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For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

May 2026



TIPS

The Dressing – Bracelets – by Marcy Lytle

I am an accessory kind of girl. I think accessories make the outfit, add pizzazz, and are so fun to choose from...if you have an array. When spring/summer roll around, and our sleeves are short, it's time to wear bracelets and wear them often.

THE BOLD:

Rivanna Jewelry is one of my favorite online shops to find the most gorgeous bracelets, ones you can purchase several of, because the prices are great. I have a red one, a green one, some neutral pieces...and love them all. They are the most perfect accessory for your arm! They're bold, you'll want to read what they're made of, and they are exquisite and really the best bracelets around.

THE DAINTY:

Have you heard of Rose Burkhardt Jewelry? I met her at a farmers market, but she sells on line, as well. The bracelets are well made, so dainty, come in different colors and guess what!? They have a magnetic closure, and...a tiny charm with a verse printed on it. Mine has Proverbs 3:5! Check out their bracelets. The perfect gift for yourself or someone else. I gave one to my daughter and DIL a couple years ago on Christmas. I wear mine stacked with other bracelets, or alone.

THE CLASSIC:

A leather cuff is always a bracelet I wear as a go-to look for summer. I like this wide and woven one, and I found it handmade as well. But there are lots on Amazon. However, if you can support your local artisans, visit the market and browse...or visit some Etsy shops and see if you can find one. There are thin ones and wider ones...both great for the season! Be sure to look for ones with snaps so that they're adjustable and comfortable for your arm.

THE WRAP:

A wrap bracelet – This white woven one wraps around and also snaps with a magnet. I like that it's white because it can layer with other pieces. It was also found at a booth in a market. Wrap bracelets are just chic and so special. This one is a leather piece, and it's just perfect. You'll want to reach for it again and again.

THE WHIMSICAL:

Oh my goodness, this bracelet is so fun. It was in a shop right next to an old theater in a small town in Virginia. It's part of a man's tie, and then there are buttons and jewels sewn on it. The large button serves as the closure. The bracelet has shades of red, so perfect for the summer season. Wear it with a white tee and jeans for a simple yet elevated look. I love this bracelet!

I recently realized I could store my bracelets on old cylinders, like cans of mousse or spray. They just slip on and look cute sitting on your bathroom counter.

Seven for You – That First Job – by the Panel

What was your first job? It's a good icebreaker question for gatherings and so interesting to hear the answers. What made someone pick that job and did they like it? We asked our panel of women to share their first jobs. I think it's a fun read. Hope you do, as well.

I was 15 when I went to work with my dad at Travis State School. I volunteered there every summer and on the holidays.

I was hired to work there at age 17. My first paid job. I was a lifeguard, Special Olympics coach, and recreational therapist. I was going to college at Texas State and worked three jobs to pay for my tuition and apartment.

I learned how to fully love someone, to care so much that you are willing to risk everything for them. So many names and faces of those I taught and cared for are still in my memory.

This first job became my lifelong career; it shaped me in ways that I am forever grateful for.

The image is of my mom and me. She worked there as well as my Dad. We always had a big Halloween festival for the clients who lived there. – Cathy

I started babysitting when I was nine years old but my first official job at a business was in a bowling alley. I was eleven and was hired to work in the nursery. I would walk to the bowling alley, and someone picked me up because it was nighttime. I loved this job because it made me feel like I was really helping the parents. I had been there about two months when the lady in charge quit abruptly. This bowling alley was in a rough area of a port town on the coast of Texas, and she didn't feel she was getting paid what she should. I understood because most days we would have about 25 kids and babies. It was so wild, but my paycheck made it worth it.

The night the lady over me quit, the bowling alley manager came in and told me I was now in charge! I was stunned because I was only eleven and we took kids up to nine years old. And also, because the parents didn't mind leaving their kids with me. I tried my best but I only lasted two weeks in this position. There were two nine-year-old boys that gave me such a hard time that I felt the paycheck wasn't worth it. So, even though I learned a lot, I ended up quitting my first official job. - Carole

My first job was at a women's clothing store in downtown Austin in the credit department, on the third floor of an old building. The store was called Yarings. The wall had about eight phones we answered from the other stores around town. There were card files where we wrote down purchases and determined if the buyer could use their credit or not. (I actually enjoyed saying no. What is wrong with me!?) It was a fun job, as I worked with a couple of friends there, too. And I enjoyed going downtown. That old building is still there and is part of the cool vibe in downtown Austin, and well...credit cards have replaced card files and wall phones! – Marc I I I I I loved Yarings!! That was my first credit card. Did Marcy have something to do with that? I worked across the street at Austin national Bank at the time, but that was not my first job.

My first job was at Lone Star Paper Company at the age of 15. They were a wholesale paper company that sold paper throughout Texas and my job was to file the paper invoices. I was a file

clerk. No computers back then! They would sell big rolls of beautiful quality gift wrap to stores like Joskey's and maybe even Yarings! I think that is the reason that to this day, I am kind of a gift wrap snob! – Anita

My first job was at an independent pizza joint named Peddler's Pizza in Kilgore, TX. It was built in an old gas station and was very popular. It offered buy 1 pizza, get 2 pizzas free on Monday nights, and I'm pretty sure the ENTIRE town ate pizza from Peddler's Pizza on Monday nights. It was non-stop busy for hours on end. I could do all of the jobs, but they preferred to keep me in the back because I tended not to deal with rude people very well! One customer called and was quite disrespectful over the phone about the quality of his pizza. I told him, "Sir, there are other pizza places in town."....it turned out to be a wealthy business owner in town and he was not happy with me. I never felt badly about my response though, because he was so rude. So, that relieved me of phone duty. I can still remember the smell of that raw pizza dough and remember that 7 oz of cheese goes on that pizza! (They only sold one size of pizza.) Also: I made \$4.35 an hour....that would've been in about 1991-92ish. It was a fun job, working with my friends and making pizzas to feed hungry people.

Cousin Moms – Going Back To What – by Kamrin and Charissa

Going back to analog, or getting rid of technology, etc. It's definitely a discussion we have because our kids are very computer-based even at school. Screens are in front of them a lot. It's a world of technology for everything. However, there is a balance and it looks different for each family.

If my daughter didn't have a phone or Ipad, then she'd be on the phone chatting with her friends. I like it because they chat and work on homework, and that community of friends is an outlet. She's not scrolling. The other day her friends weren't available, so she was building Legos. I feel like that's a good balance!

My boys are outside most of the time, as they love playing sports. So I don't feel like the phones are too much of an issue. I'm sure many disagree, and some of their friends still don't have cell phones. I'm grateful for the phones though, for the kids to have a connection with us when they're at all of their activities. The kids communicate with us a lot.

I will say that it is important to have disconnect times, not even from just technology but from the crazy world. Our kids are very active and enjoy trying new things and are in different activities. I love that they're active physically. Some may say we're too busy, but it's a good busy, in my opinion. We love that they try new things and make friends and build community. They have used their brains and gifts and creativity, how to be on a team, how to serve, how to pivot, so many things! I think that helps, and because they're involved in activities, they're not on technology.

As far as disconnecting from just the busyness, I try to keep the temperature on things. If we are all exhausted, what do we reset? We have a family night where we play board games. We love the Family Adventure book together. We sometimes leave our phones at home and get blizzards at DQ and laugh and joke, and we are silly. Those are moments where we disconnect from schedules and busyness.

Balance is knowing your kids and family, and paying attention to your own thermometer and red flags. We don't have to be like other families, or follow what social media says. It's not always easy. Some seasons are way harder than others, and some seasons we thrive...and then there's the mundane. Conversations with our kids are key. Sometimes I just sit in their rooms for a few minutes and ask how their day was.

It's not really about technology versus analog, but it's making sure that family is the center. I had an analog lifestyle growing up, and I still wanted to talk to friends and be busy. So every generation has things that take away family time. It's the heart of family first, being together, and communicating with Him and with each other. And by all means, we can ask for help. So that we can rest. And give ourselves grace.

Charissa

I have heard of the analog lifestyle and going back to the way things were before computers and internet...to a simpler time. "What were you like in the 90's?" is a question I see everywhere. When I was a kid, we were maybe considered the last generation of being offline and having an "analog" lifestyle.

Now we have so many electronics and the screen and social media, everything is at our fingertips. My husband and I do try to make sure our girls have time being off of their screens.

There's a healthy balance in helping kids have a healthy respect for technology, and then also a healthy look at what's real.

Even if our life is chaotic, sports (softball) has been a great bonding time for our family. My husband is assistant coach, we enjoy getting dirty, and love watching each other grow in a sport. I also grew up playing sports. It's a great pastime and hobby, and it creates time with teammates, exercising and it gives space from the screen. We focus on being outside.

