet, velvety caramel and flaked sea-salt go together beautifully in these little packets of heaven. Whether given as a gift or enjoyed fireside with your family, these caramels do not disappoint. * You will need a candy thermometer for this recipe.*

Ingredients:

Nonstick vegetable oil spray
2 C sugar
½ cup light corn syrup
1 (14oz) can sweetened condensed milk
1 stick butter, cut into small pieces
2 Tbsp bourbon
½ tsp kosher salt
Flakey sea salt (such as Maldon)

Directions:

- Lightly coat an 8x8 baking pan with nonstick spray and line with parchment paper, leaving a 2" overhang on 2 sides; spray parchment.
- Bring sugar, corn syrup, and ¼ C water to a boil in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat, stirring to dissolve sugar.
- Cook, swirling pan occasionally, until mixture turns a deep amber color, 8-10 minutes.
- Remove pan from heat and whisk in sweetened condensed milk and butter (mixture will bubble vigorously) until smooth.

-Fit pan with thermometer and return to medium-high heat. Cook, whisking constantly, until thermometer reads 240 F.

-Remove from heat and whisk in bourbon and kosher salt. Pour into prepared pan; let cool.

-Sprinkle caramel with sea salt, cut into 3/4" pieces, and wrap individually in parchment paper.

*Caramels can be made 2 weeks ahead. Store wrapped tightly in plastic in airtight container at room temperature.

Dark Chocolate Peppermint Bark

Serves 4

Difficulty: 

This Peppermint Bark is a beautiful Christmas dessert. Whether given as a gift or enjoyed fireside, it really rings in the Holiday season. It's also one of the easiest candies out there to make. I love to serve it cold, that way the crunch is maximized, but it can also be served room temperature.

Ingredients:

2 C dark chocolate chips

1 ½ C hard peppermint candies, crushed

Directions:

-Line baking sheet with wax paper

-Melt chocolate in microwave safe bowl for 75 seconds or until melted, stirring every 30 seconds.

-Mix in 1 C crushed candy.

-Pour onto wax paper and spread to ¼" thickness.

-Sprinkle remaining mints over top of chocolate, and refrigerate until hard.

-Cut into desired sized pieces. Serve chilled if desired.

Raspberry Dark Chocolate Truffles

Makes 1 ½ dozen truffles

Difficulty: 

*Truffles are, in my book, the best dessert you could ask for. Elegant, rich, and a portion that's just *right, my husband and I can't get enough. Buying these treasures at a chocolate shop is pricey, so this homemade version became a necessity in our house. If raspberry isn't your favorite, feel free to substitute other extracts, such as hazelnut, vanilla, or even espresso to suit your taste.*

Ingredients:

1 1/3 C semi sweet chocolate chips

1/3 C heavy cream

3 Tbsp butter

1 ½ tsp raspberry extract
2 C dark chocolate chips
2 Tbsp shortening

Directions:

-Microwave semi sweet chocolate, butter, and cream together for 75 seconds or until chocolate is melted, stirring every 30 seconds to mix.

-Add raspberry extract and mix well.

-Chill mixture for one hour, or until solid.

-Melt dark chocolate and shortening together in 30 second spurts, stirring each time, until melted.

-Scoop chocolate raspberry mixture into ½" ball and, using a fork, dip into melted dark chocolate. Set on wax paper and allow to harden. Repeat until raspberry chocolate is gone.

- If soft truffles are desired, serve at room temperature. If hard truffles are desired, freeze for at least an hour before serving.

Tried and True - Crowd Control – by Marcy Lytle

You've got a large group of family members coming for dinner sometime during the holidays, or at least they're gathering at your house for seasonal fun, and there's too many of them! Instead of looking forward to a nice time, you're all of a sudden in panic mode because the family gathering has now become a crowd of people – men, women, boys and girls and babies! – and you're already feeling claustrophobic and unable to sleep. Why? Because you feel out of control!

What are we to do to control our emotions and to disconnect our panic button, when too many visitors are coming to our home to wreak havoc?

It shouldn't be that way, because Christmas is a happy time, right? Well, it can be, with a little corralling of our lists, our food prep, our home organization, and our activity planning before they all show up with their stuff, their voices, and their kids...

If you're in charge of the food, you have two choices. You can delegate and hope everyone brings what they're supposed to, that it tastes good, and looks good or... you can make it simple yourself. (I prefer this choice because of having to receive, reheat, and re-plate items people bring). Costco and Sam's has great appetizers and there's absolutely no shame in setting them out on your own pretty platters at a buffet table, so that your time in the kitchen is only there to heat and serve – instead of cook and clean. Another idea is to prepare a [simple cheese plate](#), set out options for bruschetta spreads and provide breads. This is not a time to cater to each individual's eating preferences. If they can't eat what you're serving, they can bring their own bagged food, seriously. Add to your array with a large fruit tray (purchased or just simply sliced and circled on a round tray), and you're done.

Include help from your immediate family before your guests arrive, in setting up your buffet table or in setting up tables. Again, you have two choices. You can set up small tables in your largest room, and line up your buffet across your dining table or bar area. Or you can just spread out a [large buffet](#) (great video to watch!) and have chairs set out around the room. Either way, have this set-up and food-flow prepared and ready before your guests arrive. Having people underfoot in your kitchen with their foil covered dishes drives me crazy, so I like to be ready so I can visit like a ladybug instead of buzz like a bee.

Nothing messes up your nicely cleaned living area where the family will gather like their purses, diaper bags, coats and their "stuff." Designate ahead of time a place for all of these things. Clear off or clean out your own hooks or coat closet before guests arrive, and **have one of your own family members greet your guests, take their things, and invite them in.** This is a huge help! This way everyone knows where their things have been stored and is able to get to them, if needed. And your seating area stays clear and is only used for seating! Clear out a space in one room only, with a large box of items for the little ones, and perhaps a TV set up for movie watching. One idea is to spread a large blanket over a table and under it, where the little kids can sit and pretend they're at a theater. You "could" hire a babysitter if there are lots of kids, to keep the kids corralled, busy, and quiet.

Activities are worth having in place, if you don't want people dominating the conversation, being bored, or getting in unpleasant "discussions" like political debates or religious squabbles. There are [Christmas printables](#), games, short movies, and even fun crafts for all. Having about three of these to do throughout the evening will entertain your guests, allow you time to sit and play, and make the hours pass without incident. It's a nice thought that people will just come, everyone will visit, and the evening will be pleasantly quiet and enjoyable. But my experience is that without a vision, the party perishes...

Now that you've got the crowd's stuff organized, the food is laid out and the buffet is started, the kids know their space and are occupied, and your activities are planned, how do you make the evening flow well without screaming out all of your instructions? **A chalkboard, whiteboard, or easel is a fantastic solution!** If you have tabletop room, place a small chalkboard there. Or if you have floor space, set it near the entry of the large gathering room. On the board, write your evening schedule, so that guests know what to expect when and what time the celebration ends. And it makes them feel like they have come to a real party! (And they have no excuse to linger when you're ready for bed...)

Finally, there's always that fun part of clean up after the guests leave. You can set out your fine china, provide cloth napkins, and purchase extra sets of glasses –but why? **There is nothing wrong with using pretty paper goods for a crowd.** And you might want to set out a large garbage can in the kitchen for waste. Ahead of time, ask perhaps one couple to stay and help you with cleaning up the kids area, putting away chairs and tables, and cleaning serving dishes. Purchase some cute [to-go containers](#) and send people home with leftovers, so that you don't have a fridge full of food you won't eat. If your clean-up time is short and sweet, you'll fall into bed and have sweet dreams instead of aching feet.

Are you already tired thinking of the above suggestions? It does take work to have a crowd over to your house, but if you plan ahead and have a list of food, placement, and activities you'll not only enjoy the evening yourself, but you might not mind volunteering to host next year's gathering as well.

Well...maybe not...but at least you'll survive and be able to say "I did it!" and your guests will say "How nice!" when they return to their homes and the holidays are over.

HOME

Practical Parenting - Creating Space – by Mandy Major

Do you ever just want to skip Christmas?

Skip the food, the added 10 pounds, and the gifts you'll just re-gift or return?

I am in the mood to skip all the holiday hype this year. Dial things way down... actually just leave the country entirely. I am not trying to be negative, or the Scrooge, or the Grinch, or any other naysayer! I generally love the Christmas season, the smells, the lighting, candles, hot tea, and cookies.

But this year?

