A BUNDLE OF

THYME

January 2015

TIPS

The Dressing - Winter Wonder – by Marcy Lytle

Sometimes the wonder and beauty of Christmas is so overwhelming and breathtaking that after it's all over the "wonder" is gone. It's gone from our homes, our wardrobe, and our yards, because the cold winds are blowing and everything is dead! But we can bring back the wonder in all of these places to brighten up the dreary days of winter ahead. We don't have to wait until spring to experience the newness. We can start now!

In your bedroom – One way you can switch up and add a bit of wonder to your bedroom is by changing out your lampshade or lamp base. What about this cute giraffe lamp base? There are also owls and birds, all bringing nature into your bedroom – a trend that's full of wonder! Start with something new and add one thing each month this year!

In your family room – Is there a space on a shelf or table that just begs for a piece that's useful, yet conversational? How about this vintage retro clock in red? Check it out at World Market. It might be just the piece to add a pop of color to that otherwise monochromatic shelf you've got staring you in the face each day.

In your yard – If you don't have a fire pit, now's the time to buy one! This leaf-design pit is affordable, a best seller, and a great place to gather on cold nights for some hot apple cider and roasting marshmallows with your family and friends. What a cute, fun addition to your patio!

In your closet – Didn't get just what you wanted for Christmas? You'll love this pretty long, hooded cardigan to warm up your days this month, from Maurice's. It's got cute front pockets to hold your phone, and it's great for layering on those cold days, along with your scarf and beanie as you head out for after-Christmas sales!

In your kitchen – This super cute menu chalkboard from Pier One can brighten up any kitchen and add to the wonder of "What's for Dinner?" as your family reads what you've displayed for the evening meal, and anticipate the tastes, the wonder, and the beauty of the dinner meal together around the table. You don't have to cook every night (of course not!) but when you do, why not write your menu here for all to see?

In your jewelry – Maybe you got a new sweater or top for Christmas and it needs some adornment! Add to your winter jewelry collection with this pretty geometric big necklace from Langford Market! It will bring a bit of wonder to any outfit really, because it's simply gold and elegant, and fits up close to your neckline to make your outfit shine!

In your bathroom – Change out your drab soap dispensers in favor of these handpainted ones from World Market, with matching trays! Add coordinating hand towels and you've got a new look for the new year!

January doesn't have to be dull, when you're stuck indoors with the heater running full force, while you sniffle and cough. Look around you. Embrace the winter! And add some wonder to your space that will bring a sparkle to your eye, even after the Christmas light twinkles are gone…

Seven For You - Buy it Now

Those after-Christmas sales. Maybe you're tired of shopping, but if you're not and you wonder what it is you need to buy now…so that you'll surprise yourself by having it next year…here's our list! Spend some time in the first part of this month at the malls, in the drug stores, and at your local discount stores, scouring the shelves for something useful and practical, and okay, something fun, to add to your boxes before you store everything away.

1. **The tree stuff.** Get your tree bag now so you'll have it next year when it's time to put up your real tree, so you can lay it at the base. Get a few new ornaments on clearance. And buy those lights to replace your old ones. And by all means, label what you buy, and toss the things that don't work anymore.
2. **Gift wrap, bags, and paper**. You'll save a wad of money by buying these things now. It's fun to coordinate colors to match your décor in your house, so that all of your gifts look so pretty lined up under the tree. Remember to get all sizes of bags, and pretty paper. For example, if you opt for snowflakes and snowmen on your bags, go for the same on your paper!
3. **Hostess gifts.** These things break your bank when you have to run out to get them just before a party. So why not buy them now while they're half off or if you're lucky, 75% off? Maybe there's a pretty dip dish with a server that you can pick up for one hostess, or a set of Christmas dish towels for another. Label these and don't forget to use them next year when you're heading out to visit with friends.
4. **Stocking presents**. Again, when you wait until next winter to start buying these, you'll spend twice as much as you will if you buy them now! Obviously, don't buy food items, but other items are on sale, so grab them! To-do refrigerator magnet lists, reindeer pens, Santa cups for the kids, fun cozy socks, etc. – it's all there at 50% off or more!
5. **Yard décor**. We decorate our yard with metal Christmas stakes, and we love going on a scavenger hunt for these after the holidays. We've found them in a corner, well into February, and they're discounted so nicely! You'll be so pleased when you purchase these now, and discover them next December as you uncover them to decorate.
6. **Food sets**. We're not talking about buying these now and saving them until next December – no way. That would be so bad. However, these are great for January parties, get-togethers with friends, or just for fun on cozy winter nights! Summer sausage sets can be used for picnics in front of the fire. Cookies= sets can be enjoyed one evening when everyone is hungry for sweets. And those cans of nuts? Mix them with raisins and other treats for your own trail mix for road trips.
7. **Pajamas.** It's so fun to present the kiddos with Christmas pajamas. If you can guess their size next winter, or even if you buy them for the adults, get them now. There are so many choices, from footsie ones, to two-piece flannel sets, to long nightgowns, and they can be expensive and add up! But if you watch, they just might end up on a 70% off shelf, and that is the time to grab and go.

What do *you* buy after Christmas? One more thing I always buy after the holidays is a Christmas CD on sale. I look so forward to opening it next fall as I listen to the melodies. I know there's usually no money left to spend after the holidays, but if you've got just a bit of that

Christmas bonus or a little bit of savings you can use now, you'll end up saving tens, maybe hundreds of dollars, come December 2015.

Is it already 2015? Oh my, I need to get to the store!

Cheer up Your Gloomy January!

January can be a sad month. The excitement of Christmas is over and it's cold outside. Never fear your clothes can bring some cheer! Bright and colorful outfits can bring you some joy!

I got this dress for Christmas. The pattern is jaggedy and the colors are like a rainbow. I like it! Add matching colored leggings, and this outfit it sure to bring you happiness.

My Little Pony is my favorite show! I thought if I bought these amazing pony pants and added a cute top – BOOM! – it would be fantastic spectacular! Who wouldn't be happy wearing ponies? Ponies are for everyone!

This is my cute cousin Zoelle Sophia Karnes. She also happens to be wearing a jaggedy print dress and leggings. She added a fluffy flower. I am sort of jealous of her outfit.

Just looking at this cuteness can brighten up your January! My little cousin Hayden is so adorable she looks cute in almost anything! She is wearing a flower top. There are so many bright colorful flowers, wearing them makes it almost feel like spring!

Who's got the blues? Not you!

Because now you know how to cheer up your January by wearing bright and colorful clothes!

THE FEARLESS KITCHEN - Not Your Average Vegetable by Christina Vetter

Happy New Year, THYME readers!