Another thing we do is send our kids outside, to get involved in yardwork at home. Our oldest has a backpack blower. The girls help mow and pull weeds, and they feed the donkey and cats. We also have a Zipline outside. Getting sunshine and being creative is so important. They go outside before sitting down to watch TV.

One of my favorite times is the summer when we go camping to our favorite spot. It's a beautiful place and there is no cell service. We bring out all board games and card games, we tell stories, make s'mores and eat ice cream, and we ride our bikes!

I don't think I'd go back completely to an analog lifestyle, but I do love a healthy balance. Not shielding the kids, but showing the kids a balance by setting the example. Sometimes, I do scroll and have that habit instead of reading a book or having a conversation. However, we try to focus on being with each other.

Being involved in our church is also another way to grow in our family unit spiritually, in time together and with Him. It's not to "check off a box." But church is a place to be encouraged and share with others, and to thank God for another week and another day.

In the Kitchen – All the Bowls – by Marcy Lytle

The month of March was a blur, with vacation, and then the hospitalization of my husband, and so cooking at home was minimal, homemade dishes were few and far between. So instead of recipes this month, I thought it would be fun to share all the bowls I use and love for all sorts of foods...I hope you enjoy and are inspired to add to your collection this season!

Marshalls has lots of cool bowls, and I recently found these that say “Delish” in the bottom. They are perfect for making rice bowls, or any sort of bowl where you add a base and then top it with all the things like a protein, nuts, veggies, maybe a salad, some avocado, and more.

We visited a small town and they had some sort of bowl project, where folks designed and made bowls for sale. These two are heavy-duty and I love the artwork. They’re great for soup! Such cool and unique pieces I love having in my cabinet.

See this sunflower bowl? Oh my goodness, I fell in love with it and bought a couple for salads! Any sort of salad fits and looks pretty in this colorful bowl. They’re perfect for spring/summer picnics, don’t you think?

These tiny bowls were part of a set that went with a tray, but I find myself using them for charcuterie nights over and over again. They hold all of the little items you might want to serve like hummus, dips, olives, nuts, as many or as few as you want to sit out. They’re from Target.

I had to grab these pasta bowls. I mean... how cute are they with the pasta shapes painted on the bottom? Any time I serve pasta, we eat it in these bowls. It can be as simple as spaghetti, or the fanciest pasta I make with all the pesto and flavors. These bowls make me happy. Found them at Marshalls.

Neutral and shallow. I don’t know what these bowls were made for, but when you need sides to a plate, this is your choice. A shallow bowl that sort of looks like a plate. I love them for burgers and fries, or individual charcuterie plates, or other foods that tend to fall off the edges. They look pretty on all the colorful placemats too!

This last bowl was purchased as part of a grocery store promotion, so many years ago! I kept them because chili just works great in them! The color, the size, all make for a bowl of chili that just looks pretty while you eat it. Add a big spoon, some grated cheese, and a bandanna for a napkin!

I remember a time where I just had bowls that matched a set of dishes, and then some plastic options, too. But once I saw all the choices available, I knew I wanted all different bowls for all different occasions. So fun.

Bookstore - What Can I Do, Lord? Kade and Jade – by Carole Gilbert

Kade Kim is a young boy expressing his desire to help God in whatever way he can. As he writes to God in his notebook, he is accompanied by his faithful companion, Jade. Together they search for ways to help God while asking Him what they can do. Through their adventures, they find many possibilities without even leaving home.

Written in Kade's handwriting, this book journals his and Jade's travels while seeking ways to help. *What Can I Do, Lord? Kade and Jade* is the sixth book in the series Encouraging Scripture Books, for children. For inspiration, it uses my life verse, Matthew 6:33, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

I had a lot of fun being creative with the illustrations of this book. The pictures are imaginative from a child's perspective, like tending God's sheep in the snow, which is actually in the laundry room on the mound of white towels.

Writing poetry and drawing were childhood hobbies of mine. I never thought I'd be putting my hobbies into books as an adult, but God led me to do so. After my autobiography was published, I was asked to do a Career Day at an elementary school. My autobiography is not the kind of material you would discuss with children, so we did a children's book together. My six-year-old granddaughter helped with the illustrations and each group at the career day got to help edit the book. We had so much fun, and that gave me the idea of continuing to write for kids using scriptures from God's word for encouragement.

So, even though *What Can I Do, Lord? Kade and Jade* is a fun book with childhood adventures, its meaning of being ready to serve God is the important message that children will receive.

You can see more at the bookstore link at the top of this page, or on my website [The Bookstore – Unraveled Encouragement](#)

Tried and True - Last Month's Learning – by Marcy Lytle

Last month wasn't pleasant for me, it was horrendous and horrible, as I watched my husband react to a sudden illness out of the blue...and then now he's gone. I've been more than devastated. One thing I'm learning to increase, and that is my awareness and noting small things around me that bring joy, laughter, or learning. I hope you enjoy this month's list, as I enjoy writing it so much.

Have you tried the Siete Chips found at the grocery store? They're tortilla chips but a healthier version for us all – and the lime chips are the best!

On our last vacation together, we stepped inside the cutest bookstore/coffee shop ever and on the wall was a bowl full of free bookmarks. So cute, even in a kids' bedroom near their bookshelf!

Clean Eating Bowls is a great cookbook for making all sorts of dishes in my favorite form – a bowl meal! Try them. I've enjoyed so many.

A museum we visited had a whole section on the polio epidemic decades ago...and they had one of those iron lungs. Oh my gosh, have you seen one before? So glad these aren't used any more on children.

Pebble family art – I made one for us and it's hanging on my wall. But look at this one we saw...they're so easy to put together! Just pebbles, glue and a bit of creativity.

I found this patio beaded curtain at Earthbound Trading Company and just love it. It's so easy to hang and creates ambience that invites you to linger...

I had an olive oil bottle I wasn't using any more, and I then realized it would make a perfect vase! Even for faux flower stems made from fabric.

I was at the movies with a friend. She ordered nachos and I had a big bowl of popcorn. She shared her nachos and I placed a few on top of my popcorn bowl. The flavor of the nachos with the popcorn – it was delish!

If you're visiting a friend in the hospital, take a box of straws. That was our most used item when my husband was ill. We always lost the straws for the cups for him, and for us, so having a box was awesome.

When's the last time you took off your sandals and walked barefoot? I hadn't done it in a long time, and it felt good...try it.

Paint rocks with the kids, write words of hope, leave them on trails, and brighten someone's day. It's easy play and oh so good to bring light into this dark, dark world.

Never underestimate the power of a handwritten card. They are life, and such a treat, when someone is suffering in grief.

Did you know there is Modpodge glue available at Michaels for gluing puzzles for framing? It's easy to do and keeping a puzzle you love is easy art to then frame and hang.

Walking is the best physical therapy for a sad heart. The sun above, the trees to see beside you, and the birds to hear. We know this, but we often stay inside when we're sad. Outside is where the life is.



HOME

Practical Parenting – Creating Rituals – by Marcy Lytle

When our kids were small, one thing we did every week was sleep in the den together. We started this because the kids would often ask to sleep in our room, so we designated Friday nights as the night to sleep together as a family. I think rituals keep our kids grounded and feeling safe and secure. And sometimes, when life is busy it's easy to lose the beauty of the calm that comes from a routine that settles all the souls.

In the mornings:

- Have French Toast Friday, or Melon Mondays, or how about Taco Tuesdays for breakfast? Make that one day the same meal each week, one that everyone loves and looks forward to!
- Maybe a verse a day calendar sitting by the kids' bathroom sink would be a great encouragement for the kids to find each morning when a new day begins.
- A Facetime call to an aunt, a grandparent, or someone special could be a routine on one specific day a week. How special...
- A morning song as you lift or open their blinds. A wakeup song, or a foot rub, some sort of five minute routine to awaken the day and get a spring in your step, and theirs!
- When the kids arrive in the kitchen, how about a family dance? Put on a 3-minute song and everyone worship or move or jump, to kickstart the day with energy and hope.

In the evenings:

- An ice cream outing once a month, where the family heads to your nearest and favorite place for the cold stuff. It's May, and it's time for ice cream – let's scream!
- Sock fights are the best. The family gathers and each brings a pair of socks. Then the tossing begins as you throw the sock at each other and try to miss or catch them. This gets some energy out and ends in laughter.
- Prayer time for what ails them, what excites them and what's on their minds. Write it down and pray. Then wad up the paper and toss it in the trash, for no more worries. And lay down to rest.
- Outdoor star gazing is a fun thing to do once a week on a clear night. If you have a telescope, great. If not, just take out the blankets and gaze. Talk about God's great creation and love for us all.
- Leave a treat maybe once a week or month on the doorstep of a friend or neighbor. It can be homemade cookies, a gift card, or even popcorn and sodas in a bag. Sign your name...or not.