My husband lost his job in August and we began the greatest journey of our married life to date. We didn't immediately start looking for work, because for the first time in a long time we both felt something stirring...something bigger than ourselves.

Blake losing his job forced us into a place and space to take the time to pray, to ask ourselves what we wanted, what could we create, and how to get there. And then...our company was born!

As we asked ourselves what we wanted to do and where we wanted to be, Cambodia was on both of our hearts. Our company logo is actually the sign for Major in Khmer (the Cambodian language) and actually translates to "magnificent city." We created this company to have the freedom and finances to go, to be a part of something in Cambodia, to one day be a part of a trade school, teaching the trades to the poorest of the poor... creating hope, empowerment, and cultural change.

In the midst of all this dreaming, planning and fear, I walked into a store and it was hard to miss the irony staring me in the face.

Christmas.

I know, it's Jesus' birthday and the season of giving and all that...but, is it? Really?

There's that moment when you open those presents under the tree hoping someone discovered that perfect gift you wanted but didn't tell anyone about (maybe Santa is real after all?) only to discover there are no more gifts to open, and you didn't get anything you really wanted. We've all been there! In that moment...is it about giving?

Don't get me wrong, I love getting the perfect gift for people, and I love watching my kids open gifts, too. But sometimes, we miss the point.

Every year, I have my kids go through their toys and pass things on, getting rid of old things to create a space for new things. **This is a necessary step in the journey.** If my kids don't create the space for new things, they end up forgotten and (quite honestly) in a trash heap. This reminds me of a story:

The Parable of the Talents:

A man is going on a trip and calls his servants and gives each of them some money. To one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one. He gave them each talents according to what they were able to work with. Then the man went away. The man who got five talents went right away and traded them and got five extra talents. The man who got two also made two more. But the man who only got one talent dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money. After a long time, the Master comes back and calls his servants to see what they did with what he had entrusted to them. The first two men who had doubled what they had been given were told, "Well done," and because

they had been faithful with little, he gave them responsibility over more. When the servant with the one talent came forward, he told the Master he had hidden what the master had given him in fear of losing what he was given, and returned the one talent. The master was upset for the servant being lazy and not even attempting to invest the money. And instead of returning the talent to the fearful man, the Master gave it to the servant with 10. (Matthew 25:14-28 paraphrased)

Getting rid of the old things creates a space for new things and also helps us to take care of the things we keep. When my kids take care of the things they have, they get more things. The same is true for us in life. When we make space in our lives...new things begin!

When I say I want to skip Christmas this year, what I mean is:

I want to pass on all the "stuff."

I want to let go of the list of things "I have to buy."

I want to start a list of things to create.

A Magnificent City is only one of them!

What do you want to create with your family this season?

I Don't Do Teens - The Lies We Believe – by Marcy Lytle

We start hearing them when our kids are first born – like when that mom says, “My son is already crawling,” and he’s only 4 months old – and we think, “My little boy must be behind!” Little lies of inadequacy, competition, fitting in, getting ahead, etc. sink into our very souls over the years, until we can’t see straight or believe the truth any longer about our kids who only have a few years left to live under our roofs.

So just what are the lies we believe in the teen years of raising our kids? I’ll share with you some that I saw, considered, believed at times, and then discarded...because they’re just not true!

Lie: Sports and the clubs they are offer are a “must” if my child is talented and I want her to get a scholarship. And a scholarship is the only way I can afford for him/her to go to college.

While it may be true that being a part of club sports (which costs thousands of dollars by the time your kids graduate) is beneficial to getting a scholarship, it’s absolutely not true that it’s a “must” for any child. Just because “everyone else” is on a club team does not mean that route is the one for your son or daughter. And the cost for travel, uniforms, club fees, etc. over the years honestly adds up to as much as college tuition – seriously!

Truth: Sports are great for kids to be a part of, but there are actually very few kids who will grab a scholarship. So make sure you know the time, money, effort and family time that will be sacrificed (and church time) before you fall headlong into the sporting pit that can swallow you whole. Pray and seek God for YOUR family’s path and stay on it, regardless of what others are doing.

Lie: Speaking of college, my kids need to go away to college, live in a dorm, and “experience” all that college life has to offer, because that’s what all kids do when they graduate.

We couldn’t afford housing AND tuition, so our kids stayed home and went to college. One didn’t mind, the other one didn’t like it, but neither one ended up with student loans when they graduated. And neither one suffered one bit from missing out on the “college life.” In fact, they needed more time to slowly emerge into adult life, and it worked for them.

Truth: For some graduates, college life awaits them and they thrive away from home. For others, sending them away, encouraging them to pile up debt they cannot repay, and expecting them to be an adult overnight just isn’t the best decision. And we’ve got to, again, hear God for OUR family and do what’s best for OUR kids.

Lie: It’s too late to really teach our teens anything, so we’ll just let them be. Besides, teens are rebellious by nature, and they’ll grow out of it.

This is one lie that really tricks parents and our kids, as well. Our kids don't have to be rebellious! And no, we are not through raising them when they turn 13. In fact, just the opposite it true! They need us now more than ever. They need a listener with wisdom and guidance, and they need someone who believes in them with instruction and trust. And they need boundaries and respect, and our presence, as they continue to mature.

Truth: Our teens are still watching us. And we can be an example in front of them, one they admire, love, honor and obey, when we continue being the parent and letting them out little by little...always at the end of that rope should they need a tug or a release.

Lie: It's impossible to expect our teens to remain pure until marriage, so we'll just hope for the best.

When our teens are away from us at their friends' houses, out with a group of kids, or even at a sporting event, we don't know what they might be doing. And our imaginations can go wild with fear. But our teens respond to high expectations, WHEN they are taught to have a relationship with Christ – one that knows they are loved and they love Him right back. That's the best insurance against premarital relations – a supernatural relationship with Jesus.

Truth: Our teens won't stay pure because we threaten, but they will desire purity when their hearts already belong to the one who loves them and died for them and has them in the palm of His hand! And that love will hold them secure when temptation comes.

Lie: Church is mostly boring to my kids now that they're older, so it's not that big of a deal if they quit going. They'll start up again when they're older.

Many parents grew up with their own parents demanding that they do this or that, so they want to be less strict on their own kids. However, if our teens want to drop out of fellowship with their peers and their family (whether it be a church building or however you worship with others), take time to ask them why and listen. Maybe they've been hurt. Perhaps they have questions about spiritual things. There is a reason.

Truth: Part of training our kids into maturity is teaching them to pursue Christ, not a church or group of people, but in doing so – to learn to love the Body of Christ. This is hard, especially if we ourselves carry around wounds. Our kids need a haven, a safe place, and an encouraging bunch of peers who love Jesus and love them. If that experience isn't happening, find out why and help to make it better – but don't let them run and hide and harbor ill will, unresolved.

There are lots of lies we parents take on as truth, because we simply don't know what to do. After all, we've not raised another set of kids before! However, seek God for your kids and listen to him tell you what to do – not to the voices of everyone else and what they're doing. God has a plan for your family. Stick to that plan. And our teens needs us, and won't run from us, when we are present in their lives with love, instruction, compassion, and understanding -

with a firm foundation on which they can stand or fall – and we'll be there to catch them and restore them to their feet.

Choose to believe that He who called you to parent these teens will equip you to do it well.

And that's the truth.

The Family Practice – All is Calm... - by Rachel Toalson

We're planning a trip and recovering from a birthday party and trying to get holiday shopping done, and in the middle of all the madness, all the dinner parties and Christmas get-togethers and the date night squeezed in between work and kids and home so we can go see the new Star Wars movie, I feel expectation waiting in the wings, pressuring me to do it all and do it all well.

Make sure you see those people.

Make sure you pick a good gift.

Make sure you don't forget (fill in the blank.)

It's like this giant vortex that keeps pulling harder and harder and harder, sucking all the life and joy out of the holidays.

So it is that I find myself, one morning, unable to breathe, the panic thick around me.

Breathe. Just breathe.

I know how to do this. I know what I need. I know what can quell the anxiety for me, and it looks like sitting in a room, straight-backed in a chair, breathing in and out, sometimes to words, sometimes to just silence—because in the middle of all this mayhem that looks like festivity, I just forget to breathe.

So in the early morning hours, I do it, five minutes, and then it's time to pick up where I left off and move right into the crazy morning with crazy kids who are going crazy for all the extra activities they have at school—Christmas parties and teacher gifts and half the year over, woo hoo!

I know exactly what it is they need, too.