As usual, now that the holidays are over, many of us are beginning to regret that never ending supply of holiday treats we've kept within arm's reach the past three months. From the first piece of Halloween candy, to the last glass of champagne ringing in the New Year; our clothes seemed to have grown progressively tighter as the year drew to a close. It's no surprise that most people welcome the New Year with resolutions of weight loss and healthy eating. After all, bathing suit season is a mere five months away. Consequently, vegetable sales soar this month as everyone seems to jump on board the health train.

I suppose I'm one of the lucky ones, because I'd be happy eating the same frozen vegetables all day, but I know many people vow to never taste another bag of frozen peas and carrot medley unless their life depends on it. I get it. Vegetables have a reputation of being a little boring. After all, were supposed to eat five servings a day. In one year, that's 1,825 servings of vegetables! It takes some serious creativity to not get in a canned corn rut.

Have no fear, because this month I'm excited to share some amazingly tasty vegetable recipes that won't have you calling the dog to secretly finish your plate. As with all food, any time you find yourself stuck in a rut, you've got to try something new! One of the great things about vegetables is their versatility. You can make soup out of pureed asparagus, broccoli, carrots, or squash (see butternut squash recipe below). Don't be afraid of trying an old favorite in a new way. Mix a variety of veggies to form a casserole like Ratatouille or with pasta for a super yummy Pasta Primavera (see below). Also, never be afraid to try something completely new. Next time you're in the store, try some of the vegetables that may look strange to you. My advice, start with those cute baby cabbages and try my Seared Brussels Sprouts (recipe below). They're easy and shamelessly addictive.

No matter your taste, I promise there's vegetable dishes out there that can please even the pickiest of appetites. Keep searching for delicious ways to pack in those veggies, because there are endless options out there. I want to remind you, especially this month, to always be fearless in your cooking! I hope you have a very happy start to a wonderful new year, and as always,

Happy Eating!

Pasta Primavera **Difficulty:**
Serves 4
Recipe Courtesy: Giada de Laurentiis

This pasta primavera is AMAZING! It's one of the very few recipes that I actually follow the directions to the T. This is a great "sauceless" pasta dish that tastes wonderful! I know you'll enjoy it!

Ingredients:
3 carrots, peeled
1 large zucchini
2 yellow summer squash
1 yellow bell pepper
1 red bell pepper
1 onion, thinly sliced
¼ C olive oil
1 Tbsp dried Italian herbs or herbes de Provence
2 tsp kosher salt, plus more to taste
2 tsp black pepper, plus more to taste
1 pound Farfalle pasta (bow-ties)
15 cherry tomatoes, halved
¾ C shredded Parmesan cheese

Directions:
-Preheat oven to 450 F.
-Cut carrots, zucchini, bell peppers, and squash into thin 2 inch long strips. On a large, heavy baking sheet, toss vegetable strips, onion, oil, herbs, and 2 tsp each of salt and pepper. Transfer half of the vegetable mixture to another baking sheet and arrange the vegetables evenly.
-Bake, stirring after the first 10 minutes, until the carrots are tender and the other vegetables begin to brown, about 20 minutes total.
-Meanwhile, cook farfalle until tender but firm to the bite, about 8 minutes in boiling water. Drain, reserving 1 C of cooking liquid.
-In a large bowl, toss the pasta with the cooked vegetables to combine.
-Add cherry tomatoes, and enough cooking liquid to moisten. Toss with salt and pepper to taste. Toss in parmesan cheese, and serve.

Ratatouille **Difficulty:**
Serves 6 side servings

Ratatouille is a rustic French vegetable dish that has stood the test of time for a reason. It's amazing. If you haven't tried it, do yourself a favor a try it ASAP! It's fresh and wonderfully tasty. Fresh herbs are recommended for this recipe, but if you do go the dried route, sprinkle them across the top of the vegetables before baking to allow the flavors to sink in.

Ingredients:
Olive Oil
¼ eggplant, small dice
½ zucchini, small dice
¼ yellow onion, small dice

2 cloves garlic, minced
½ green bell pepper, small dice
1 ½ roma tomatoes, small dice
1 sprig fresh Italian parsley
1 sprig fresh thyme
1 sprig fresh oregano
4 fresh basil leaves
Salt and black pepper as needed

Directions:
-Preheat oven to 350 F
-In a medium sauté pan, heat enough oil to just coat the bottom of the pan.
-Add onions and cook until tender over medium/low heat. Remove to bowl.
-Repeat for garlic, eggplant, zucchini, and bell pepper, removing each vegetable to bowl before starting the next one.
-Toss vegetables together with desired amount of salt and black pepper and transfer to a 9x9 baking dish.
-Cover with foil and bake for about 20 minutes.
-Meanwhile, mince all herbs together. After vegetables are finished baking, remove foil and sprinkle herbs across the top. Serve immediately.

Brussel Sprouts **Difficulty:**
Serves 8

Don't be afraid of them. They are delicious! I've come to find most people either love them or hate them, and I definitely fall under the love category. Super yummy and so easy! They make a beautiful side dish!

Ingredients:
1 ½ lb brussel sprouts
5 strips of bacon
Salt and black pepper as needed
Oil as needed

Directions:
-Cook bacon until crisp over medium heat. Remove to drain on paper towels, reserving grease.
-Cut brusells sprouts lengthwise.
-Heat grease over high heat and sear brussels sprouts in batches. You want a good color to them without burning them. (You may need to add oil the the pan between batches depending on how fatty your bacon was.)

-Turn heat to medium low and saute all brusells sprouts together until tender but firm to the bite, stirring often.
-Season with salt and black pepper to taste, and serve immediately.

Butternut Squash Soup **Difficulty:**
Serves 4

This soup is one of my all time favorites. It's perfect for a chilly evening! You are able to lighten this soup even more by subsituting additional chicken broth for the cream, but I advise against it, as the flavors won't be as rich. Either way however it is wonderful!

Ingredients:
1 (3lb) butternut squash
1 medium onion, small diced
2 ½ C chicken broth
½ tsp nutmeg
½ - 1 C heavy cream
2 Tbsp butter
1 Tbsp brandy or whiskey (optional)
Olive oil for brushing
Salt and black pepper as nedded

Directions:
-Preheat oven to 375 F.
-Cut squah in half lengthwise and rub flesh with enough olive oil to coat.
-On a foil lined baking sheet, place squash flesh side down and roast for about 45 minutes, or until extremely tender.
-Cool about 25 minutes or until managable with hands.
-Meanwhile, sweat onions in butter over low medium heat until soft and translucent.
-Add liquor and cook until liquid is gone.
-Discard seeds of squash and scoop flesh into onions.
-Puree mixed with chicken stock in batches until smooth.
-Reheat over low heat if needed. Add nutmeg.
-Stir in cream until desired consistancy and remove from heat.
-Add salt and black pepper to taste. Serve immediately.