Just think of something your family loves to do, the things that excite and restore, and then make it a habit and a routine. Change it up from time to time, as needs and desires change...and enjoy life!

I Don't Do Teens – Loss and Love – by Marcy Lytle

The three teens (one is still a tween...) in our family lost their "Mister" last month and it was hard to watch and observe and wonder how they were processing it all. I saw their parents strain at the burden of caring for their children, while they themselves were grieving. And one always wonders if kids really get it, if they're really voicing what they feel, and how to navigate sad waters with them.

Here's what I noticed...

The oldest and the most sensitive reacted with more questions, questions even adults have, and we all prayed and trusted that we'd know what to say, how to say it, and leave the rest up to God. But the way he reacted warmed my heart ten times over. He wanted to sit near me. He even got up from the restaurant table and switched chairs to just sit by me. That was pure gold.

The middle one, 13 years old, didn't say much at all but just sat quietly. However, she asked if she could hang with me one evening. We ate, we watched a movie and even painted together. After, she asked if she could share a song with me. "Dancing in the Sky" by Zita. It was perfect, for her, and for me. It bonded us. We held each other while we listened. She hurt, and I hurt with her, and we felt the loss together.

The youngest, not quite a teen yet...but more of a tween...well he seemed the most aloof. But he was anything but. The next Sunday after he lost his Mister he wanted to go with me for the afternoon. He thought of indoor golf, buying a Fuggler at Walmart, and stopping for flavored tea on the way home. It was really something, being with him – which was pure joy. Right alongside the pain that ran deep in my heart as we had fun...without their Mister.

Later, I thanked them all in a group text and the youngest wrote back and said, "No problem, I loved it...thank you."

They each reacted in their own way that was true to their own personality. God made them that way. And they have been just what I needed.

If your teens are suffering a loss, a deep and sorrowful one, they may not cry...they may go right back to what they were doing...but they're processing. Let them process and react in time, as you love them and hold them and cry with them.

God has a way of taking care of all of us...in His way...the best way.

Homesteading – Rooted – by Leyanne Enterline

Thank you Lord for rain!

For some reason, I can do all the watering on a schedule for the right amount of time... but when it rains, watch out! Everything literally doubles in size and is so happy!

Praying for a good spring with lots more rain to come!

Everything is so green and beautiful! I've had rose bushes for two years and they have finally started to put out the most beautiful color! For a while, they were just pokey plants. I had no idea they took so long to bloom.

My blackberries are starting to flower, so we'll get some yummy berries soon if I can get to them before the deer and birds do. The aloe plants were not looking too happy after bringing them in from the freeze; but after a good rain, they are looking much better! I had some type of random melon or squash seed plant themselves in the middle of my yard and I can't wait to see what they are! I built a silly rock ring around the plants trying to protect them from my hubby mowing over them. He thinks it looks ridiculous, but I really want to try and see what produce pops up!

I love self-seed spreaders! It's so fun! I wonder how it happens, too. Was it the wind or a bird or an animal digging in my compost? How did the seeds get there?

I also planted potatoes in a random spot because they need a lot of room and they are getting so tall! Our soil is very rocky and I did not amend this area, so we'll see what happens. It was a cheap plant though, so I had to try. I had some potatoes already sprouting, so I cut them in half and dipped the cut part into rooting powder and planted with buds up in an area where a lot of birds like to come. And the soil was kind of softer there. Even if I don't get any potatoes, I think the plants are pretty, so that's okay!

Inside, I've taken lots of ivy cuttings and snake plants and they are trying to propagate. They are looking really good and getting roots. I'll put them in soil soon. These are the best because they only require once a week watering and don't need much sunlight!

If you don't have a green thumb, try ivy or a succulent. They're the easiest!

How fun is gardening...

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...a time to plant,
and a time to pluck up what is planted;”
Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 ESV

In Each Room – All the Pretty Porches – by Marcy Lytle

It's approaching the summer season, and it's time to make sure color and pretties are on your front porch. If your porch is small, or large, there are some fun things you can try to give your house curb appeal to you every time you drive up from being away. It's fun to smile as you walk in the door of your home.

A Chair – Your front porch needs to be inviting and homey, and a chair does the trick. Our porch is small, but we have room for a chair in the corner with a “Welcome” pillow, as well as a cute tomato pillow we found in the Dollar Spot in Target!

Flowers – Ideally, fresh flowers are the best (in my opinion.) However, don't let a drought stop you from adding color. We've been in a drought for a while, so we opted for a few faux flower bushes we found on Amazon. We often mix them in with the real and hardy plants, like rosemary.

Light – I love having a few lanterns on the porch that come on at dark, to illuminate the path to the front door. I just shop around at all different stores to find them. And...it's great to have your chair, lanterns and plant stand coordinate! I chose black.

Art – Now this is something new! We were shopping for a new wreath for the porch, and I just couldn't find one that I liked for the spring/summer season. As we went down the aisles at Hobby Lobby, my husband said, “What if we hang a piece of art on the brick wall instead of a wreath?” He said it needed to have the color of our front door in it.

He was right! We found this landscape that fit exactly on the wall space behind the chair. Oh my goodness, it's my favorite new thing for the porch!

Door mats X 2 – Layering a couple of mats by the front door is always fun and artistic. Get a bigger thinner one for the bottom layer, and a coordinating print or thicker one for the top. Play with texture and pattern!

Window candles – We have a tiny window above the front door with a ledge, where we like to sit a trio of flickering candles on a timer. Amazon has lots of choices. They are so pretty as the sun sets, and our door lights up in the evening.

Whatever you do to your front porch to jazz it up and make it pretty, remember:

- Light
- Color
- An eye catcher
- A Chair
- Decor

Stand out in the yard and view the entire scene, and move things around. Grab one focal piece (like the art) and decorate to match that. Browse sites on line for pretty porches for inspiration. And finally, snap a photo. Then look at it and see if it makes you smile...

Rooted in Love - In The Storm – by Kaelin Scott

Between the births of my two beautiful children, I had a miscarriage.

It was a painful day, both physically and emotionally, and it was also exhausting. I first went to the emergency room in the closest town to the ranch where we live, and they ended up sending me to the emergency room in a bigger city, which is about an hour and a half from our home. Because there was suspicion of an ectopic pregnancy, I had to stay in the hospital overnight, while my husband and daughter, who was not even two years old at the time, stayed in a hotel with just the few diapers we had in the car and the clothes they were wearing. They stayed with me as long as they could, but they eventually had to leave so they could rest.

I sat in that hospital bed all alone, weeping over the loss of my unborn child, listening to the cries of other babies who had just been born. Not understanding what had happened. Wondering if I'd done something wrong to cause this. Maybe it was punishment because I hadn't been excited enough to be pregnant again. Perhaps I hadn't taken good enough care of myself or done all the right things. Even though I knew none of that was true, those are the kinds of questions that run through your head in moments like that. Moments when things are falling apart and you don't know what to do and you just want someone to fix it.

It was one of the loneliest nights of my life.

But even in the midst of my sorrow and loneliness and pain, I wasn't really alone. God was there with me. I could feel His peace in my heart, even though it was shattered. Even though I was devastated, I knew this was somehow part of His bigger plan. I sensed the Holy Spirit surrounding me, holding me together, comforting me through my heartache. And that was the most beautiful thing.

Resting in the arms of my Savior was what got me through that night, and it's what got me through the sadness in the days to come. I remember sitting on my bathroom floor, listening to *Praise You In This Storm* by Casting Crowns, letting my tears fall as I lifted my heart to Jesus. Praying for strength, comfort, peace, and joy. Begging Him for healing from the pain.

And I knew He was there. He was listening. He saw every tear I cried, and He was weeping right along with me.

In the moments when life doesn't make sense – the moments when we're falling apart and everything is out of control – we are never alone. Circumstances may be out of our control, but God is still on the throne. He is still good. He loves us and has a plan for us. Even when it hurts and we don't understand, He is with us. He is holding us in His hands. His grace is sufficient for us, and His power is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

Trials in life will happen. Seasons of heartache will come. Those things are hard, but they are also beautiful in their own unique way, because they enable us to rely on our Savior. They bring us closer to Him and deepen our trust in Him. They allow us to see His goodness – how everything in this life pales in comparison.

He is Lord of all. Let Him be Lord of your heart when it's falling apart. He'll never leave you or forsake you. Let His grace be enough.