And I'm just about to lead them when the just-turned-9-year-old comes bounding down the stairs. "Mama!" he says. "I can't find my library book!" He's looking frantically, in all the places where it normally is, the table, the book basket, the counter where he absentmindedly puts them, and he's freaking out, completely freaking out, because it's the last day to turn it in before he's out of school for a bit. I put my hand on his shoulder and say, "Breathe. Just breathe."

He does, right in the middle of the hall with his brothers bounding around him, trying to beat each other down the stairs and to the table, and then we follow them down to breakfast and before we know it it's time to go, except someone can't find their shoes and someone else forgot where they put their teacher's gifts and another one has a piece of paper that needs signing that I didn't know about and there are no pens anywhere to be found, and now we're all hyperventilating again because the clock says we're three minutes late.

Breathe. Just breathe.

It's not often our first stop on the freak-out train—to stop and be still and just breathe, when the whole world is going mad around us because there are things to do and people to see and holidays, holiday, holidays and all the activity that comes with them. Our holidays can look more like dreading the alarm than looking forward to each day with joy and expectation.

And if this time is about anything at all, it's about joy and expectation. So we have to reclaim that.

We can with stillness.

Sure, everything around us is moving at a crazy pace and we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, but there is always time for a few minutes of stillness. Of just breathing. Of entering into a sacred silence, together.

Before my boys leave for school, before we go our separate ways, we stand at the door to our home, this place of love and safety and rest, and we breathe. Four counts in, four counts held, four counts out, four counts held. We repeat it four times. Or as many times as it takes to bring stillness and calm into mayhem and wild.

We breathe. We stay silent. We stretch into the stillness so that we can live better, more connected, more fully present lives.

In a season that runs madly toward a finish line that feels unexpected when it comes, chasing stillness has the potential to re-center, to keep us present in this moment right now, to realign our life when it's swung off-kilter.

We reclaim joy in the stillness.

How to find stillness:

1. Before anyone leaves the house, stand at the door and breathe together. Hold hands and breathe. Breathe words or just breathe. It doesn't matter. The practice of breathing will eventually become a habit any time we feel overwhelmed or fatigued.
2. Build into the nighttime routine a practice of stillness. We use a bell. Someone rings the bell, and everyone closes their eyes and listens until the bell's sound fades. We do this a couple of times before we all go to our beds.
3. Lie down on the ground and tense up different parts of the body, then release. For example: Tense up all the muscles on the face for a count of four. Then release and let your face slacken. Do the same for the neck. The chest. The arms. The stomach. The legs. All the way down. The body knows better how to relax once we've shown it how to tense. We do this with my boys once or twice a month.

Life as We Know It – The Deposit – by Erica Simmons

No one was ever at a more important and impactful crossroad as our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing what was to come next, knowing the pain, the suffering and something so many of us forget, the reward. This reward was not for Him, but **for us**. His crossroad led to the redemption of mankind, our salvation, our privilege to walk in relationship with our Creator. We are familiar with the passage, recall the struggle in garden, and often quote the words of surrender He made; but we shudder and cringe at the sacrifice He made of Himself **for our sake**.

Have you ever thought about the number of crossroads *we* come to in a day? Should I say these angry words, repeat that vicious rumor, engage in this less than godly behavior? We sometimes live our life in such a way that our spiritual crossroads are like so many stop sign intersections where drivers no longer stop, but blow right through.

The decisions we make at our crossroads also have benefits **for others**, besides us. The way we spiritually handle our crossroads **creates legacies** for our children and our children's children. When we come to our crossroads, we are faced with two options. The first is to take the easy way out and the second is to stay the course, surrender our will to God's, and watch what it does. Not just what He does in our situation, but in us.

This month's "life as I know it" moment began in the last school year, when my position was moved under another department. I made this move kicking and screaming, and to no avail. As I began to know the people in my new department, I began to forge good relationships. Yet the entire time I have still maintained that *I did not belong there*, and the work our department did should not be under the same umbrella as the work of the people in my new department. Two of us were moved, and in May, the other person had an opportunity to take a position in the private sector.

Once she left, I began to work on a project I felt God put on my heart. The work for the project was tremendous and I spent many hours at work and at home developing it. I made appointments with key personnel to present the project to campus administrators. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Feeling overwhelmed, I began to question why the other position in my department was not filled. I was told that the hiring would be put on hold and when a position was posted it would be for another coordinator position like my own. After a conversation with my supervisor, she agreed that taking an opportunity for advancement off the table was not fair and a compromise was made that the position which was currently an Associate Director's position could be re-written as an Assistant Director's position.

As time went by with very little progression toward the goal, I began to feel like the work our department provided was not valued. I set out to redefine our work, our mission and our focus. I put together a proposal and presented to my new supervisor who was very supportive and began to intercede with her supervisor on my behalf. Throughout the process, I had my good days and bad days, days where I was frustrated, angry and resentful. I felt like I was being punished because of the negative interactions between my department and the department I

had joined. Exasperated, I went to my supervisor and told her I had made the tough decision to look for another job.

However, one day on my way home, I realized that I love my job and the work that I do, and there are no other jobs out there that I want to do. It then hit me:

I was at my crossroads and I had a decision to make.

I decided to not give up or quit, but to focus on the work and nothing else.

I would love to say that after making that choice things were smooth sailing, but they were not. I had my days where I experienced such peace, and then there were days where I was discouraged. It was on the day that I was at my lowest that I realized the enemy was fighting me mighty hard. And believe it or not, that realization was the turning point for me. I re-committed to **focusing** on the work.

That was on Tuesday of the week that I am writing this article, two days ago.

Today, I was able to have a conversation at length with my supervisor. She told me that all the positive feedback the work has been getting and with her supervisor now having the time to evaluate the proposal and understand the new direction our division was taking, she is on board. She is not only on board with the new direction of the work, but wants to structure the division to hire two more positions, with one of them being the Assistant Director.

This victory would not be possible if I had taken the easy road and walked away.

The benefits of this victory **for my family** would not be possible if I had quit.

Surrendering my will to His was more than a decision, it was a commitment.

This experience and victory **is a deposit** into my children's spiritual legacy.

They went through this with me, and **they get to see the power** of submitting to the will of God.

A Night to Remember – Exquisite Dining – by Marcy Lytle

Christmas is the time of the year when all the stops are removed and all the glitter and sparkle are spread around to shine and brighten our world. It's the time of year when we enjoy decadent dishes spread out on beautifully decorated tables, where exquisite detail is taken to make the meal an "experience," not just a moment.

This month's family devo involves fine dining, either at a restaurant with the kids if you choose to do so, or at home around your table where the entire family has created a dinner to remember...

Preparation: *Plan an evening where you can take the kids out to a nice dinner...or prepare one at home with white tablecloth, soft music, dim lights or candles...elegant dining. As you enjoy your meal, note the elegance and attention to detail and discuss with the following questions, as you eat. Then read the summary at the end.*

- What if we were offered a table where stains and old food were still present? Would we choose that table? Why not?
- If the menu was full of food choices that looked good in the pictures, but the ingredients were poison, tasted like dirt, and not cooked thoroughly, would we stay and eat? Why not?
- Suppose the restaurant was noisy, lights were flashing, and people were bumping into us while we ate. How would our dining experience be?
- And finally, what if we did stay at this dirty table, we did choose something that made us sick, and we ate...never being able to visit with those we came with. What then? How would we feel at the end of the dinner?

Did you know that Jesus prepares a fine dining experience with us, every time we sit down to visit with him? He prepares a clean table, good things to eat, listens to every word we say, and we can hear him too...and we feel great when we've finished – very satisfied.

But the world offers us everything used, dirty, stained, full of junk...and when we dine on all of that...we feel bloated, sick, and totally dissatisfied.

The meal we're having tonight took some effort (or money) to create this fine dining experience, and we still might have a few messes...because we're human. However, Jesus prepares a flawless table for two, hidden away from the noise, for our perfect dinner date with him.

As you enjoy your fine dining experience, talk about the placement and pieces at the table and how they relate to dinner with Jesus:

The white tablecloth: He always removes the stains of sins (mistakes and meanness) because his blood covers a multitude of wrongs.