Tried and True - Little Changes by Marcy Lytle

It's January, the holidays are over, and we're at it again – making resolutions – or maybe not. Sometimes we make resolutions that involve becoming more fit for the year, only to see that by the time December rolls around again, there's been no change. I'm not one for drastic changes by dieting, and from what I've heard and seen, diets are not the most effective way to be healthy. In fact, some of them are downright dangerous. It's the little changes that affect our health…in the long run. Here are a few small things to start with for 2015 that might be easier than that new crash diet you've been reading about:

1. **Drink more water.** This seems like a simple thing, but I've gone a whole day before and realized I've only had one glass of water. I have a friend who sets out a certain number of bottled waters by her desk each day and there they are, staring her in the face, waiting to be opened and swallowed. That little change can help. Set out the water in plain view, and purpose to drink it all by bedtime.
2. **Do it then.** When you buy groceries, make a small change by coming home and washing, slicing, and storing your fruit in a pretty container right then. Peel some cuties, wash and pick the grapes, rinse the blueberries, and put them in small one-serving containers. This way, when you open the fridge, they're prepared for you, and all you have to do is grab one serving and go.
3. **Become nuttier.** According to everydayhealth.com, nuts are crazy good for you. Almonds, walnuts, and cashews are among my favorites. You can eat about 23 nuts for only 170 calories, and you'll be doing your heart, your gut, and your entire body a world of good. Store these in portions right next to the fruit, and grab both!
4. **Share a meal**. If you and your spouse don't agree when eating out on what to choose from the menu, like my husband and I, then make compromises. Let him pick say three entrees on the menu he'd like to eat, and then you choose one from those. If you still can't agree, then let him order his meat, and you order a couple other sides. Or opt for a salad and just glean from the few items you like from what he picked. Or finally, portion out your meal when it arrives, ask for the doggy bag early on, and take part of your meal home.
5. **Walk, walk, walk.** Early morning doesn't work for some, because they already rise so early for work, or they've been up with the kids all night. Nighttime doesn't work for others because they're tired from the day, or they work physically, and have no energy. So whatever your excuse is, think about your day and make walking part of your routine, not something you have to fit in. Take the stairs at work, park far from the door at Target, walk to your mailbox instead of stopping by in the car, go to the mall just for a brisk walk and not for shopping, find three trails and hit one at least once a week. Make a list of all sorts of ways you can walk a few more steps, and see if the changes don't stick.
6. **Trash the boxes**. Read those boxes you pile in your grocery cart. They're full of unrecognizable ingredients, and the list is long! Go for fresh. You enjoy bags of chips, boxes of granola bars, and premade helper meals? They may seem more convenient and easy, but make a little change of ditching one or two of those items from your list, in favor of fresh options. Carrot sticks are great options for chips, those fruit and nut bags

(listed above) can be eaten in place of your bars, and if you roast some fresh veggies on Sunday, you can add them to your dishes all week! Make one little change.

7. **Drinks for Driving.** I think there's just no way around stopping through a drive-through when you've got kids in tow, soccer practice and dance lessons every night, and nothing in the pantry. However, there are a few minor changes you can make. Keep a cooler of bottled waters in the car, and don't order drinks at the drive-thru. Train your kids to opt for water (and yourself) instead of a soda. It will take a while, but soon you'll prefer it. Honest! This way, you're shaving off calories and sugar in one small way, while they still enjoy their favorite menu items (and you save a buck or two per meal!) Also in your cooler, store a few apples or carrot sticks, and skip the fries, when you order the burgers.

Think of other small changes you can make, and try incorporating one a month. By the end of the year, look back and see which ones were an easy trade-off, and keep those going. My mom used to say, "It's the little foxes that spoil the vine," which meant small bad things over time can destroy you. However, I think it's also true that small good things over time can invigorate you.

Go for the little changes that work!

Movie Reviews

Blackhat

It sounded like a good story, the one of a convicted criminal being released in order to help solve a major cybercrime that is having worldwide impact. Chris Hemsworth plays this guy, and the intrigue starts…but it falls flat…in my opinion. The movie is long – 2 ½ hours – and there's only so much one can take of looking at the big screen and seeing computer code scrolling on a computer screen, listening to lackluster characters mumble, and worst of all seeing Viola Davis in a role way beneath her showcase talents! My husband enjoyed the movie somewhat, as it does involve some action in the latter part. However, he and I both agreed that Blackhat lacked more than it possessed. And the music throughout the movie distracted me. It was repetitive and annoying, as it tried to add to the suspense of this no-success thriller. The last comment my husband made as we left, was "It was sort of like an episode of Scorpion and MacIver." Enough said. – Marcy Lytle

American Sniper

War wreaks havoc on the men/women who serve, and it tears apart the families left behind while they wait, and they wait… American Sniper is about one particular young man who had a gift and a passion – a gift to aim and hit a target successfully at a young age – and a passion to protect "his own." This movie is based on a true story of the Navy Seal Chris Kyle, who was married, with two children, and serve four tours of service for our country, becoming a legend for his kills. Bradley Cooper does a fantastic job of expressing the heavy burden these soldiers bear as they feel compelled to return, yet pulled by the wife and kids at home, to stay. I couldn't help but feel as though for the entire run of the movie that I was somehow in a jury stand, watching and hearing testimony of the pros/cons of abandoning life stateside to serve vs. staying and caring for the family you've created at home. Should young men/women remain single if they're going to enlist? Is it really worth it to defend a country by learning to kill so many who are our enemies? Should a mom with children be more understanding, when her husband leaves her for almost a year at a time, while she's left home alone, in worry and dread that she will get that fateful call? I don't know the answers, and the movie only presents the questions. – Marcy Lytle

Selma

I didn't really care to see this movie, since I assumed it was just another "I Have a Dream" remake of Martin Luther King's speech. But I went to see the movie because of a couple of great reviews I had read. And I was not disappointed! Selma does tell the story of Martin Luther King, but it's more focused on the man, his "call," his obedience to do what God told him to do, the heavy load he carried with a wife and kids, demonstrators being killed, threats being made on his life and on the lives of others, and his firm stand against all odds, including his

confrontations with President Johnson. I was 7 years old when the events in this story took place, and of course I don't recall anything except hearing about MLK's assassination. However, this movie isn't about that; in fact, the killing of MLK isn't even part of the movie. It's about the faith of one man, who knew in his heart that he must speak up, stand up, and march for what was right. I found myself shaking my head at the sobering fact that these events happened in my lifetime, wondering if we've made any progress at all against racism, and being inspired with the proclamation of the Truth, as I felt tears well in my eyes at the end of the movie. And as I left the theater, the conversation I had with my friend who went with me was about how we wondered if there's a cause around us now, present day that we need to be aware of and join in the fight...or are we just as blind as our predecessors… - Marcy Lytle