A Night to Remember – The Hobo Walk – by Marcy Lytle

A few years ago, we took the three older kids on a “hobo” walk where each kid carried a big stick with a bandanna tied on the end, full of treats for the fish in the stream, just down the street. I was telling 3 year old Camp about the excursion and he immediately ran to get his broom and a bandanna. He then started filling the bandanna with plastic fruit. It was so fun to watch.

Just a few days later we were with the family and decided to incorporate the hobo walk into our fun. What a great message for all of us!

A hobo was a train hopper long ago, and he carried his belongings across his shoulder as he went from town to town. Hobos were NOT tramps or transients. Hobos thrived on the train travel! And just like hobos, we too are travelers here on the earth...as this is not our final destination. Let's learn more:

Preparation: Find a long stick for each person participating, grab a bandanna (or a scarf) for each person, as well. If you want, purchase a small gift to wrap in the bandanna, or use a favorite toy they already have. Plan your hobo walk path in the backyard or at a nearby park.

What year and date were you born? (Let each one answer.) God placed you on the earth in this family with your parents and siblings, right where you're supposed to be...but only for a certain amount of time.

As you grow and get bigger, you'll walk this earth and do lots of things!

Where was your favorite spot we had fun as a family? (Let each one answer.) Where do we want to go next? (Ask for answers.)

During our lifetime, we will visit lots of places, towns, restaurants and homes...kind of like a hobo here on earth!

(Give each person their stick and bandannas.)

While we walk on this earth, we have lots of gifts we carry. Some of us are good at sports, others at music, still others at art, or all sorts of things. What is your gift that God has given you? (Point out or let them answer what their gifts are.)

We carry those gifts with us while we walk on this earth. Inside your bandanna is a gift!

But guess what? This earth is not the final destination for any of us. Just like hobos hopped trains and worked, we hop around the earth to different places carrying our gifts, as we live on the earth.

Let's practice the hobo walk. (Ask the kids to toss their sack over their shoulder and follow each other around the yard.) Play “Walk with Jesus” by Cory Flament if you can! It's a great walking song. Ask the kids to sort of dance too, as they walk their path.

When our life is over on earth, we no longer carry a stick (ask the kids to lay down their sticks) and we are so thankful for the gifts God gave us on earth (open the bandannas and discover the gifts.)

Have we known anyone that died and already finished their walk on earth? (Ask the kids to share...) It's sad to lose a loved one here on earth, but they've just finished their walk and their

on the train to see Jesus, so to speak. He takes them to their heavenly home, while we keep walking down here.

Hobos were willing to work. Are you willing to work for Jesus?

Hobos often temporarily lived near water sources. We live near the living water – Jesus – the giver of life!

Hobo is short for “homeward bound” and that’s what we are! Heaven is our final destination because of Jesus when our walk on earth is done.

Family Prayer;

Lord, thank you for the gifts you’ve given us to use for you here on earth. Help us to walk with Jesus, our Savior, and give thanks as we hop from place to place while living here, and preparing for there – heaven – to be with you. Bless us as we walk, hand in hand with you, everywhere we go. – Amen.



YOU

Healthy Habits – Those Long Stays – by Marcy Lytle

Well, since I now know what it's like to have a long stay in the hospital, and so many people told me "Take care of yourself," I thought I'd write about it, share what worked and what frustrated me, and how I tried somewhat to keep myself sane and healthy while sitting day and night by my husband's side. If you've ever had to do this, I'm sorry. And if you haven't, maybe you can help someone who has or is. It's so hard when one loses track of time and space...and just wants to go home.

Water – I kept water bottles constantly in front of me to drink all day long. It was easy to not drink, not eat, and not take care of myself. Water bottles front and center.

Blanket – It's cold in hospital rooms, often. Having my own blanket from home comforted me and felt cozy in a not-so-cozy sterile room. My niece even brought me a brand new blanket!

Straws – Sounds like a weird thing to have, but my daughter brought up a box of straws. I can't tell you how many times we needed one for the patient, or for our drinks, because straws always disappeared.

Breakfast items – This was the meal of the day that I needed every morning, but didn't want to Door Dash, didn't want to eat much, but I needed. My DIL made some muffins and left them with me, and a basket someone brought had fruit. Perfect.

Laptop – When I could not sleep or function or breathe, connecting to my people and my world on line was a life saver...honestly.

Music playlist – Music is healing, in every way. I often laid my phone by my husband's ear, and I even found myself dancing near his bed. Lyrics you've listened to before somehow come alive, when you need to hear the truth in song.

Cozy socks – I had a pair to wear every night. No one wants to walk on the hospital floor, and you certainly don't want to wear your shoes to sleep. Thick comfy socks, a pair a day, were the best.

Toiletry bag – I ended up throwing away this bag, after the hospital stay, because I grew weary and wanted a new one. But having my own toothbrush and familiar items from home kept me sane when I got dressed each morning.

Little pillow – I used this to raise my husband's head, handed it to him to hold when in pain, and though it was small (it was our car pillow) it was familiar and useful.

A Sweater – I changed out my sweater almost daily, because it took on the hospital smell and I needed fresh, daily. But a sweater is a must, just like that blanket. You'll wear it often. It will hug you when no one is there.

An open window – Raise those blinds or shades as high as they'll go. Some days, just the light coming in the window in the morning hours is what reminded me that He was there in his faithfulness, with every sunrise.

Inner Strength – Pleasing – by Michelle Wyatt

What are personal boundaries?

Have you ever heard of the phrase “no means no and yes means yes?” When it’s a struggle to establish healthy boundaries, it is not that simple. For example, have you ever said yes to a request and then immediately realized that you really wanted to say no?

There was a time when I was asked if I was up to staying longer to babysit. Instead of being honest and respecting my boundaries, I said, “Sure.” Ironically, by not wanting to disappoint, by saying yes, I actually did the child a disservice by not being the best babysitter I could be.

Saying yes out of wanting to please someone is letting fear take over.

Everyone is afraid of something at one time or another. It’s part of being human. We can’t always be confident. Life can shake us up sometimes and that’s okay. The important thing is to lean on a source of support to get back to honoring ourselves, loving ourselves, and providing self-care. I share this story because it’s taken me a long time to understand this to the degree that I do now. I am certainly not perfect at it, but when I do fall back into old patterns, it’s easier to recognize them and do so quickly, and then I have the tools to go back to healthier ways.

To take it a step further, by being honest and showing people our boundaries, we are modeling for others what that’s like. Why is that important? Not everyone grows up knowing what taking care of ourselves through setting healthy boundaries looks like. Instead, we become people pleasers – saying yes to make someone else happy. In my case and that of my sisters, we put so much pressure on ourselves to be perfect that it kept us from having fun.

When I was growing up, a lot of praise or criticism came from how my siblings and I performed. I mean *performed* in the literal sense as well as generally how we did in life. There are multiple memories from when I was child that have stuck with me.

When I was about seven years old, I was in a baton twirling competition. I froze and forgot my routine shortly after starting. My mom stood right in front of me, whispering, “Do something.” I barely moved. The judges gave me a third place trophy which was nice of them. I wish my mom had given me space. Maybe then I could have relaxed. I know that no one is perfect and deep down she was just excited and wanted to watch. Sometimes, adults do not know that they are instilling anxiety in their kids.

Another example happened when I was in sixth grade. I won second place in the spelling bee. Instead of being proud of me, my mom told me I could have spelled the word correctly if I had taken a breath. I immediately felt belittled, ashamed even. It was more

than just knowing I had let her down. The room caved in on me. I remember going back to class with my head down. When I got to my class, all the kids and teacher clapped for me. My head lifted up and I managed a little smile. It meant a lot to me. It wasn't the same, though, as wishing my mom had done the same thing.

Jumping to the future of me as a mom, I am now teaching my kids to respect the words yes and no, and I am being honest with them and teaching them to be honest with each other. I'm trying to model what developing healthy boundaries look like.

For those of you that can relate to any of this, seek support, ask questions of professionals, look up videos, but most importantly give yourself grace, a little bit of time, and say yes when you mean yes. And it's okay to say no when you need to say no.

If I can do it, so can you!

A Hopeful Heart - Held in the In-Between – by Christina Oberon

There are seasons in life where we find ourselves suspended between what was and what might be, held in a space that doesn't offer direction, only quiet unfolding.

Lately, I've come to know this space more intimately than I expected. It's where two realities seem to exist at once, where hope and uncertainty sit side by side without resolution. Where I stand at a crossroads, still holding a desire to grow my family and give my son a sibling, while also learning to support a body that is changing, quietly and persistently in the way that perimenopause changes things.

This space doesn't invite quick decisions. It doesn't hand you a next step or a timeline. It asks something harder: to stay. To stay present in a body that feels different. To stay open when possibilities feel murky. To stay grounded when the path ahead is anything but steady.