The music: He enjoys singing songs of love over us, and hearing us sing songs of love and worship back to him. (*Sing a song with your kids of worship to Jesus.*)

The candles: Jesus is the light of the world and he makes darkness flee! *Blow out the candle to experience the darkness, then light it again to experience the light!*

The table: There's always room for us at Jesus' table, he always has a chair for us to sit, to be fed, and to leave satisfied. *(Leave an empty chair and invite Jesus to sit there.)*

The food: He prepares a table for us, even in the presence of our enemies, where we can eat in peace and leave with joy. *(Enjoy your meal together.)*

It doesn't take a whole lot of effort to prepare a pretty table with tasty food (it doesn't have to be fancy) and invite the entire family for a quiet, lovely dinner together for intimate conversation, ambience of peace and beauty, and food and drink that everyone enjoys. Do it. Together. This Christmas. And enjoy the good things in life He's spread out before you...

Everything Home - \$30 Christmas Cheer – by Mikaela Cain

“Surely this will be the perfect size,” I thought to myself, holding a narrow cardboard box containing a plastic Christmas tree.

Garlands and lights cover my childhood home around this time of year. My family spares no corner in decorating for the festivities around Christmas. I wanted to bring that holiday cheer into my own space. I didn’t need anything big—just a small holiday visual to bring a warm smile to our faces.

Before finding my little tree, I swept the aisle at Target and was blown away by how expensive the reindeer throws, snowflake candles and nativity sets were. I had to pass the Christmas decoration section up entirely, before I found my \$30 tree.

Pleased with myself, I texted my husband that I had found a bargain. “It’s in a box, so I can’t see how tall it will be, but I bet it won’t be taller than the couch.”

“Wait until I get home to set it up!” He texted back.

We were both excited. Before he even took his jacket off when he got home (or eat dinner), we snuggled in the living room to pull the tree out of its box. I turned on a Christmas Pandora station, ready for the big moment.

Grant opened the top of the cardboard box with our first Christmas tree inside, and pulled out the smallest tree known to mankind. We weren’t sure whether to be disappointed, or just confused. It was shorter than the Charlie Brown Christmas tree, and not a lot prettier.

“Is that it?” I asked, peeking in the box to see if there was a second section, or at least more branches.

“Yeah, but we’ll fluff it out and it will look better,” my optimistic husband said.

We took turns fluffing it, with little luck. Then, we started decorating it with hand-me-down decorations that Grant’s parents gave us. The ornaments looked ridiculous. Each one seemed to cover a quarter of the tree! We took them off, and settled for lights, instead.

My text earlier that day proved true— the tree wasn’t as tall as the couch. It was about a foot and a half tall. We had to sit it on the coffee table in the corner for it to be visible. I was really unsure about it. Didn’t it look silly? Would serve to make the holidays full of depression instead of cheer? But Grant was ready to get comfy and fed, so we left the tree for now.

A few days later, we were surprised by the difference a little tree can make.

We came back to our apartment after a long, hard meeting with friends. We were tired and sad when we walked up the steps to our second floor apartment in the dark. The narrow hallway was only lit by a yellow, flickering light. A depressed sight to match our mood. But, when we opened the door to our home, everything changed. We were met with the white lights of our

Christmas tree. The bulbs shot light through the branches creating a shadow on the wall that looked like a giant snow flake.

Our hearts jumped!

We felt the warmth of the season fill us with hope, and stood just staring at it for a minute.

To my surprise, the little tree served its purpose. It brought a warm smile to our faces. The size didn't matter anymore. Its scrawniness wasn't even noticeable when we really needed it the most.

Our house was filled with holiday cheer.

YOU

Under the Influence – Now I Know – by Marcy Lytle

I finally figured it out.

I've been so puzzled as to why I enjoy watching [Pioneer Woman](#) on the television at night, before I drift off to sleep. I don't like anything remotely "country," and yet the backdrop of this particular show is nothing but country! Huge pastures with cows roaming and cowboys roping, and a big ranch house where the entire group gathers around a huge table for home-cooked meals fill each episode. And I love it all. Watching it relaxes me. I almost crave it as much as the food I see being prepared by [Ree Drummond](#), the Pioneer Woman.

This show has been on television on the Food Network for years, but I only discovered it several months ago. Once I started watching, I was hooked. In fact, I record episodes that I cannot see live, and my kids just bought me my first Pioneer Woman cookbook! I still don't like country fashion, and could care less to ever live on a ranch or set up my home away from the city, but I am enticed and drawn to this show, much like the cows are drawn to the hay they're fed daily by the ranch hands and kids – on yes there are four of them – before the sun comes up on the horizon.

So what did I figure out, and how did this realization take place?

I've had enough...

Commercials are mostly about medicines for depression or lackluster sex, the news is full of stories that create anxiety and frustration, and television shows on the other channels thrive on stories from dysfunctional families with parents who yell at their kids, cheat on each other, and could care less about home life – because they're busy doing "it all." And I'm tired of it. My eyes are tired of seeing and hearing about one particular family of grown girls that dominates every entertainment news show. My body is weary of watching how I can drop three sizes, perform better in bed, and get that youthful "glow" with just a swipe of a cream or a sip of a drink.

My mind, body, and soul are screaming, "I want off and out!" and then...

There it is in simple pale purple with a plain white font and an easy listening tune...

The Pioneer Woman

She shares her recipes, we see photos of her kids playing together with just a ball and nothing more, we're included in her trips to deliver goodies to her pastor, her husband's aunt, and her dear father-in-law. We're invited to watch as her family gathers around the same table for a meal that was prepared with love, because the woman preparing it is confident in who she is – not in what others want her to be.

We get to imagine sitting on the porch with her as she rocks back and forth, and the Oklahoma breezes blow. We want a sweet dog like her Charlie, who lopes along at the same slow pace as the baking pies in the oven. The love between this woman who cooks and her husband who works cattle is evident when she shows up with food, and when he arrives home and looks into

her eyes, or when he picks her up and tosses her over his shoulder and she squeals like we all did back when we were first in love...

Ree Drummond doesn't put on airs about her achievements =, her recipes, or even her pleasant life on the ranch in Pawhuska, Oklahoma. She's experienced city life and as she says, "accidentally" became a country girl. And she loves it. It suits her. She loves her kids. And her kids love her. She admires her husband. And he admires her. And it all looks so perfect...

I know it's not.

But it's different. It's inviting. It's real. It's soothing. It's appetizing. And it's satisfying.

At the end of a busy day where my mind, eyes and ears have been saturated with profanity, shootings, politics, natural disasters, and teens gone wild, I enjoy a nice friend showing up on my screen to mix a few pantry ingredients together into a spread that I want to eat with her and her family.

This Pioneer Woman seems to have figured out what is important in life, and that's why I like to watch the show. I want part of that rest, cool breeze, and amazing kitchen aromas, as I too get away from the busy life and find something scrumptious to create out of the simple things in life.

And that's why I click, lay back on my pillow, and fall asleep as my mind empties the fullness of the day onto the wide open spaces of the prairie and fills back up with visions of pasta or pie from inside the kitchen where the oven is always warm...and the table is always set.

Strengthening Your Core - The Big Catch – by Marcy Lytle

I used to fish with my dad when I was a little girl, and I loved it. I loved sitting on the bank and learning how to push the hook right through the eyes or lips of the minnow, and I became quite good at it! I have some good memories of those fishing trips because it was me and my dad, down by the river, and he was teaching me and I was learning...as we sat and waited for the catch!

One thing that is important in the art of fishing is learning **how to cast your line**. I call it an “art” because it really is. There are so many things that can (and will) happen when one is learning to cast. If someone is standing too close behind you, they might end up with a hook in their nose or near their eye, and then the fishing trip will morph into an emergency room trip, instead! If the flick of your wrist isn’t just right and the aim isn’t just so, the line won’t go anywhere, and your pretty canvas of a fishing pole with line stretched across the water becomes a silly snapshot of a wiggly string dangling by your feet.

If you don’t **listen to your fishing instructor** (my dad, in my case) and toss your line wherever you please, you might end up getting your line all tangled up. That doesn’t make your instructor happy, because he then has to stop what he’s doing and untangle your line (which can take a while) or break the line, reattach your hook and bait, and set you back up to cast again. Only this time he’s watching with a keen eye to see if you’re going to cast where he told you to in the first place.

And finally, if you don’t **cast in the right spot**, you won’t catch a fish at all! You can cast all day, but if the fish aren’t swimming by, the atmosphere is not quiet and serene, and the weather’s not just right, you’ll go home empty bucketed...with no fish fry that night!

So what do these fishing lessons on casting have to do with my adult life, now?

I thought of this verse this morning, “Cast all your anxiety on him for he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7) and I realized that if I obey that one directive early each morning, my day goes along so much better. I not only enjoy the day, but the return in the evening is satisfaction of my soul, just like a full string of fish ready to enjoy!