A Night at the Museum – Secret of the Tomb

The museum displays are alive again, this time traveling to the British Museum of History to find out why a golden tablet is decaying, in order to keep the "magic" alive each night at the museum. I'm not really a fan of these movies, mostly because they're full of what I call corny humor (which doesn't really amuse me), but there is a good amount of creativity that goes into the making of each installment of these movies, including A Night at the Museum – Secret of the Tomb. Add in the fact that this is a family movie, a clean one in fact, and that Robin Wilson (from *Pitch Perfect*) is the British version of Ben Stiller, and you've got yourself a fun family time. The movie was also bittersweet as we observed both Robin Williams and Mickey Rooney, two Hollywood icons, in their final roles. If you enjoyed the other two movies before this one, you'll enjoy this new one as well. Familiar characters, a new storyline, and a heartwarming relationship between Larry (Ben Stiller) and his son make it a movie with a little something for everyone… - Marcy Lytle

Taken 3

I liked it! Even though the "other" reviews weren't so favorable, and even though the movie is somewhat predictable, and even though Liam Neeson is getting old, Taken 3 is a great thriller of a movie with action, drama, and among the list of actors – Forest Whitaker! He plays the police officer on the hunt for Neeson's character, when a death occurs and Neeson is implicated. Neeson once again is the all-loving and protective dad, with a job that puts him on the run from the law and in pursuit of the one who dares to threaten his family. Yes, there are times in the movie when I thought, "That's crazy – how did he come out of that alive?" But there were other times when I watched the expressions on Neeson's face and realized that he is just the right face for those steely looks, he is the perfect voice that sends chills to one on the other end of the phone, and he's the protective father at all costs. It's a movie worth seeing, if you enjoyed the other *Taken* films, or if you just enjoy a good chase, a mysterious killer, and a young damsel daughter in distress. – Marcy Lytle

Annie

I had heard this wasn't like the "original," and it wasn't. But I loved it! The little girl who plays Annie is the same little girl from *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (If you haven't seen it, do! She was nominated for an Oscar). Quvenzhané Wallis is her name, and she's an expressive, talented

young actress who portrays the character of Annie in this musical so well! Jamie Foxx plays Daddy Warbucks, only he's Mr. Stacks in this version, and Cameron Diaz plays Ms. Hannigan – the old hag who "cares" for the orphans. It's the same heartwarming story of a young girl hoping her parents will find her, only to be found by the most unlikely parents of all. Annie is an updated version of the original, and it's super entertaining and fun. It's nice to see a movie like this once in a while, if you're a kid, or even if you're not…. – Marcy Lytle

Foxcatcher

Steve Carrell is unrecognizable in this movie, as he is transformed into John Du Pont, a disturbed man who coaches a USA wrestling team, including gold medalist Mark Schulz, played by Channing Tatum. The movie is extremely slow getting started and it doesn't pick up the pace at all during the movie. Foxcatcher is a true story of an extremely wealthy man with mental issues and an unhealthy relationship with his mother. He preys on a young man with his own self-esteem issues, and brings him into his home and life, to coach him as a wrestler, but to also *own* him as a friend. Mark Ruffalo plays this young man's older brother, an esteemed wrestler and coach, who also arrives at Foxcather, with wife and kids in tow. I assume the movie was super slow to emphasize the slow, calculated movements and looks of John Du Pont, but it was a hard movie to watch – even though the acting was superb. I wasn't expecting what happened at the end, but let me say this isn't a feel-good movie, an action film, or even an intriguing drama. It's boring, disturbing, and creepy. If you like that sort of thing, this movie's for you. – Marcy Lytle

Big Eyes

The previews of this movie tell a lot, but they don't tell it all. Amy Adams plays Margaret Keane, a real lady who is a real artist and still alive. When she was younger, she married a man Walter Keane (played by Christoph Waltz) who took all the credit for her paintings of children with "big eyes," and intimated and controlled her into not revealing that she was the true artist. This all took place back in the 1950's and Margaret believed him, when he told her that "lady art" wouldn't sell. However, time and the burden of the lie take their toll on Ms. Keane and she soon reveals the truth, hoping she will be believed in the courtroom. Big Eyes is entertaining and disturbing at the same time, as we are drawn into the unbelievable scenario of a wife who lives with a husband who claims to be an artist, yet she never sees him paint a thing. *How does that happen?* I wondered that as I left the theater, but I also wondered what happened to her daughter, who observed a mom who was hidden away and a stepdad who was crazy. I think you'll want to read the real story after you see this movie. – Marcy Lytle

The Imitation Game

Benedict Cumberbatch is one of my favorite actors, and he is superb in his role as Alan Turing, a super brain who secretly was able to build a machine during WWII to break the Enigma code. His character is spellbinding from the onset of the movie, as we are drawn into this exceptionally

smart man's way of connecting (or not connecting) with others, because of his social ineptness. We see (from flashbacks) the sad experience he suffered as a young boy, losing his dearest friend, and how even the name he gives his machine he's inventing (Christopher) helps to keep the memory of that friend alive and with him, throughout his adult years. Keira Knightley plays another super brain that enters his life and the two of them pair nicely as a couple, and as co-workers. Cumberbatch's character in The Imitation Game is misunderstood, mistrusted, and misjudged many times, because of his differences from the "norm," yet several times throughout the movie we understand and nod our heads as we agree with the fact that being different can often result in amazing things that change the world. And sometimes being different can leave a person with problems too big to be solved, by even the smartest of brains. – Marcy Lytle

Into the Woods

If you're curious to hear your favorite actors sing, and you see how many of your favorite actors are cast in this movie, you'll want to see the film – like I did. And early in the movie, I was delighted with the singing, the lyrics and the storyline. At one point it seemed like the movie was about to wrap up and be done, which would have made Into the Woods a good watch. But…it kept going. And going. And the story unraveled, much like life does, when we think everything is going well. Fairy tale endings and wishes aren't so much what we expect them to be, and disappointments wreak havoc on our homes and in our relationships. But this story, of tangled up fairy tales and wishes gone wild, went too far and sort of ruined the thrill and excitement of the first song. And by the end of the movie, even the songs became a grating noise of the same lyrics in just a few monotone notes that really got on my nerves. So, should you see it? Probably. But I don't think you'll buy it to place on your shelf along with your classics. – Marcy Lytle

Unbroken

"This is a true story" was on the screen at the beginning of the movie, which told the horrid tale of an Olympian athlete (Louis Zamperini – played by Jack O'Connell) who ended up being a prisoner in a Japanese war camp (after already suffering through weeks of barely surviving after his plane crashed in the ocean). I've seen many films about prisoners being tortured, but I think this might be the worst – it was hard to watch. But a promise made to God, and the words of a sibling who saw the gold in his little brother, kept this young man alive, strong, and a hero of sorts to his fellow prisoners. Unbroken is the title of the film, but it's also an adjective that describes the spirt of this runner who amazed the crowds as he came from behind to win the race, time and time again. It's that same spirit that keeps him alive as the most ruthless of all Japanese commanders tries to break his body and his will, without success… - Marcy Lytle

The Hobbit

I must confess I'm not a fan of these movies, but I went with my family and I was pleasantly surprised with this one. Or maybe it's that I purposed to like it! The story was easier to follow, and it was certainly full of action, as the "armies" fought for the gold and the mountain home.