For a long time, I believed growth required movement, that clarity would come through action, and that peace would arrive once a decision had been made. But this season has undone that. Years of seeking answers to infertility, moving through surgeries and treatments and quiet hopes, only to meet disappointment. And now, here, there is no clear direction to move toward. There is only the invitation to be. Which can feel, honestly, like its own kind of loss.

There are moments when I want to rush ahead, to name what this season means, to understand what my body is doing, to land somewhere that feels certain. But I'm slowly accepting that not every season is meant to be resolved. Some are meant to be lived through and felt, even honored in their uncertainty.

This in-between is not empty. It is not wasted time. It is not a sign that something has gone wrong.

It is a place where my body is asking for care instead of pressure. Where expectations are loosening their grip. Where control is slowly, reluctantly, giving way to trust. And where I am reminded (sometimes gently, sometimes not) that I am not alone. Even when the answers don't come. Even when the future looks different than I once imagined, there is something steady beneath me. Something I can't always see, but can begin to feel when I allow myself to slow down enough to notice it.

I'm learning that it's okay to hold both things at once - to honor the hope for what could be, while tending to the reality of what is. To care for my body today without abandoning the desires I still carry. To live inside the tension without needing to resolve it.

This season isn't asking me to choose a direction yet. It's asking me to remain open. To listen more closely. To soften where I've been holding too tightly.

And to trust that even here in the questions, in the waiting, in the unknown, I am not lost.

I am held.

Life Right Now - ANTS! - By Jennifer Stephens

It started with one. Then another. Tiny black dots frantically scurrying across the kitchen window frame. There's another one! Nooooooo... Is it? Are they? Please, no. It is. Ugh. ANTS! What is it with these pesky things? Both disgusting and fascinating at the same time. Inside the house? Disgusting (don't worry, we sealed all entry points and haven't seen another one since...). But, outside (where they're SUPPOSED to be)? Fascinating.

Discovering an anthill can lead to hours (okay, "hours" is a stretch, maybe twenty minutes) watching, observing, and wondering about these miniscule creatures. They're quite busy. Without speaking a word, each one seems to know exactly what job they're meant to fulfill. Queens, foragers, nurses, soldiers, builders, cleaners. They use pheromones to signal the needs of their colony and use age and physical traits to determine specific roles. We never see an ant trying to do it all. An ant doesn't push the other ants out of the way, insisting on fulfilling everyone else's role. If a rock (or shoe – no, I didn't almost intentionally stomp on one) gets in their way, they don't stop – they just find a different path forward. Ants work together to build and maintain their community. Ants are never lazy.

We could learn a lesson from ants. When we recognize our strengths – and the strengths of others – we can each use our individual skills to successfully work together. How often do we try to do it all ourselves or attempt to do something that doesn't lean into our physical abilities and it leads to feelings of overwhelm and exhaustion? Ants are always in motion. They don't sit for hours mindlessly scrolling social media (Guilty!). They're hard workers! They don't expect beetles or slugs or any other insect to gather food for them – ants work all summer to gather enough food to store for winter. Sometimes we struggle trying to muster up the gumption to finish (or begin) the task at hand. But we need to take initiative. We shouldn't wait for somebody to prod us along. Ants don't wait. They go. They keep moving forward. They work as a team. No matter what obstacle stands in their way.

There are 12,400 species of ants throughout the world. Ants that work together. Ants that stay in motion. Ants that do what needs to be done to maintain their community without being asked or reminded. We could learn a lesson from the ants.

“Take a lesson from the ants, you lazybones. Learn from their ways and become wise! Though they have no prince or governor or ruler to make them work, they labor hard all summer, gathering food for the winter. But you, lazybones, how long will you sleep? When will you wake up?”
Proverbs 6:6-9



MARRIAGE

In Unison – Seventeen Years - by Terri Barnes

May is the Seventeenth Wedding Anniversary of Chris and my marriage.

Instead of reflecting on each year individually, I want to emphasize the significance of our Seventeenth Year together.

My intention is to present a list of 10 meaningful aspects that exemplify this milestone.

I believe this approach may offer encouragement & guidance to couples on their marital journey.

Year Seventeen for us

1. We appreciate the dedication we've built, moving from romantic feelings to a conscious commitment to love.
2. Endurance has been HUGE, to say the least - as we say, "This is mid-life, less about perfection, more about choosing."
3. Intentionally renewing intimacy, such as focusing on our friendship and passion in the throws of routine.
4. Our relationship being enriched and deepened by time and shared experience.
5. To say without question, we have matured in our covenant.
6. Became aware of having a solid, dependable foundation, even when facing powerful winds.
7. With our hands together in strength and steadiness, nothing can break our resolve.
8. A chosen team-based approach, us against our boys at times, *laughs.
9. When sometimes it takes a hard push to help the other move along.
10. We recognize who is observing our union, others, especially our two sons.

Could we discover greater true happiness in the coming years?

I say, yes, without a doubt.

It's a profound love we share; we will confidently step into the future...

We look forward to meaningful moments and ongoing personal growth.

We'll prepare to take on whatever comes our way—Believing nothing is beyond our reach!

So here to now...what a Celebration! Seventeen Years!

Date Night Fun – Boat Rides – by Marcy Lytle

Do you like to ride in boats? It's so fun, and there are so many choices in the month of May, for getting on a boat together to see and feel and be...under the big blue day sky...or the vast starry night sky.

Pedal Boats – I think they're hard to find these days, but if you can...find one and pedal. It will work your heart and you'll laugh as you realize how out of shape you both are! Or not... Plan this on a day when you can enjoy the breezes, and stop by for ice cream somewhere on the way home. A perfect day date.

Tour Boats – I love these, when we're traveling. Tour boats are usually large and take off across the water with a guide who points out the sights. They might be a bit costly, but they're worth it once in a while. Make it happen once this season.

Fishing Boats – We don't have one but have always thought it might be fun to! Going out on a boat to fish reminds me of the *Andy Griffith Show*, and didn't it look fun? If you don't have a fishing boat or access to one, then just fish on the bank and pack a picnic lunch. It will be fun. I promise.

Sailboats – Have you ever been sailing? This might be the adventure of your lifetime, just the two of you or with others as well, on a sailboat somewhere. If that's not available, then dress up as if you're going sailing and sit by the water somewhere and watch all the water sports others do, while sipping on cold drinks and taking bites of charcuterie.

Kayaks – Do you enjoy this activity? I do not. But so many do. Rent a kayak or a canoe, pick a pretty day, and go downstream with another couple. Don't go after a storm, as the water will be too swift (I know this...) But instead, wear cute hats that you purchased together, and get in and paddle with your oars...as you soar.

Boat rides are fun, and we often forget just how fun they can be together with him.

After 40 Years – The Miracle – by Marcy Lytle

I'm writing this beside my husband's bed, where he is literally fighting for his life. I've cried, I've sobbed, and my heart has ached beyond a capacity I thought was able. I'm praying for that kind of miracle where all of the wrong is made right, overnight. That's the miracle I want. I know all of our friends are praying for that, as well.

However, I know that I am going to get a miracle of the best kind from our Father. I once read a story of a rabbi who lost a son with illness, and he wondered one day – which is the greater miracle? Peace in the loss, or the healing of his son? And he concluded that the peace in the loss was the greater of the miracles.

I told God last night that I don't want that second and greater miracle. I want Jon to be well, now, and for good. And of course, I didn't know what we would get. But God is the ultimate giver by nature and he can't give anything but the best.

How can the best be all this pain and disease? Some say sickness is not of God, and there were times in my life where that phrase made me feel bad then, if I got sick. Or some have said that sickness is placed on us when we do wrong. Oh my goodness, that's hurtful to any ears. I have since come to believe with all my heart that suffering IS part of walking with God, because it's in that suffering that He is with us, in a space where we cannot know him without it.

Jesus suffered. He could have come and just - splat – fell over dead – if it was just about the death. But it was also about the suffering prior to the death, the kind that was brutal and unthinkable. And he did not escape it, but made a way through it with LIFE.

I'll never be able to explain the ways of God, but I am told to love them, in his Word. And I don't really love them, because of the lack of understanding, and because the pain I feel today is greater than the peace I know is available.

I'm to the end of myself because my body and mind is tired. I can't think or even process anything, except breathe and raise the blinds to let the light in, sit and cry to ease my broken heart. I didn't get the kind of miracle I wanted.

I cannot give thanks enough for friends and family that texted, sent food cards, messaged me and the ones who were, and are, on their knees in the early hours and late at night, for me. I can barely stand and I feel as though I'm in a fog that's getting thicker.

And I'm aware that it's a new day and He is faithful...just look at that sun.