Here’s why:

My Father wakes me each morning bright and early, reading for an adventure with him, ready to instruct me and show me great things. But first, I have to learn to cast correctly, just like I did on the grassy banks sitting next to my dad.

I can cast my anxiety on those around me, but all that will happen is they too will carry the wounds of my anxiety, and we’ll all be weighed down and bleeding.

I can cast limply with no faith at all, unassured that God cares or wants to help me, and I’ll end the day frazzled and tired and weary, like that wiggly fishing line that was cast without skill.

I can cast my anxiety on my own strength and smarts and see where that sends me, and find myself tangled up and unable to undo all the mess that I've done, and then call for his help. He's sure to come, but he tried to tell me how to avoid that mess and I didn't listen!

I can toss my cares out into the deep dark abyss of murky waters on a cold breezy day and whine and wail so loud because of the pain that I feel, and never experience a return because my noise drowned out the whisper of his voice instructing me to where the school of fish is swimming.

Or...

I can watch him and learn, turn from others and turn to him, place my faith wholeheartedly in his goodness and mercy toward me, listen to his voice and obey, catch a glimpse of the bounty awaiting me for the day (the school of fish named peace, joy, abundance, love, etc.)

And...

Reel in the biggest catch of the day on my fishing line, with His eyes and arms behind me helping me land it to shore without losing it, and sit at his table a few hours later enjoying it.

Are you casting your cares elsewhere, amid the noise, without considering his instruction and directive? Maybe that's why we all feel so frazzled by the end of each day – because we show up by the river bank and think we are alone and without a friend.

That's not true. Our Father has a full tackle box and fishing pole ready every morning and he invites us come with him to learn to cast – fully – skillfully – with great aim – all of our cares right onto Him for an incredible return.

In fact, he's promised that we will be strong, firm, and steadfast when we learn to cast our cares on Him.

Beauty for Ashes – My Kitty – by Pam Charro

I recently brought home a kitten after not having had one for nearly 20 years. I grew up with cats and have always loved them, but after my son was born, I decided I would not get any new pets until my children were older. It's been quite an experience getting used to having a furry baby around again!

One of the aspects of having a pet that has been very sweet has been the cuddling and purring. I had forgotten how lovable kittens can be when they are happily motoring away on my lap, their little claws gently yet somewhat painfully kneading into my flesh. Such total bliss (for one of us, anyway; and usually, both)!

This got me wondering why God gave us such sweet little things to love and what it can show us about our relationship with him...

Being loving and close is something God greatly enjoys! And, in my relationship with my kitty, I get to experience what it's like to be the bigger entity while my little one just lets go and purrs. But how well do I allow myself the total abandon of being the one who receives the petting?

My kitty seems to trust me without question, yet the One who has proven his love and friendship toward me multiple times throughout my life seldom receives the same trust from me. I simply do not yet know how to let go to the same degree as my sweet kitten.

How grateful I am that God is so patient with me!

He knows he deserves my trust and he longs for me to receive his love on a deeper level. He created me and he deserves me in every way. Yet he also knows and understands that I am doing the best I can and I am a work in progress. I have greater trust for him now than I did a few years ago, and I know I will continue to grow.

Years ago, God gave me a quick flash of a man setting a small dish of milk underneath a car for the scared kitten underneath to come out and drink. I knew he was referring to me.

Thank you, Lord, for considering me a treasure that is worth waiting for.

Healthy Habits – Gifts and Gatherings and Guests – Oh My! – by Marcy Lytle

I don't know if you're like me, but Christmas and all of its busyness makes me sometimes feel sick. I stay up late, make my lists, prepare the food, think of ideas to keep people busy, and do all of the extra holiday activities, alongside my regular hours of work. And there just doesn't seem to be enough hours in the day to get everything done! Add to that the idea that Christmas and all of its sparkle and glitter needs to be just "perfect" because it only comes once a year and we want it to look like the Christmases in the Hallmark movies. Then reality hits us in the face like a blast of cold air that stings and chaps our skin, and we realize we're not even enjoying the holidays at all – and then they're gone!

Here are four areas that suffer during the holidays and ways we can stay healthy and happy, and not sickly and sad.

Sleep

Instead of visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads as we drift off to sleep, we have nightmares of gifts that we never did purchase, a dress for that party that we just can't find, and a dish for that gathering that we don't even want to attend, and oh yes – our guest room that needs to be prepared. We can't get to sleep; and we're up before dawn, yawning before noon.

In order to ensure that we get sleep and rest, we can use a small notebook for all of our lists, so that they're all in one place, and leave it by our bed at night as we drift off to sleep. As we think, we can reach over and write down everything that surfaces in our minds, remove it from our minds, and place it on the white pages and close the book – literally and figuratively. Somehow, knowing we've written it, that the book is right there, and the pen is nearby, allows us to relax and sleep a little better.

Emotions

Without sleep and with lists constantly in hand and barking orders given to family members, we end up not being very pleasant company for anyone. We're so tired that our emotions are at the end of our sleeves and anyone who brushes up near us sends us over the edge, and we either cry or yell – depending on the given day and circumstance. Sound familiar?

Try putting on praise music or easy listening as you make your holiday dishes, clean your rooms, or run errands and check off your lists. Set aside time in the morning, before you start your busy day, and read the Word and pray – casting your cares on Him – again literally and figuratively. Stand in your room, lift your hands and toss – just like you would a volleyball – sending that weighted ball of worry to Him to catch and carry for you. Seriously, this is a good exercise for your soul.

Expectations

We are searching for the perfect gift that will result in "Oh, Thank you, this is just what I wanted!" and we worry. We've given him our list but we hope he'll remember a surprise that will make us feel loved and appreciated. We feel the pull from every family member to show up at every

dinner, every house, and every party and we don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. There are expectations others place on us, and expectations we place on ourselves, setting us up for a sure disappointment. Why? Because expectations kill the joy of Christmas – that joy that comes from enjoying the wonder of it all...

Pray before you shop and ask God to grant you wisdom and creativity for gift-giving, then listen and obey, and be done. Let go of expectations from anyone for what you've "always" wanted, in favor enjoying each moment of the day you've been given. And learn to say "no" and realize you cannot be all things to all people. And if you feel so inclined, break out in song at the top of your lungs to the familiar lyrics, "Let it go, let it go..." and dance with your children!

The Wallet

According to an [NBC survey](#), almost half of American would rather skip Christmas altogether because of the financial stress it places on families. And although the wallet is not a part of our physical body, it's connected to our physical and emotional and mental well-being. Having an empty one with nothing to spend makes us stressed and sad. Emptying out a wallet that was one full, in order to pile up gifts under the tree, also creates stress and sadness. So what are we all to do?

Some say to be creative, but many of us just don't have the ideas or the time to even implement them. We might be given advice to set a budget, but every time we've tried that – we go over by a longshot. It's normal for parents to want to bless their children and shower them with gifts. And the pressure of our culture, the advertisements, and our own kids pointing and pulling and pushing us to get the things they want is just too much to handle. Financial stress might be the worst "virus" of the season that makes us sick.

I say create memories. Serve together as a family at a Blue Santa event by wrapping gifts to give. Spend time together making your favorite salsa, and deliver it with a bag of chips to good friends. Cuddle up with blankets and watch Christmas movies while you enjoy a huge tub of popcorn. And finally, don't let what others are doing be the standard for your family Christmas. Pray about everything, give thanks for in all things, and give what you can of yourself, your time, and whatever money you can afford – and nothing more.

Now that you're feeling better about these four, see if you can't slow down and enjoy the lights and sounds of the season at ease and feeling healthy – so healthy that you have the energy to sing a few carols and throw a few snowballs (If you're lucky enough to have that pretty white stuff fall on your lawn...)

Merry Christmas and Good Health to All!

CHRISTMAS HOPE

By Ginny Hurley

Tis the season to be jolly
Tinsel, trees, and all that holly

The highway is bumper to bumper
The man upfront appears grumpier and grumpier

Lights are flashing a mile behind
I'm thinkin' it's not the Christmas kind

As I ponder on this matter
My heart begins to pound and patter

What if Jesus rode along?
I really think he'd sing a song

Maybe I'll just try that now
Before that farm truck joins his plow

Something in my spirit swells
I hear it! Many ringing bells!