This movie is full of scenes of peril, so little ones might be frightened. The dwarves, the earth people, the elves, and all of their costumes, made for an exciting dramatic movie-going experience that went well with a large bag of popcorn. The Hobbit is a great holiday movie for the gang to see… - Marcy Lytle

Wild

I heard talk of Reese Witherspoon and Laura Dern (who plays Reese's mom) being up for an award nomination, so of course I wanted to see this movie. However, Wild might be one of my least favorite Reese movies. This film is based on the true story of Cheryl Strayed, who goes on a 1,100 mile solo hike to grieve, find herself, heal, and prove something – I'm not sure what. The scenery is pretty, but two hours of watching this woman carry a backpack way too heavy for her across desert land, all the while flashing back to memories of her husband, her sexual encounters outside her marriage, and her dying mother, were a bit too much. And it didn't appear that she learned much, grew any, or changed at all…by the end of her trek…when she made her final statement (in the movie) about life. I guess it's supposed to be a profound statement to sum up her "adventures," but it wasn't worth waiting for. And I didn't leave the theater thinking what a strong, amazing woman she was, but rather what a long, arduous trek and a waste of time. – Marcy Lytle

Exodus: Gods and Kings

I did not like this movie, and I'm suggesting you save your big movie bucks and go see something else, unless you just want to sit through 2 ½ hours of the film to see the graphics, which were pretty great. It seemed to take forever to get to the juicy part of the story – the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea – as we watch Moses learn of his ancestry and receive God's word – and marry his wife. He and his wife had a little "saying" when they married and again at the end, which seemed cheesy and contrived, and didn't fit with the rest of the movie. That aside, Christian Bale played Moses and didn't bring the character to life at all. In fact, it took so long to get to the plagues I fell asleep, and awoke for the mighty sea scene, only to be disappointed again. I went to the movie with three other people, and we all left the theater saying, "What?" I always loved the story of Moses, and envisioned the passing through the sea as a glorious event, full of victory and rejoicing. There was none of that in Exodus: Gods and Kings. In fact, there was not much of anything to rejoice about. – Marcy Lytle

A Christmas Carol/Christmas in Connecticut

Both of these movies were in the theater this weekend for one-night only, but I'm reviewing them here, in case you want to watch them on Netflix this holiday season. These both are the old versions (black and white) put on by Turner Classics, and I enjoyed the tidbit of information given before each movie. You know the story A Christmas Carol, but in this 1938 version, it's Bob Cratchit and his honorable character that stands out, above the mean spirit of Ebenezer Scrooge. Christmas in Connecticut is my favorite Christmas classic, especially this 1945 version. Barbara Stanwyck plays a successful writer of a woman's magazine (the cooking/housekeeping column), yet she's anything *but* a housekeeper. When the magazine owner wants Stanwyck's character to entertain and have a soldier over for Christmas dinner,

this writer has to create a country home, the illusion that she's an excellent cook, and even find a baby to show off as her own! It's hilarious, and a great movie to see this holiday! Don't let the black and white keep you from watching – you forget there's no color after the first few minutes of the movie! – Marcy Lytle

Rosewater

This movie is based on a true story of an American journalist who traveled to his home in Iran to cover the election there, only to find himself accused of being a spy and then ending up in prison, all because he was with the wrong people at the wrong time, filming the wrong thing. The movie isn't so much about the man's torture by the Iranian government as it about presenting a picture of the absurdity of the whole entire story. The journalist ends up using his own "trickery" to get himself set free. Rosewater is directed by Jon Stewart, and it's not the most memorable film, but if you remember the story in the news, you might enjoy the movie. – Marcy Lytle

The Homesman

I saw the previews for this movie, starring Hilary Swank and Tommy Lee Jones (& Meryl Streep and James Spader), and I thought I was in for a great old west story of a sweet young single woman, willing to transport three women who had lost their minds, across the prairie back home to where they could get help. She enlists the help of a man about to be hanged, because she saves his life. However, I was so wrong. The actors are some of my favorites, so I did enjoy seeing them and watching them in their element. However, The Homesman is a dark film with characters that are – well – disturbed, in the most disturbing of ways. There are scenes that are hard to watch, and characters you'll want to take to heart, only to find yourselves appalled and aghast at the turn of events near the end. I'm giving this movie a thumbs up, only because of the actors, and because some do like a twisted story. But the combo of disturbing, with the old west, with literal craziness and eye-popping cringes, didn't make for a mix of a movie I'd want to see again. – Marcy Lytle

The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part I

Walking into the movie theater, I expected this latest installment of the *Hunger Games* series to be just as action-packed as the first and second movies were. I was surprised to find that it had much less action and much more character development. Exploring the psychosis behind the games, Mockingjay Part I exceeded my expectations in terms of emotional development of the characters. It made me feel a little crazy as I watched Katniss Everdeen (played by the fantastically talented Jennifer Lawrence) battle her inner demons, but thankfully there were bouts of comic relief from the beloved characters, Haymitch Abernathy (Woody Harrelson) and Effie Trinket (Elizabeth Banks). District 13 is a completely different setting from what viewers of the *Hunger Games* are used to, with less glamour but much more harsh realism. Deserving of two thumbs up, this film left me with a hunger for more action but filled my emotional quota to the brim. – Kayley Ryan

The Theory of Everything

I went expecting to see great acting, but to be distraught over this true story of a renown atheist, Stephen Hawking. I did see great acting by Eddie Redmayne and Felicity Jones, but rather than the movie focusing on the atheism, it focused on the relationship between husband and wife, amid his debilitating disease and his quest for the theory of how time began. Hawking's wife, as portrayed in this movie, is a believer in God and this is evident throughout the movie. Hawking loves her, and even gives her "a moment" at one point in the movie, as his theories continue to develop when he acknowledges that God might exist. Redmayne's smile throughout the movie, surrounded in by his grimacing face, is captivating. Jones' emotions that show on her face, as she takes care of three children and her husband, is equally magnetizing. And the way The Theory of Everything wraps up left me with a glorious thought all my own, *Yes, one day the lame will walk again, but it won't be because of man's theories of how to turn back time.* – Marcy Lytle