God is with me and for me and all around me. There was a time I didn't know that. But I do know it. And that's the beginning of any kind of miracle that awaits...



ENCOURAGEMENT

A Day in the Life – What If, Revisited – by Bekah Holland

I usually try not to live in the land of “what ifs.”

Mostly because I already excel in overthinking and self-blame, so it’s not exactly a healthy place for me to wander off to. But every now and then, I find myself there anyway, questioning... well, just about everything.

Like what if I had worked harder in school and gotten my degree? Would my family have struggled the way we have these last few years?

But then I follow that thought a little further.

If I had, I wouldn’t have taken the job at that restaurant, in that city. I wouldn’t have ended up in the not-so-romantic Newark airport. I wouldn’t have met my husband. And that means I wouldn’t have been given the gift of my beautiful children.

And suddenly, that “what if” doesn’t feel so simple anymore.

Because our life, every messy, hard, beautiful part of it, has shaped me into who I am. So maybe the “right thing” isn’t always the same as the best thing. Or maybe when God said, “I know the plans I have for you,” He already knew I wouldn’t always follow what the world calls right... so He gently leads me toward what’s best instead.

Now, if I’m going to play the “what if” game, I try to play a different version too.

Not right away, of course. Usually I’ve already taken a deep dive into a gopher hole of doubt and regret first. I’m still a work in progress. But trying has to count for something, right?

So I shift.

And I think about the moments that stayed with me.

The ones where someone showed up for me without even realizing it. The ones that quietly changed the entire direction of my day.

Not big, flashy gestures. Just small, gentle things. Right when I needed them most.

A smile from a stranger.

A hug from a friend that lasted just a few seconds longer than usual.

A quick message that simply said, I see you. I love you. No reason. Just because.

I’ve been held together by someone else’s arms when I was falling apart. I’ve been met with kindness on days when I was doing everything I could just to keep it together. I’ve had people remind me that I matter when I couldn’t see anything good in myself.

Those moments didn’t fix everything.

But they gave me just enough.

Just enough to take the next step. Just enough to get through the rest of a really long day.

And sometimes, just enough is everything.

We all know a smile won't fix a broken heart. But it can soften the edges. A kind word won't make someone love themselves overnight, but it can remind them they're worth something when they've forgotten.

So don't underestimate the small things.

You don't have to change someone's whole life to make a difference. Sometimes just being a little bit of light in the middle of someone's darkness is enough.

Because the truth is, we have no idea what anyone else is carrying.

That small, ordinary thing you almost didn't do... might be the very thing that helps someone keep going.

So if you find yourself playing the "what if" game, try this instead:

What if I choose kindness every chance I get?

What if I hug my kids a little longer?

What if I reach for my husband's hand every chance I get?

What if I call my friends more?

What if I smile at a stranger just because?

And what if those small things... end up being the "just enough" we all need?

"Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear... all of which have the potential to turn a life around."

— Leo Buscaglia

Firmly Planted - Heavy Burdens – by Dina Cavazos

A tiny spider lives under the window sill next to my kitchen sink. I really don't mind a few harmless tiny spiders in the house—after all, they catch flies, gnats, and other unwanted, generally small, insects. Usually, I'm not even aware of them hiding under the sill or in the corner out of sight; but the June bug wriggling on its back, caught in a web, got my attention.

Along with my morning coffee I got a glimpse of the natural fight to survive: spider vs. bug. The June bug—gargantuan compared to the tiny black spider—was waving its legs as it tried to escape the sticky snare. The spider was trying to haul it up the three inches from the counter to wrap it in its web underneath the sill; but the June bug was too big and heavy for the strength of that tiny spider.

Intrigued, I watched for a while and then was even more fascinated as I realized the spider was actually strategizing. I saw her release some silk from her “silk-releaser”, moving down to attach it to the bug, then climb up to attach it to the sill to strengthen her net. She repeated this several times. I imagined her miniscule brain calculating her moves. How many silk threads would it take to encapsulate this juicy meal?

I was curious how this would turn out, but it was a slow process, so I set my phone in a position to record it and went on about my day. After some reading and prayer, I went out to the garden. Two hours later I checked progress: the June bug was only about ¼ inch above the counter. My phone's battery was low, so I stopped recording and left to do some errands. I would see just how successful this determined little spider was in lifting the weight of her prey when I got back.

On my way home I stopped to visit a friend who told me a story that I didn't think much about until later. She had a huge pecan tree removed from her yard. The flat stump left in the ground was at least three and a half feet across. Pecan wood is beautiful, used by craftsmen to make furniture, which the cutting crew intended to do. In order to have large pieces of lumber to work with, they cut the trunk into large sections. She described and showed me pictures of three men struggling to get this enormous tree trunk into a trailer to haul it off. They tried various methods to move it, pull it, push it, roll it, load it, and keep it from tipping the trailer. Finally, after several attempts and two or three hours, they managed to haul it away.

The reason I had visited this friend in the first place leads to one more story that I'll try to condense: About a year ago I went to an orthopedic doctor after months of shoulder pain. After an X-ray and some physical therapy that wasn't helpful, I quit PT and just gave it time. It was getting better on its own until my hand began to go numb at night. After a couple months my hand began to tingle and felt like it was on fire, waking me up and keeping me from sleep. After a week of this I was desperate for immediate relief. I stopped to ask if she had a recommendation because she's one of those people who usually has an answer. She suggested I wear a hand brace at night. To my great relief, it worked! Two days later I saw an acupuncturist who told me the nerve in my right arm was constricted in three places. It originated with my hurt shoulder as a result of moving or carrying heavy objects.

Guilty. I used to cut branches with a very long pruner. Trying to balance something twice my height over my head put a strain on my shoulder. Heavy objects? How about rocks, concrete stepping stones, and forty-pound sacks of birdseed? Well, one must do what one must do...

Leaving the acupuncturist appointment, my thoughts returned to the tiny spider and the men struggling with the log. Is God trying to tell me something...? Light shone on a common thread: each of us was trying to manage a heavy burden in some way. Jesus' words—*Come to me all who are heavy-laden and I will give you rest*—came to mind. I needed to hear that. News of wars, rumors of wars, famine, disasters, and evil are a push of a button away. It's easy to worry and fear what tomorrow may bring. While I must deal with physical burdens at times and learn how to manage without hurting myself, I don't need to carry the burden of the world on my shoulders. That is far heavier than rocks and birdseed and can have more serious, though often hidden, consequences such as depression, worry, fear, and negativity.

As God does, he reminded me of a truth that is impacting my life. I'm more mindful of what I do, of carrying heavy objects, and have found a wonderful helper for hire. I'm more aware of my limitations and try not to over-do. As I hear disturbing news, I remember the world is his burden to carry and I'm only responsible for my part. Even for that I can depend on Jesus, the one who offers to carry my burdens, for help.

Oh...and the spider—when I got home the June bug was still only ¼ inch of the way up, the spider had given up trying to carry that heavy burden and was busy feasting on it right where it was.

An Adage a Day - Just a Minute – by Carole Gilbert

I love it when I'm with my grands and get to take them places. I've gotten to take them to sports practice, pick them up from school, and just cart them all around town. We've gone to Chuck E Cheese, jump houses, and restaurants like Olive Garden. I always keep three car seats side by side in my car unless it's the older grands I have with me. And I love the singing, laughing, and conversations that take place!

When my son and daughter-in-law had their new baby recently, I took care of the other kids. We went to the hospital to see their new brother, out to eat, to birthday parties, and whatever was needed. The day I was leaving, I took the kids and met my son at the mechanic's shop. He needed to put his car in for minor repairs and then we were going to go to McDonald's for breakfast.

The kids and I pulled up and parked as my son drove into the shop out of sight. My young granddaughter started to become upset and was crying, "Daddy! Daddy!" I reassured her Daddy would be back to us in "just a minute," and to keep watching the doors for him to come out. I continued talking with her and her siblings trying to get her mind off of daddy when I heard one of my grandsons was counting; 1, 2, 3...11,12, 13...30, 31, 32...50, 51...

His older brother said to him, "That's not funny."

When he got to 60, he looked at me in the rear-view mirror and said, "No he's not, Gma."

I thought, "What?"

What was happening was that he counted the minute I had referred to and when his daddy wasn't out in "just a minute," he was playfully telling me so. I explained that it's just an old idiom and doesn't always mean literally just one minute.

This came from my grandson who recently turned seven. He seems to be the one of my twelve that could be the philosopher of the family. He apparently likes to think. I remember the age of seven. It was one of my favorites. That was the year I started to branch out more as a kid and started thinking things through for myself.

Kids can think so literally, sometimes. This makes for a funny concept if we think about some of the phrases, statements, and sentences we use.