Bubbling up within my heart
A song, a song will surely start

What an incongruent place
To feel His Spirit amongst this race
Arise within me King of HOPE
To Christmas thoughts I do devote

No weapon from an enemy
Can rob my joy and make me flee

From on high my power reigns
Removing all that tries to strain

I know what's true. I know Who's real
My Beloved is the One I feel!

That baby born so long ago
Is in my car right now, I know!

He's not a baby any more
But Immanuel whom I adore!

Oh thank you, Father, for Your Son
His victory is completely done

No matter where I live my day
His arms will wrap me through the fray

It's that wonderful time of year
Be reminded and DO NOT FEAR!

HOPE can never disappoint this girl
For I am His precious priceless pearl!

MARRIAGE

In This Together - Sugar Cookies and Lingerie – by Sarah Stennett

Christmas shopping by myself leads to mindless wandering sometimes since I am so unaccustomed to time by myself. A few weeks back, I strolled into one of my less frequented shops, Victoria's Secret, only to see faux-fur trimmed red lingerie and hear the ever-familiar *Santa Baby* song filling the air.

Oh yeah! Christmas is the most romantic time of year, I thought.

I also forget about romancing my husband when trying to fit in time to bake and decorate sugar cookies with my girls between Christmas parties and holiday band concerts. There are so many opportunities to spend my time, money, and energy at this time of year that it all gets jumbled together and loses some of its purpose.

Christmas cheer breaks down into one of these three categories for me:

Romance

Christmas is the most romantic time of year: cuddly sweaters, a cozy fire in the fireplace, and the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree set the perfect backdrop for love. Or so it would seem, seeing as how *All I Want for Christmas is You* and *Baby, It's Cold Outside* are the most played holiday songs. Jewelry and lingerie sales skyrocket during the months of November and December, too. Love is the very message of Christmas, so translating that into romantic love is only natural.

The first Christmas we spent together as a dating couple, my (now) husband Rob gave me a few gifts, but the main one was a script he had written that told our story and left off with a "to be continued." That gift was sheer perfection since it was very vulnerable of him to share his developing craft of script writing by unveiling our relationship through his eyes and it spoke volumes of his hope for what we might become.

Yes, that Christmas I knew that I had "found the one my soul loves." It wasn't a glamorous gift that cleared out his bank account or a grand gesture of romance otherwise reserved for contestants on *The Bachelor* dating show. It was simple and complex, raw and beautiful. In other words, it was total perfection.

Fast forward 15 years and here we are happily married with a house full of vibrant little girls. Christmas looks and feels radically different now. We are not young and in love, but we are older and our love for one another is richer. Our gestures are different, but the romance is still there.

Kids

Any holiday is more fun with little kids in your life because it helps you see the world with excitement and innocence again. For that, Christmas truly is the most wonderful time of the year. As parents, we strive to not let it be about getting gifts, but about celebrating our love for one another through giving gifts and togetherness. So, the past few years I've been doing my own version of a Christmas activities advent calendar. It requires a lot of planning on my part to sit down with Rob and look at the December calendar to figure out which day will be a simple thing (read a Christmas picture book together as a family) and which will be more elaborate (make Gingerbread houses). I have found that the key is to have several simple but meaningful activities and a few fun traditions sprinkled in. The first year we had the kids open the advent activity envelope before

dinner, but their eager anticipation wouldn't allow for it last year so we changed it to opening the envelopes in the mornings over breakfast. For our family, this has become such a fun way to incorporate the meaningful (write Christmas cards to soldiers, serve at a soup kitchen together, shop for Christmas Angel Tree gifts) as well as the traditional (decorate the Christmas tree, drive around to look at Christmas lights, attend a candlelight service) into our holiday season.

Faith

In my high school French class, I learned about the French tradition of attending late night Mass on Christmas Eve followed by a midnight feast. I was intrigued because the two most spiritual experiences I've cherished are reverent worship of our Holy God and sharing a great meal among my most cherished people. While the French tradition isn't practical for our family full of young children, I always try to keep those two practices as the heart of our Christmas celebration.

In the wake of the Sandy Hook tragedy of 2012, parents everywhere hugged their children a little tighter going into the holiday season. That year, the innocence and life of children was more beautiful and precious than ever before. My first grade daughter was chosen to sing *Silent Night* solo on a dark stage for our large church's candlelight service. Tears rolled down my cheeks watching her sing up there under a dim spotlight because at that moment the gravity of God's love in giving His one and only Son to this earth became palpable.

All three of these are important during the holidays (and every day) because they are my core values, my heart. I can't look at them as three pulling forces requiring perfect balance because balancing requires tension (and tension stresses me out). Instead, I like to think of the three as intermingling in a constant dance, each holding its place of value and celebrating the others while often highlighting one or the other at a time.

What does this intermingling look like?

In Matthew 22:37-39, Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, body and strength" and to "Love your neighbor as yourself." He ordered the two so that we too could give priority to loving Christ and then loving those He has placed in our lives.

So to me, I try to keep this in mind: Jesus first, next husband, then kids, and finally others. And here are a few strides I take for each, in turn:

God. Christmas is a special time to quiet our hearts, not busy ourselves. I have to constantly remind myself of that. I like Advent devotionals and have used the *She Reads Truth* one in past years, but I think the goal here for me is to be even more intentional about abiding in Him and finding my rest and peace in just seeking His presence to prepare my heart for more of Him this Christmas. When I love God first, it's a whole lot easier to love my husband and my kids.

Husband. What about my marriage? How can my husband feel valued and precious this month? Why let all of the fun be reserved for the kids? I like to try to get in extra snuggles just by hanging out with my husband by the Christmas tree once all of the Littles are off to bed. Although romance and sex are far from synonymous, a new lingerie item goes a *long* way in speaking his language. For us, we both enjoy being

together **and** shopping, so date nights of Christmas shopping while holding hands and **not** pushing strollers are great fun. Or baking his favorite Christmas cookies, just to see his smile. So yes, even the husband and wife times have to make their way to my Advent calendar of events so my husband can remain a priority.

Kids. My family advent calendar and our daily family devotional readings (We love the *Jesus Storybook Bible* for this and there are some good simple devotionals that go along with it for our older kids) build anticipation of celebrating the arrival of God's greatest gift. I also like to try to steal moments alone with each kid to talk about Christmas or faith or life and just embrace the wonder of the season by processing it through my child's eyes.

When in doubt, K.I.S.S. comes to mind! I'll never forget that acronym from my freshman algebra teacher writing the letters on the board in chalk while spattering "Keep It Simple, Stupid." The things I just listed are practical ideas that work for me, but what is truly important isn't trying to do **everything**, but striving to do **something with great intentionality**. This Christmas, I want to make space in my life for vulnerability and time for true connection. To me, this Season of Giving means giving myself to Jesus, my husband, and my family in the same way that Rob did 15 years ago:

Simple and complex, raw and beautiful.

Total perfection.

Date Night Fun – Inspired! – by Marcy Lytle

If Christmas isn't the time of year to be inspired, then when is? There are all sorts of sights, sounds, and wonders everywhere and instead of being annoyed by them, tuning them out, or staying so busy that we miss them all – why not be inspired by them? Experiencing inspiration can be observing something that is so breathtaking that we are then stimulated to react or feel something creative going on inside ourselves. If date night this month can do all of that, what fun awaits us! At the end of each idea, we are including a fun recipe to try that you can pack up and take along for an end of the night snack.

The Sights. I know the drive-thru luminaries in some towns are too crowded with cars, and the walk-through light show in my town is shoulder-to-shoulder people, so I get why these might both be something to avoid. But what about driving through neighborhoods observing the sights that friends have worked hard to set up in their yards? You can even take the kids on a family date on this one! Make it a fast-food-night and stop for an appetizer for all to share, drive a few streets, get a main dish at the next drive-thru, drive a few streets, end with dessert for all, and a few more streets. You could even vote for the best house and go back and leave them a note in their yard! You might be inspired to add a decoration to your own lawn!

Snack to take: [Pumpkin Chocolate Chip Cake.](#)

The Sounds. Find a Christmas concert and attend it together. If you like traditional music, there are churches that provide these sounds. But if you enjoy more upbeat tunes, look for a concert elsewhere. Maybe a coffee shop you frequent has a single songwriter sharing his holiday version of "O Holy Night." After the concert is over, drive to a pretty overlook across your city or town and play your own tunes in the quiet of the car and be inspired to believe in He who is Good.