Beyond the Lights

This movie is one of those movies that could have been thoroughly enjoyable except for…. Let me explain. Young cop catches a young starlet as she is about to jump from a balcony, because she's fed up with her life. That life is one created by her mother (Minnie Driver) who wants the young girl (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) to be everything she wasn't. Sound like a familiar storyline? The young man "savior" is portrayed as being a prince of integrity and honor, as he sees the girl for who she is without all the glamour and glitz, and loves her. This eventually changes her, and well…you can guess the rest of the story. The music was great, it's a romantic story on the big screen, and I loved the ending. But I always wonder why these young heroes who rescue the girls still sleep with them outside of marriage? And besides that, the beginning scenes of the movie might make you want to walk out. This is not a movie for teens or kids. If you want to see a great love story played out beautifully and don't mind shaking your head a few times at this PG-13 movie that should have been rated R, then Beyond the Lights might be something you'd like to see. – Marcy Lytle

Low Down

This is the story of a young girl with a talented musician for a dad, who happens to also have a drug addiction. It's a true story of Joe Albany, told through the eyes of his daughter Amy Jo, played by Elle Fanning. It's a dark tale, for sure, where hope barely rises for the young girl and her future, but then it's dashed again because of the demons that demand her dad's body. Low Down provides a look into the world of musicians gone "wild" in the 1970's in Los Angeles. Glenn Close plays the girl's grandmother whose face reveals it all – the hurting, angry heart – of a mom over her wayward son. I probably would give this movie a thumbs-down, except for the ending statement made by the girl, as she realizes that she has a choice and doesn't have to

succumb to the influences around her. It's a memorable quote worth telling to your own teens. – Marcy Lytle

Force Majeure

This film caught my attention because the previews showed a snow avalanche heading towards a ski lodge, and I love disaster movies! However, the avalanche of snow is just the tip of a huge iceberg that almost destroys a family of four, when the dad runs scared, leaving his family behind to face the disaster – then shows back up when disaster is averted. That one act of selfishness and abandonment reaps a pile of trouble in the marriage, which over the course of the movie surfaces more than once. Force Majeure is an odd movie of sorts, with a sort of eerie feel, but then gets very interesting as the father has to face his lack of leadership for his family, and the mom realizes her own weaknesses. The way this takes place and plays out is not your normal movie-watching, but it certainly made us talk and think, as we left the theater. And if you go as a couple, it might make you take a look at your own reaction or non-reaction to things that threaten your family. – Marcy Lytle

Interstellar

I was told to see this movie in the IMAX but I didn't. It was still awesome. Matthew McConaughey plays a single dad of two kids who is chosen to make a space flight like no other – to save the planet. Time travel, amazing graphics, an emotional storyline, and a three-hour screen time, all make for a movie going experience unlike anything I've enjoyed before. If you sit and analyze it too long, you'll miss the point. But if you think, "Would I risk never seeing my children again in order to ensure their future?" you'll engage in this man's angst, his fierce love, and his determination to "return" to his daughter, played (as an adult) by one of my favorite actresses, Jessica Chastain. And a big plus about Interstellar – it's not full of junk – so you can take the whole family. - Marcy Lytle

Whiplash

JK Simmons and Miles Teller give an outstanding performance as teacher and student. Teller is a drummer in an elite music school, run by a ruthless instructor who pushes the musicians way too far, past any reasonable limit – especially Teller. Whiplash is full of drumming, which is spellbinding to watch. But this movie is also full of language and abuse, which is hard to watch. When we think the instructor can't do any more harm, he does. And when we think the student can't take any more abuse, he does. The emotion these two actors display is amazing, and the connection they make is disturbing. Whiplash is the name of a piece of music, not a jerk of the neck, in case you are wondering. – Marcy Lytle

Nightcrawler

What a great thriller of a movie, with a storyline and twist I've not seen before. Jake Gyllenhaal plays a driven man (to put it lightly) who won't stop at anything to get a news story, as he roams the city at night looking for crimes he hears about on the police radio. Gyllenhaal's face, his

skinny frame (he lost weight for the movie) the way he wears his hair, and his eyes, all contribute to making him a scary man indeed, as he pushes the limits until he goes too far. He finds a connection with a news veteran (played by Rene Russo) who's almost as scary as he is. Gyllenhaal also hires a young naïve man that he takes advantage of, and this young actor is perfect in playing this part. There's a lot of language in Nightcrawler. (R-rated). But if you like thrillers, you'll like this one. It's a tiny bit slow at the beginning…but keep watching. You'll be thinking, "Oh my, did he really do that?" – Marcy Lytle

Birdman

Celebrities and their demons. That's what this movie is about, and it's told and filmed in a very unique and unusual way. Michael Keaton plays an old actor who was a once famous actor in films, but he's now trying to make a comeback by appearing and directing on Broadway. However, his motivation is to rid himself of the voices and images in his head that tell him how washed up he is, and that he will never amount to anything. Adding to those voices, are a daughter just out of rehab, an ex-wife, and a cast of actors with their own problems. There's no musical score per se in this movie – but there is the beat of drums throughout the movie…and many metaphors that are pretty obvious but well written into the story. Birdman is full of language and mature themes, but the characters in the story have fallen to the lowest of the low in the Hollywood life…and it's not a pretty picture. – Marcy Lytle

St Vincent

I hadn't really noticed this movie until I heard a couple of the actors talk about it on television. Naomi Watts, Bill Murray, and Melissa McCarthy play in this comedy/drama about a divorced mom who has no option but to leave her 12 year old son in the care of an old "crusty" man without a nice bone in his body. However, it turns out that the little boy has the uncanny ability to see beneath the crust of this man to the real person he used to be, the one who deserves a certain kind of recognition. I've never seen a movie combine comedy with such a serious theme in a movie, and do it so well. All of the characters are flawed greatly, due to life's hardships, and this somehow makes them totally relatable and loveable in St. Vincent, a movie worth seeing – with a little boy actor who will win your heart. – Marcy Lytle

FURY

It's World War II, the Americans are in their tanks fighting the Germans, and Brad Pitt plays the leader of a group of men on one particular tank, when a boy of a man, a clerk typist, shows up to report for duty and join Pitt's troop. This young man is the focus of the movie's story line, as Brad Pitt trains and pushes this scared young man to learn to fight and kill. The group of five men on the tank fight and bond, and curse and quote scripture, as they move against the enemy, ending up at a "crossroads." It's bloody, there's lots of language, and it's hard to watch. Fury is the name of the tank, and it describes the passionate anger these men feel towards the enemy as they fight together to the finish. The "jury" is still out on the "fury." I just can't say if I enjoyed it, because I didn't. But I can say it was a good war movie, because it was. – Marcy Lytle