Just a minute and I'll give you some examples.

Hit the hay.

Off the top of my head.

Snowed under.

The apple of my eye.

Under the weather.

Costs an arm and a leg.

Up in the air.

Break the ice.

Toot your own horn.

And one of my all-time favorites is, "Pulling your leg."

Children are so fun and smart. They can teach us if we let them. But somewhere along the way we lose our childlike beliefs and behaviors. I wonder if we think like a child, literally, when it comes to God's word. Should we? I believe we should. God meant His word to be taken like He stated it, not to be watered down or picked at. It's up to us to hear and obey.

Matthew 18:2-3, And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Unprepared – Purpose – by Marcy Lytle

I was not prepared to be an empty nester, and I actually despised that label. There was even an empty nester group at my church and I didn't want to go, because I didn't like the name. Imagine that!

Having your kids leave home hits parents differently, depending on lots of factors. I had friends that were ready to see their kids take flight and weren't really sad about it. So they said. But for me, and for lots of my friends, it was hard when my kids left the house and it was just Jon...and me. And what were we going to do now?

As a mom, even if we work outside the home, a lot of our purpose in life is in making sure our kids are fed, clothed, cared for and loved. And it takes every ounce of our fiber to be involved, in order to do this. So it makes sense that when they leave, to go to college, get married, or just move out on their own, we are left with the gaping hole in our hearts and huge questions that scream,

“What am I supposed to do now? What is my purpose?”

It hit me hard when my daughter moved out, especially when she texted a few days later and wrote, “I miss you, Mom.” I couldn't stand to look at her room, so we let our son who was 4 ½ years younger just take over her room...and his. Little did know that decision would come to bite me in the butt a few years later.

And it did. When my son got married, he took with him all the stuff from both bedrooms, and then we had two empty boxes to fill where there were once posters, kids' clothes, toys, bulletin boards, shoes strewn about, and more. I cried until I couldn't cry anymore.

I remember my husband and I went away for a weekend on our own and realized our job as a parent with kids at home was over. Yes, I had my paying job still, and I had friends and we had each other, but our kids were gone! I was sick to my stomach and could barely enjoy myself at all. Would that feeling ever subside?

One day when I was sitting alone and feeling totally without any purpose left in life, I was sharing this with my husband. He didn't say anything, but I could tell what his face was expressing and this was it – *I'm still here, aren't I? We have each other.*

This hit me like a ton of bricks. My purpose wasn't over, it was just shifting, and even going to be fun...without the kids. And besides that, the kids would still need me...I soon found out.

Crawling into bed in and crying as if I'd lost it all wasn't an option any more. And the truth is, my husband was still there and we began to see how we could make our own fun happen without the kids. I can imagine that single parents have to figure it out in a whole other way, and if you're one and you're reading this – share your story in the comments!

I fully believe God has a purpose for us in every season of life, especially when the kids are gone. Yes, it will hurt to not set the table for a crowd, you may cry buckets of tears because they grew up so fast, and you may want to decorate the house (that's what I did) in a new way – all your own. And that will be fun. It will hurt for a bit, but it will get easier, I promise.

A friend once described it like this. You'll ache and long to see their headlights as they visit your home, once they're gone. But you'll smile and fall into bed exhausted and happy when you see their tail lights as they head back to their place.

And your purpose? It changes, but it doesn't end. You'll have the opportunity to:

- Plan more date nights and picnics with him
- Explore that hobby you never had time for before
- Sit and cultivate that relationship with Him in worship, with all the noise gone
- Support these now adult children without intruding (that's a whole other topic)
- Go on trips whenever and wherever without littles crying, "Are we there yet?"
- Look forward to championing those kids you just raised, every single day...

Unearthly Thing - When Cleaning Falls Off Your Radar – by Angela Dolbear

I don't mind cleaning. It just slips my mind from time to time. But living with two big dogs and a cat can get pretty hairy if the vacuuming is neglected. Especially as the weather gets warmer, and my animal pals begin to shed their winter coats.

I am currently knee-deep in my publishing goals. My mind is consumed with editing my latest novel, writing agent-grabbing query letters, writing articles (like this one!), writing monthly devotions to publish online, starting a newsletter, and boosting my social media presence. Consequently, regular cleaning tasks get left in the dust, quite literally.

When furballs roll across the floor like tiny indoor tumbleweeds, guilt sets in. I love my beautiful mid-century home God gave me seven years ago, and He allowed me to decorate it lovingly in a way befitting its era. I feel terrible for neglecting the upkeep of the pristine original wood floors from 1959.

I make plans to put cleaning tasks on my "To Do" list, but even that doesn't happen. I watch quick "How to Clean Your Whole House in 5 Minutes or Less" videos while rousing my morning brain with coffee. While the content is inspiring, it doesn't actually help my dilemma.

So what's a busy author to do? Neglect the forward momentum of my writing life, I prayed to cultivate for so long?

Like everything else I need help learning how to do, I went to the web for my research.

There were pages and link after link on the topic of neglected house cleaning. My overwhelmedness only grew.

Time to bring in the big guns. I stopped and prayed, like I should have done to begin with. Here are a few things the Master Cleaner of my Soul spoke gently to my heart:

- 1. Begin with Gratitude.** I'm grateful for my beautiful home every day, but I don't remember to be grateful for the physical ability to clean it. There were several years where the chronic illness I live with (scleroderma) weakened me and stole all my energy. Taking a shower was a major victory. The vibrations from running a vacuum made my hands ache for hours. Now, I feel I can go pull out my fantastic cordless vacuum and electric mop and clean my wood floors until they shine. Praise God! Now I'm starting to feel inspired to clean...
- 2. Be Mindful to Care for Yourself.** I recently read a blog post from an experienced writer about the importance of not writing. She talked about how sitting for hours slaving over her keyboard to meet a major deadline eventually caused an injury to her ribcage that took months of physical therapy to recuperate from, and caused her to miss that deadline. The physical therapist advised her against sitting for more than an hour and to get up and move around. For me, that could entail cleaning!
- 3. Recognize Where I Have Victory and Expand on It.** I don't know when it started, but I set Mondays for laundry, paying bills, and grocery shopping (which nowadays is placing a Shipt delivery order with Target or Publix). Every morning, after prayer, devotion, and breakfast, I clean the kitchen and pick up the living and dining areas of my home, before

I get ready for the day. It just works for me and my household, so I'm grateful for it. What else can I set up? "Floors Friday"? Or "Tub and Toilets Tuesday?"

Dividing house cleaning into specific tasks in their own time slot seems doable and less daunting. I realized I could use the time after a long writing session to do 20-30 minutes of cleaning, which would be good for my health and my home.

Additionally, I've noticed that I often get writing ideas and plot problem breakthroughs when I'm not sitting at my computer trying to wrestle the answers out. Changing laundry loads is particularly good for this, so much so that I'm contemplating keeping a notepad and pen next to my dryer.

I hope this helps you in your own pursuits, whatever they may be. Please let me know in the comments below and share any tips or tricks that work for you.

Blessings to you!

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, as well as many short stories. She just completed the fourth book in The Garden Tales series, "The Mid-Century Breakfast Club," and is searching for representation for it. Her novels are available on [Amazon](#) in paperback, Kindle, and audiobook formats. Angela writes real, relatable, and reverent fiction. She loves reading, writing prose, and writing and recording music in her studio in Nashville, TN—listen to her latest album [STORMS](#) on your favorite music streaming service. Please drop by and sign up for news, read the latest stories, and hear new original music at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>.

Moving Forward – Simply Near – by Pam Charro

So many of my loved ones are going through awful trials right now, and it just breaks my heart. I love these dear people so. If only my caring and concern were enough to fix everything! I feel so helpless sometimes.

It's normal to not know what to say or do and to feel ineffective when disaster strikes a loved one. But simply being near can be incredibly valuable. One of my fondest memories while going through an especially hard trial of my own was when a sweet friend said, "I don't know what to say except that I stand with you. You are not alone, and God is also here, somehow bringing good out of this." So much that she could have said might have made things worse -- and many of my well-meaning friends have said such things -- but her simple statement of being there with me was perfect.

I think about the story of Job and the input his three friends offered when he was his most vulnerable. I'm sure that they had good intentions, at least, initially. But it's so easy to get into hot water when we try to explain why something is happening; and it simply isn't our job. In the end, God was angry with Job's friends and only forgave them for how they misrepresented him when Job obediently prayed for their forgiveness. When a friend is already down, explaining that they must somehow deserve it is usually the last thing they need. Additionally, that simply isn't necessarily the way God works. Each person's journey with God is a sacred one, and we are wise to acknowledge that mystery. If something difficult or challenging must be said, pray it will be said in love, and at the proper time. Possibly even by someone else.