Snack to pack: [Mixed Nut Tartlets.](#)

The Wonders. I think nothing speaks of the wonder of Christmas like a starry lit sky, a beautiful sunset, or a gorgeous sunrise on a cold morning. You'll have to plan a clear cloudless day/night for this date, and probably a coat or blanket. Find a book with the Christmas story, or use the Bible, and read it aloud to each other while observing the beauty in nature. Imagine what it must have been like for Joseph & Mary, and how the birth of the Savior changed their lives forever. Pray together on your date night out for the wonder of His love to come to all of those you know who do not know it...yet.

Snack to enjoy: [Pecan cheese log.](#)

The Season. Tis the season to be jolly.... It really is! It's the season of hope, joy, and giving. Make your date night out one of hilarity and include an activity that involves giving. After all, there's no greater joy than giving, because it's in giving that we are blessed! Maybe spend the evening wrapping gifts together and laughing, as you prepare to give. Perhaps you can joyfully prepared a food gift together and deliver it to friends who are shut in, and can't get out. Or an idea might be to go on a double date and enjoy the evening over coffee, laughter, and a surprise gift to your favorite couple.

Snack to give: [Fudgy Chocolate Chunk Brownies](#)

The Savior. It doesn't hurt every now and then to have an inspirational date that includes those sacred things like communion, the scripture, and prayer. Honestly, it can make you feel more connected with your spouse than ever when these dates take place. Take communion together and remember the reason Jesus came – to die and take your place – so that you can live. Read the scriptures together of his birth and then pray together, giving thanks, praying for others to know Him, and rejoicing in God's love so great – that he gave his only son. This date can take place at home in front of the fireplace, or it can occur over a quiet dinner for two in a corner of a restaurant.

Snack to relish: [Mine cherry-pecan pies.](#)

Be inspired this holiday season as you and your date make time to get away, look around, listen, and join in with all the good that is to be enjoyed as we celebrate the most wonderful time of the year!

After 30 Years – Two Judgments – by Marcy Lytle

My husband and I are very different in many areas, and I suppose that's why we work well together. But these differences can also be a source of conflict.

But conflict produces patience, and patience produces character, and character produces hope...right?

Well, it's *supposed* to work like that.

When we were first married, there were two differences that just got under my skin, constantly. I was organized, disciplined and very efficient with time – and he was not. So when we tried to lead a small group or teach a lesson together I ended up belittling him and griping at him because I had my lesson completed, I organized my time, and I was ready to teach – while he was still doing whatever it was he was doing – which in my head was nothing.

Therefore, I decided we just couldn't work together because I couldn't tolerate his inefficiency.

Another source of conflict was prayer and bible study. I had in my head that he should pray with me and read the bible with me, thus strengthening and encouraging me. (It was all about me.) I think back now at how selfish and silly I was, but it really was something I yearned for, hoped for in my marriage, and desired. I needed him to be the “leader” spiritually, and that was my definition of one who leads his marriage and family in spiritual things.

Therefore, I decided he wasn't as close to God as I thought he was because he didn't do as I determined.

Those two judgments I placed on my husband sent me down a slippery path. I didn't want to work with him on a project, yet I did, because I wanted to be with him. But inevitably, I grew angry and frustrated because he wasn't performing up to my expectation. I also wanted to feel connected with him spiritually, but if he couldn't even pray regularly with me or read the scripture, I guess I'd have to do that myself – and just pray that one day he would be what I needed.

Even as I write this article, I cringe at how self-righteous I was; pointing the finger at the greatest gift God had given me – my husband. Somehow, I had a box that he was to fit inside of, and when he didn't, **I wanted to cajole, squeeze, and press him to fit – even if the box then had bulges and tears in its sides.**

Fast forward decades...and I've come to realize two things about those two things:

My way isn't perfect or the “right” way. My husband has gifts to share and use that I need to encourage and allow him to flex his muscles and demonstrate. When we serve together, I need to let my strengths shine, and open my eyes and see his strengths that are not mine – but ones that bring support to what we're doing. He's great at analogies, he loves to read aloud and he can vocalize and project greatly, and he is very much the encourager. He can bring that to the table where we serve, and then our meal will be complete.

My spiritual life is not the pattern, nor should it be. He sees God in the everyday parts of life that I miss because my mind is so deep in thought. He gives thanks and marvels at the sunset, a rock that glimmers in the sunlight or the beauty of a tree that's growing tall – and if I choose to stop and look with him, I am blessed as well. He prays, but he also has this incredible gift of faith that allows him to rest in his trust in God, whereas I fret in my constant petitions.

We are now working together a bit more, and we're connecting spiritually over a cute devotional book we're both reading, but I hope that I have grown to appreciate and love his qualities and gifts that look different than mine. And I also hope that I've realized that he is not my source of strength or hope. Christ is.

When we free our husbands to be and shine and flex the God-given muscles they have developed, we can find rest in our marriages. And if we still feel like he's lacking in some areas, it doesn't help to belittle or bemoan that fact. But most of all, we need to get the focus off of ourselves and what we need, off of his shortcomings and what he needs, and on to Him and what he's given us:

All good things to enjoy.

Romans 12:6

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – Something More – by Rachel Critz

Finally, the season of snow, caroling, and presents. (Well, we Texans appreciate any little snow we can get.)

So what does Christmas mean to *you*?

You might say it is the day you get the presents you have been waiting months for, but it is also the day we celebrate Jesus' birth.

I have to admit, receiving presents is a really awesome part of Christmas. However, I have to remember to keep my mind and heart in perspective about something more.

We are not horrible for getting excited to find amazing gifts under our Christmas trees, but I am reminding us to give a second thought about how much meaning this specific day holds.

Isaiah 9:6-7 says,

“For to us a child was born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Immanuel. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord almighty will accomplish this.”

The day that families come together, gifts are unwrapped and stockings are unraveled is the day we remember that the Son of God was born; the Son who saves the entire world from sin. The Immanuel who saved us from everything that is evil; the Christ who brought forth mercy into a world of injustice.

Do you know how God brought his only son to the world?

Matthew 1:18-25 tells us,

“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with a child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means “God with us.”) When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.”

I am telling you about this because every year before this one I have only looked forward to Christmas as a time when I receive the gifts I have been asking about for months. This

December I may be getting a new phone, and my only hope toward the 25th has been longing for the day I get my gift.

When I was at youth group a few weeks ago, I remember one of the girls saying, "Remember what Christmas is really about." Even though it may not have occurred to *her*, it truly struck *me* and I realized that I have been selfish.

I was taking a joyous day like Christmas for granted.

Never take things for granted or become selfish about something as little as a phone.

How do you feel about answering my first question?

Just remember as you open your wondrous and amazing presents, that it is Jesus' birthday, and a little "Happy birthday" to Him or telling him how much you love him through a prayer will go a long way in having a meaningful Christmas this year and something more than just gifts under the tree.

Bush Bean Blessings - The Gift by Tammy Morrison

Long, long ago, a baby was born.

He entered this world with a triumphant cry.

Forsaking the splendor of Heaven, He bestowed gifts to all who would receive them.

Love.

Forgiveness.

Grace.

Acceptance.

Redemption.

Eternity.

Unexpected by some.

To others, the fulfillment of a promise.

Soon and very soon, He will appear.

With a triumphant shout, He will return to proclaim His own.

Love.

Forgiveness.

Grace.

Acceptance.

Redemption.

Eternity.

Unexpected by some.

To others, the fulfillment of a promise.

The song of the redeemed.

Led by Jesus.

The greatest gift of all.

The glorious assurance from Jesus...

*"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again
and I will take you to Myself, so that where I am you may be also."*

John 14:3 - Amplified Bible

Saddle Up - Totally Reliant – by Melissa Critz

Ears perked and eyes eagerly intent on the backdoor, Elijah and Domingo wait rather impatiently for their daily dinner feeding. Both horses know exactly when it's feeding time. They come to the backyard and either stand and await the opening of the back door or Domingo will make his way actually on to the patio and to my bedroom's backdoor and look in at me.

Yes, I am coming.

Horses, as with most animals, are reliant on their owners. They need to have pretty much all things done for them, being that they didn't grow up in the wild. Daily or weekly grooming such as picking hooves and brushing the fur are a must, especially if shoes are worn. Feeding time can occur twice or even three times daily. Pellets and rich hay such as alfalfa cannot be left out for the horse to eat the appropriate amount.

The horse will eat and eat and eat. This can cause something potentially fatal called colic, a really bad stomachache. Therefore, horses, like other domesticated animals, need their owners to feed them daily, exercise them regularly, and provide the health care as needed. Today I started planning on when I would need to get my next large load of coastal hay and then also realized that I needed to get the paste for worming – we do this every two months to keep the parasites at bay since horses do eat off the ground, or truly anywhere outside.