The Judge

Robert Downey, Jr. and Robert Duvall play father and son in this moving drama about family relationships. Don't go late or sleepy, because this movie is long! Downey is a successful defense attorney, and Duvall is a reputable judge, but the two are estranged because of an event that happened when Downey was a teenager. However, when Downey visits his hometown for a funeral, father and son are thrown together when son has to defend his own father in the courtroom. Adding to the drama are Downey's two brothers, his young daughter, and an old flame back in the hometown Downey's character swore off years ago. Duvall is exceptional in his role, as always, and The Judge has a bit of mystery to it, as well as tender moments that might make you cry. The father and son relationship is believable, sad, raw and real… - Marcy Lytle

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible No Good, Very Bad Day

This movie stars Steve Carrell and Jennifer Garner as a married couple with four children, one being Alexander, who is turning 12. If your kids have read the book of the same title, you know the story. From the beginning until the end of the movie, it's nonstop mishaps for each person in the family, until they are all out of sorts and blaming one another. However, they each one begin to realize the real meaning and value in life, and one by one, attitudes change and the family thrives. Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day is amusing (lots of laughter in the theater), entertaining, and clean…so how can that result in anything but a wonderful, great, totally good, very good theater experience for the whole family? – Marcy Lytle

Gone Girl

I went in, knowing there were scenes that would be hard to watch. And there were. I also went in, knowing this was supposed to be a great thriller. And it was. The music in the background of this missing person mystery added to the suspense of the story, starring Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike. Pike plays a grown woman, still under the control of her parents, who meets and marries a man who loves her. However, after a few years of marital "bliss," the marriage falls apart, and Pike's character goes missing. From all appearances and "clues," her husband is suspect. To tell any more of the story would ruin it for you. Let's just say the story is riveting, the acting is amazing, and the nasty scenes were unnecessary. Gone Girl ended with some questions still lingering in my mind, and I desperately want to see a sequel that will answer all of them. – Marcy Lytle

The Good Lie

Reese Witherspoon didn't even appear until well into the movie, because she's not really the star. This movie was inspired by the true story of the "lost boys" of Sudan, refugees who came to America more than a decade ago. The Good Lie follows the lives of several brothers and their one sister, as they were orphaned because of war, and ended up in a refugee camp…and finally in America. Reese Witherspoon plays an initially disinterested employment worker, but later a very involved friend to these young people. The actors who play these young people are captivating in their enthusiasm for life, their gratefulness for kindness, and their humility and

honor for others – maybe because they were refugees themselves. You'll want to watch the movie closely, and try not to take a bathroom break, because you'll learn why the movie has the title it does – and you'll leave saying it was a "good movie." - Marcy Lytle

HOME

Practical Parenting - Memory Work – by Georganne Schuch

Education prior to about the 1980s relied heavily on rote memorization for learning facts. Students learned their multiplication facts, the periodic table, poems, and music by repetition. Some genius then decided this wasn't real learning and steered education toward a more ethereal approach, where principles and theories were taught, supposedly teaching the student to reason better.

Now, I'm not an education expert, but I fail to see why it has to be all one or the other. I grew up under the tutelage of the memorization folks. Yes, I still know my multiplication facts. I still remember a few of the periodic table facts, though I don't know how I can use that information. I still remember pieces of poems and recognize many songs I played in band. The brain has a remarkable way of filing bits of information and never losing them. That's not to say I don't lose the place where it's filed, but the brain knows it's there and can recall it at the oddest moments.

Transitioning from the memorization model in high school to a reasoning model in college really wasn't the intellectual jump some predicted. With the exception of calculus, I did quite well. As for calculus, I firmly believe God gives your brain special powers to understand certain levels of math. My special powers shipment got lost in transit.

All that to say this: Memorization is not the scourge of learning.

When your kids bring home something that looks like it might require some effort to learn, that's good. Memorization exercises the brain. Like when a baby learns to walk, all that falling and standing exercises the muscles and cements the art of walking into the brain because the brain is actually telling the muscles what to do. Whether your children realize it or not, memorizing math and science facts, poems, and music may serve them well one day. Reasoning, after all, doesn't happen in a vacuum. It needs facts and a developed thought process, both of which rely on things you already know. Things you probably memorized.

Memorization, in fact, trains the brain to remember. The more you remember, the more you remember. A habit, you might say.

Memorization requires skills like reading and processing, both of which challenge the brain. And once you've memorized the basics of something, your brain can focus better because it isn't constantly trying to piece together facts. It already knows them, and it can now learn more about a subject. Take those pesky multiplication tables we all hated in junior high. Try doing algebra without knowing your math basics. It will take you an hour to do a simple problem, whereas half the problem will fall into place if you don't have to look up every little step. Repetition suddenly doesn't look so bad.

Finally, memory training helps improve cognitive function, and not just for old people. Young children's brains use all kinds of means to establish neural pathways, from crawling as an infant to being read to as a toddler, to climbing on monkey bars as a preschooler. Along with memorizing, a child's brain uses each activity to build more and more neural pathways, which, in turn, prepares him to learn.

Since we've established that memorization is a good learning tool, let's consider at what point it can be implemented. Our society has pushed formalized school earlier and earlier on children. I don't tend to agree that earlier is better for things that require a young child to sit for very long. Many studies prove that creative and active play, and lots of it, helps a child's brain develop better than learning their numbers and letters before they're ready. Memorization, however, is not a sitting activity. It takes advantage of a child's insatiable quest for learning. In my experience, even a very young child, say two or three, can learn songs, poems, and Bible verses. I could swear that my 18 month old knew the *Barney* song before she could even talk in complete sentences.

Just since August, my four year old has memorized the first chapter of Psalm (six verses) and is about halfway through memorizing Psalm 8 (nine verses). Memorizing Bible verses or songs or poems isn't something we spend hours on every day. In fact, we spend about ten minutes two or three times a week. I read the chapter through aloud to her, and she repeats it after me. Then, she recites it from memory as far as she can. I fill in a few reminder phrases as she goes, and within six weeks or so she has the entire chapter memorized. She's faster than her older sisters who can read!

I prefer my children learn age appropriate poems. Robert Louis Stevenson's collection *A Child's Garden of Verses* is my favorite, Bible verses, and songs. What little girl can't belt out a song from *Frozen,* after all?

You might have a different idea for memory work, but anything you choose is bound to be a boost to your child's development.

LIFE AS WE KNOW IT - Heart Tools – by Erica Simmons

"Mom, I don't want to disappoint you." It is hard to think that these heartfelt words said to me by my son Jerimiah could cause a "life as I know it moment," but they did. You see, Jerimiah had made a bad decision and even though we had dealt with it a few days later, it came up in a conversation while we were in the car. As a parent, what would your response have been? Well here was mine. I turned to him and looked him in the eye as we came to a stop sign and said, "You could never be a disappointment to me."

The truth of the matter is that there was a time when I would not have said that.