I also think of the shortest complete sentence in the Bible: *Jesus wept*. It doesn't specify the exact reason, but I don't think those were frustrated or angry tears at his friends' lack of faith. He loved his friends, and I believe Jesus was genuinely grieved at the pain they were experiencing. He couldn't hold back how it broke his heart. When we're too busy feeling for others that a lesson is the farthest thing from our minds, that is often when we're the most like Jesus.

I can't explain everything. I usually can't fix anything. But I can listen and hug and cry and pray and be there, at least to some degree, when my friends and family are hurting. I don't need to be smart or super-spiritual or above it all. I just need to be near.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – All the Carts – by Marcy Lytle

She's pushing the cart with the food trays, smiling as she arrives at the door with the tray of selections we've chosen for him, that he probably won't eat.

She shows up with her cart and a sweeper, as she silently and so efficiently cleans our room and give us back some semblance of a clean space and nice quarters, while our stay lingers and now enters the second week.

She's our night nurse and relays to me that she's on the Granny's Basketball League where she lives, and went to Nationals last year!

He's the best tech for our room and makes Jon laugh as he takes care of business, the business of bringing water and ice and sheets and warm blankets.

He's the hero that stood by Jon's bed when the catheter caused issues and he saved the day, and maybe the life, of Jon that day. And that nurse was only with us that one time. An angel? Maybe...

He's the son that shows up every day to hold his dad, pat his head, help him move and get comfortable, all with words of kindness and a face of love.

She's the daughter who stays late and sits nearby, plays music, and sings hope to her dad's ears.

And I'm the wife sitting by the window quietly sobbing as we wait for forward movement and answers, so I can have my husband at home with me, and out of this twilight zone experience.

I observe all of these folks and more that show up to work to care for the sick, because it's their job, what they love to do, or it's for whom they love to do it. It's just their daily routine today. The ones who get paid for showing up are here every day, as the ones in the beds are different each time. Some days, just their smiles are enough to help the sick one make it through another hour.

I observe my kids and their love for their dad and me as we're broken and fragile and feel helpless and toy with hopelessness. We lean in hard, although it feels awkward, because aren't they the ones who've always leaned on us?

I went to the room and sat again by the window, but this time to write out my thoughts here in this story. Multiple people across many miles are praying for us. We've been one of those praying for others multiple times. Multiple friends have texted right when we needed it, or gotten up at 4am to pray, right when Jon was suffering the worst. Multiple friends I've never met in person are messaging me on Instagram to say they're praying hard.

Lots of people from lots of experiences, but the one common thread is that we've all had suffering in our lives. We know what it's like to lose and to hurt and to be disappointed and to grieve days on end. And because of that suffering, we reach out to others in their suffering. Even my friends who didn't get their answers and their loved one died, they too are believing and asking for a miracle for us.

What kind of people do that? What kind of love is that? I guess it's the kind Jesus talked about when he said no greater love has a man than this – to lay down his life for a friend. And he showed us the pattern, and so many have chosen to follow.

I'm shedding tears right now, not because of my pain, but because of the reaching of others that I see and I receive. I'm the one in pain right now and I don't know how this story ends. And that pains me. I like to know the plan. But the prayers of friends, well they surround me. And it feels good, like one of those heated blankets we keep asking for, for Jon.

I read this in a devotional this morning,

"Only by turning to Jesus was I given peace. I wasn't given answers to all my questions, but I was given His presence, His love, His Word, and His comfort. And that has been enough to sustain me."

I must sign off now, as I hear the wheels of another cart arriving with something we need...

FRESH THYME – Second Guessing – by Marcy Lytle

On our last vacation, we had a lot of fun things planned on our itinerary and some great restaurants picked out. The first restaurant where we ate was really our favorite the whole time. The food was delicious! We had also purchased tickets for a show in another little town nearby. So we were all excited about all the things...

A few days into the trip we visited a store where the lady there had quite the opinions about things to do and food to taste in the area. We told her how we loved Home Slice, where the pinto beans and cornbread were divine. She sneered and said how awful that place was. She didn't like one bit. "Really?" I queried. She just shook her head and continued to talk...and I continued to share more places we were going.

"We got tickets to a cool show in Bristol this weekend," I said. Then she proceeded to tell me how awful that town was and she'd never go to anything there. And on she went, commenting on our schedule and places we'd chosen. Totally a Negative Nancy, for sure.

I left that store a little bit aggravated (well, maybe a lot) at this woman who dared to damper our fun!

I started second guessing that restaurant. Was there something I missed that was awry? I concluded that no, I hadn't missed a thing. She just had a bad first experience and we had a great one! I can still recall those beans!

We went on to the show that Saturday and even to dinner beforehand, and I was looking around to see any signs of what she mentioned as being a "less desirable" place to go on a date night. The food where we ate was delicious once again (she also threw shade on that restaurant), and the theater and show were so fun. An absolutely perfect date night in a cute town!

I thought about that lady after the show and how I almost let her ruin our trip's fun. I realized that words said to us by others to cause us to second guess our plans that look good to us are not worth listening to. And she shouldn't have been spreading all that negativity onto tourists.

Sure, locals know a thing or two about their space, but tourists like you and I – well we like to explore and discover on our own. And sometimes, what we love isn't what others would love anyway! So here's my takeaway from that conversation with Nancy (whatever her name was):

- I listened a bit too long. I should have walked away sooner.
- I'm glad I went with my instincts and had a good time.
- Folks that poo-poo another person's entire agenda have issues.

That lady was a stranger to me. I could tell right away that she thought it was her way or the highway. And I almost let her make me second guess a good time, and good food that I had already eaten and enjoyed!

Words are powerful, and some need to be listened to, but others discarded with the trash. And it's wise to know what's what.

Those beans were darn good. That play was delightful. And that city was not frightful.

Finally, I hope that lady finds a way to enjoy her city, the places she goes, and that she encourages those newcomers she meets. After all, she owned the store we walked into...where we didn't buy a thing.

FRESH THYME – Three Stories – by Marcy Lytle

In one day, on our recent vacation, we met three different women - one while sitting on a patio for lunch in the really cute town of Jonesborough, Tennessee, one in a tiny boutique, and one in a coffee shop. These women were so incredible, we had to share their stories, because they impacted us so much.

On the patio, right next to our table, were two women both widowed. One's husband passed 10 years ago, and the other had just lost her husband last year. The first woman befriended the second and they were enjoying lunch. The older woman was full of life, extremely friendly, and I found myself looking her way more than once. In fact, both women were friendly and struck up a conversation with us before we left. I told them about my sister losing her husband and how devastating it was to all of us (having no idea I'd lose my husband a few short weeks later.) The older woman said this, with a smile,

"Grief is a long timeline that starts here and ends way over here...in gratitude. And that's where I am, after 10 years."

Gratitude. There was that word that's been in my heart and mind for years now since I took one year and wrote down three thankful things daily...which was hard.

The second woman was a shopper in a boutique, an older woman as well, and she was dressed to the nines. Her brooch caught my eye. It was a gold airplane. She smiled and I commented on her brooch.

"I bet that pin has a story. Does it?"

To my surprise, she had been a flight attendant for 60 years and was still working! She was 83 years old, wore the pin with pride, and looked as put together as any well-dressed woman around. Wow, I was shocked at her answer and completely admired this lady and her tenacity to live and thrive and keep on keeping on!

The third woman was a young lady in a coffee shop, where we stopped to get a drink. There was a board on the wall with lots of tags and a pen, and on each tag was written a particular type of person: veteran, young mom, policeman, etc. and a dollar amount anywhere from \$10-\$20. I asked the young lady at the register what that board was all about. She said,

"It's a *pay it forward* board where folks can buy a coffee or donate money for a particular person in town. So when a young mom, veteran or any other person on a tag enters our shop, they can use the tag for a free coffee."

Wow. What a cool board. She then told us that very few people use the tags because they hate to take something free! I thought about it and decided that I wanted to pay for and hang a tag for the "widow" who might walk inside. I had just talked to the first ladies mentioned above and hoped maybe one of them would come in the shop and be blessed with a tag just for them.

Fast forward one month and I'm the widow (I can barely type the word), and I find it interesting that these women moved me and stirred me and blessed me and encouraged me. They all represented something that's not easily found in this world. Grace to move from grief to gratitude, and tell about it. Ability to thrive as an older woman and beam with pride at your purpose and vocation. And an opportunity to pay it forward to someone else who might need a hand up.

Aren't those stories incredible? We always prayed for encounters on our trips, and we always had them. I just didn't know this time...we'd live out what we'd been offered...in a moment of time.