As I gazed thoughtfully out the front window, I noticed both of my equines contentedly grazing in the front pasture, tails swishing slowly at invisible flies and eyes half-closed as their muzzles grabbed constantly at any blades of grass that could be scavenged. A thought formed in my head about how they have NO idea that I am in my home at this very moment planning on when to get their feed and worming paste. They absolutely trust that their feed will be where it should be and when. They 'know' that someone (usually always myself) will be there to feed them. They also 'know' that water will be in the troughs, filled to the brim, sparkling and fresh. They trust – they do not have to question. They are totally reliant.

I was also hearing a word from my Saddle Partner.

Be totally reliant.

Totally reliant on Him? Well of course, but as a horse is? Just 'knowing' that it will be there? How does this look? What does this really mean?

For me personally, this is a hard concept to really understand in the physical world as I haven't truly had someone in my life, for my whole life, that I can totally rely on such as parents or grandparents or aunts or uncles, lifelong friends, etc. My husband has modeled this for me thankfully for the past 25 years – for this I am grateful. But I do have to seek out His word to see what he means as I don't understand this completely in the natural. Having horses does help though in seeing some of this in a physical form.

These horses are totally reliant on me. I have to feed them, bathe them, nurture them, care for their health, love them, exercise them, enjoy them...everything. They expect

that...in a good way. They trust me. They trust completely that all is taken care of. In fact, they don't expect anything different.

So as a child of the Father, can I expect anything less?

He loves and cares for me even more than I can love and care for my horses.

I have been thinking on this picture and I do not think it means that we just sit and expect it all to be done for us – we do have to make an effort. But it's in the effort that we put forth for His kingdom that, in that, we trust that He is meeting all our needs. We are totally reliant on Him to meet those needs as He is our Father and He loves us beyond what we can comprehend. Yes, there are times of lack with job loss or health issues, but even in that and through that we must totally rely on Him. He desires good for us.

Jeremiah 29:11

'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'

Though our human minds may not understand what is going on around us and why, He calls us to trust and rely on Him:

Proverbs 3:5

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.

We may start to worry about something, whether it's a small thing such as getting to an appointment on time to a large thing like a sick loved one, but He calls us to rely on Him.

1 Peter 5:7

Casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

God is God, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, He is also our Father who loves his children and has known us since before time. He is everlasting. He is eternal. He is always.

Isaiah 26:4

Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.

Total Reliance also requires trust and faith. These are built by us knowing His Word and knowing Him. This is more than what a horse does, of course. But the picture of the horse and its total reliance on its master is just a beautiful picture that the Lord gave for my heart to understand a bit better.

This next passage just sums this up for me. Read and let it soak in.

Matthew 6:25-34

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how

God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

If you don't know Him as your Father, please contact me. I would love to share with you further on why I have chosen to be totally reliant on Him, My Lord and Father.

Be blessed.

Moving Forward - Being Great – by Pam Charro

I remember wanting to be great when I was a child: I wanted to be a famous rock singer, like Ann Wilson from the group Heart. I also wanted to speak at least seven languages and walk across the United States and Europe, just because it was there to be done. I have always known that I was destined for greatness, and I never doubted that it would happen one day.

I believe that God puts the desire for greatness in the heart of every child.

It's easy to dream big when nothing can really be done just yet, but once I got older, I began to realize that my time for greatness was at hand and I wasn't really any closer to achieving it. I was spending so much time working and living paycheck to paycheck that there didn't seem to be any time to pursue greatness.

Once I became a Christian, I realized that my desire to be famous wasn't focused on bringing glory to God, so I gave it up and stayed busy with sharing my faith and helping others to know the Lord.

Yet my dreams to be great remained inside of me.

About eight years ago, God whispered to me that I would be great. I was puzzled - why would he tell me that? I was only a newly remarried stay-at-home mom with multiple failures behind me; greatness didn't seem to even be remotely on the horizon. What was I supposed to be doing and how could I take the steps necessary to get closer to it? I often found myself panicky over how much of a "nobody" I felt myself to be and afraid my life would end before I ever accomplished what God had put me here to do.

It was only fairly recently that I heard something very important and soothing from God regarding his plan for my greatness. He reminded me of Jesus' words in Luke 9 when he told his followers, "Whoever is the least among you is the greatest."

He spoke to me again,

Throughout your life, you have experienced pain and disillusionment. You have turned your back on me and later returned to me. You have had many prayers answered and you have also failed miserably. Your life has not been easy or the dream you once thought it would be, but through it all, I have been with you and you have become more and more like me. I have put my Spirit in you and it is molding you as you persevere and mature. You no longer feel the need to scream in order to be heard because you know who you are much more today than you did when you were younger. You are a precious jewel with something precious to give, and it will be received by those for whom it is destined. You may never be famous, but in my mind you are perfectly set up for greatness.

Thank you, Lord, for reminding me of your definition of greatness:

To simply let your light shine out of me in any way you see fit.

And thank you that I can be confident that it is happening and will continue to happen as you and I walk together.

Real Stories – Grouchy Jesus – by Cindy Morgan

I'm sitting in a meeting and we're praying for a friend, and someone begins to pray aloud claiming,

"Healing is the children's bread."

At that moment I mentally check out, but that little seed flicks out of their mouth, and it lands in my heart.

I couldn't shake that little phrase from Matthew 15.

Oh, I believe God heals.

But more than that, I am convinced He loves.

And this passage seemed a little cold to me honestly....harsh and dismissive.

Matthew 15, beginning in verse 21....

Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon possessed." But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then she came and worshipped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she said, "Yes, Lord, and yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table." Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

So like my husband taught me, I jumped in to find the heart of Jesus in this text. I pulled out all my commentaries, read and digested each one. I just had a sense that this text wasn't mainly about healing. There was more, so much more. There had to be, because my Jesus is the walking perfection of love!

Where is that display of His splendor here?

The Holy Spirit began, as I read back through it slowly, to show me the progression of the sweet love story in the midst of the noise and what appears to be a grouchy Jesus!

Jesus draws her to Himself by first not responding to her.

What?

Note in verse 22, she refers to Him as "the Son of David," not the Son of God. He then in verse 24 tells her what His purpose is, and at that point we see her transition. She worships Him (she adores Him, puts Him in His rightful place on the throne of her heart) and cries out "Lord, help **me!**" Jesus then says to her that it isn't good to take the children's bread (salvation to the Jews) and throw it to the little dogs (the Gentiles).

Matthew Henry's Commentary says,

Those whom Christ intends most to honor, He humbles, to feel their own unworthiness. A proud, un-humbled heart could not have borne this; but she turned it into an argument to support her request. The state of this woman is an emblem of the state of a sinner, deeply conscious of the misery of his soul. The least of Christ is precious to a believer, even the very crumbs of the Bread of life. He cured her daughter. He spoke and it was done. From hence, let such that seek help from the Lord, and receive no gracious answer, learn to turn even their unworthiness and discouragements into pleas for mercy.

So what does this mean?

What does this have to do with love?

Well, for me, this is a beautiful picture of our loving Savior drawing this desperate, lost woman (a pagan) to Himself! He takes her from crying out to the Son of David, to worshipping Him and calling Him Lord. She was after healing deliverance for her daughter, but Jesus was after her. (Actually, he was after both!)

He wanted ***her!***

His loving kindness brought her to faith in Him. He reached through her "want" to supply her need. She needed Him. As a result of her believing in Him as *her* Lord, her daughter was healed. His loving kindness brought her to faith.

If we are convinced that He loves us, we can also move past our offense (not be offended in how He deals with us), and cry out to Him as Lord, and we will discover His prevailing love for us!

She came looking for healing and left knowing the Healer.

Jesus met her as a lost soul and she walked away His very own.

Jesus knew she had faith in His works but He provoked her to have faith in Him.

She wanted His hand but He gave her His heart.

Cindy Morgan is married to the love of her life (38 years.) She is "Nanna" to 5 beautiful grand babies...number 6 coming in April! She loves baking and praying. Cindy prays a lot while baking (and her family is grateful for that!) Her favorite story is where Jesus cooks fish and bread on the shore for Peter and John after the resurrection. Peter jumps from the boat, swims to shore and embraces his Lord.

Cindy wants to provoke women to do the same! She says,

"Jump out of bed....run to Him in prayer....and embrace His heart! He's waiting on the shore....waiting for you..."