Back to my opening question. I was driving down the highway on my way to work one morning, and let me just confess. I like to get where I am going and have people not as eager as I am stay out of my way. This particular morning there was a driver in front of me who was my kind of driver, but the one in front of him was not. In an effort to get around the slower car, he moved over in to the right lane. The only problem was that the person he was trying to pass was going faster than the person the driver had just moved behind. We were now both stuck behind slow movers, and a question quickened in my spirit.

"Is *who* you are following getting in your way?"

"What do you mean, Lord?" I asked.

During the remainder of my drive, and admittedly a few minutes after I got to work, God shared the following thoughts with me. The *who* in the question is any thought, belief or idea that is not derived from the word of God, because all of those who's are instilled in us by our experiences with other people, family, friends, who and what we watch on TV. This lead to me to ask,

"*Who* am I following?"

I find that I cannot write about my experiences as a parent without drawing on my experiences as a child, because our parents teach us how to be parents. The word of God says in Matthew 6:24:

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon (your mother) - KJV

The parenthesis, of course, includes my own note because for more than 20 years my mother was the other master I was trying to serve. She said do, and I did, without hesitation or question and it never seemed to be enough. She did whatever she had to do to get me to comply: guilt, sulking, and threatening. Breaking that stronghold on my life was and continues to be one of the hardest things I had/have to do.

So what does all of this have to do with Jerimiah?

The tools my mother used to shape my heart were tools that I let be a part of my toolbox of parenting and ones I had to make a conscious decision NOT to use anymore.

The transition away from those tools and ways of thinking was not an easy one, but I was fortunate enough to become friends with an amazing God-loving woman whose love for me gave me new tools. She came into my life at just the right time. God is good that way. We were

in the beginning stages of our friendship when the *hardest* thing I have ever had to deal with happened, and God used her in amazing ways.

Through the years I have gone to her, pretending to seek advice, when secretly I was reverting back to my old ways and wanting her to tell me what to do. That *never* happened. She always spoke the word of God to me and over me. You see, her **heart tool** was the Word every time. She would never get in the way. I cannot count the number of times she said, “Erica, don’t put me on a pedestal.” It would have been so easy for someone with my upbringing to do that. She always made sure I was following God and not her.

In the process of making sure I was following God, she also taught me how to get out of my boys’ way and teach them to let God lead them. Disappointment, shame, and guilt – those are all tools of the evil one – and I will not use them to shape my boys’ hearts.

The word of God is love. I Corinthians 13:4-7:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. NIV

The word of God is patient. Proverbs 14:29:

People with understanding control their anger; a hot temper shows great foolishness. NLT

The word of God is kind. Ephesians 4:22:

And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you. KJV

The list can go on and on.

These are the heart tools that I want to use when shaping my children’s hearts. It was through this lens that I was able to say what I said to Jerimiah that day. I could have used his desire to please me to manipulate him, but what I teach my boys as a parent is what they will use when they become parents. The tools used on me are not the ones I want to use on them; they caused too much damage. Damage that can take too much of their life time trying to repair.

So it turns out that Jerimiah’s question was the moment that I realized that “life as I knew it” had changed.

I don’t get it right 100% of the time, but I am getting it right more than I used to, and each day brings new opportunities to improve and hone the heart tools I now know how to use.

I Don't Do Teens - They Don't Include Me – by Marcy Lytle

There's a time when kids are small, in diapers, in need, and in messes, that a mom thinks she'll never have a life again, life outside raising children is non-existent, and time to herself is a wish tucked down deep in a genie's bottle. And then her children become teens, and they make plans with their friends that don't include her, they shut their door when they want to converse with a friend, and they drive off waving, while mom's crying.

A friend once said that when our kids are small we are their #1, and of course they are our #1. Our kids never stop being our #1, but other things take our place as they grow and mature. It's all part of the process of growing up, and we smile to see them becoming a little adult. But we can't help but admit that it smarts just a bit to see our son hold some other girl's hand when our hand used to be the only one that clasped around his tiny fingers.

How do we stay involved with our teens and their activities without being overbearing and annoying, as they slowly but surely begin to make plans and venture out into the world into arenas, friends, and experiences that don't include us?

The workplace. Our teens get a job, and we cannot go with them. No, mom, we can't even fill out the application for them. And we cannot sit in on the interview and explain to the one hiring what an awesome kid our daughter has been and how she is so responsible. That may sound a bit extreme (although I've heard of it happening), but when our kids get a job, it's the first time they sense pride in accomplishing something on their own, and own it. We can tell them how proud we are, ask them about their day, and keep our listening ears on, when they want to talk. And let them go.

The car. I think driving and dating were my own two hardest verbs to attribute to my kids, stating they now were doing both. Kids want to learn to drive, and they have to listen to our instructions down to every detail if they want to survive on the road. But once they hit the road alone, our heart feels as though it's going to burst! *Who's going to tell them to slow down? What will happen if a big truck cuts them off? And what about riding with their friend who just got her license?* It's too much to think about, yet we have to allow them to ride alone, with only our prayers behind them. We can't always sit beside them in the car. We have to let them go.

The friends. Moms that taxi their kids to parties, to and from the movies, and all over the city to lessons and practices, are exhausted and tired. But we love knowing what our kids are doing and being their right beside them when they do it. When they want to be dropped off at the movies and have us see a different one (in a theater across the building) we feel a pang of distance and hurt. Perhaps they want to ride with friends to practice and to get dinner, and then come home and hang out in their room, only telling us goodnight just before midnight. At first, we might feel shut out and sorrowful, but all of those things are establishing their independence, their ability to demonstrate their maturity, and their confidence in making adult decisions. We must let them go.

With all of the letting go; however, we have to stay connected to them in ways that are vital and healthy as a parent. Letting teens go and become independent is part of raising them, but while they are still under our roof, we have to be keen and aware:

1. We are still the parent, and if car privileges are abused and rules are broken, the keys are taken.
2. We are still the parent, and if he doesn't get to work on time, he's not spending his paycheck wisely, we step in and instruct and require, because that's our job.
3. We are still the parent, and if attitudes are present when our son is with friends, or disobedience shows up with peer pressure, we step in and pull the reins and limit social activity.

It all sounds hard, doesn't it? It sounds like we have to let go…and then rein in…and let go…and pull back.

Yes. It's both.

It's not easy releasing that chubby hand only to hold it again and see the structure of long fingers, slowly slipping away from yours. And it's super hard to watch your children fail when you've let them go, due to poor choices or just by pure accident, and yet you've got to do it and be there with arms wide open when they run back. And they will.

The teen years are a mixed package of tears of sadness and tears of joy that all flow together in one stream as age 13 arrives, and in five short years age18 says good-bye.

Your teens won't include you like they did when they were small, but you'll soon find that it's not so bad, and your hand will be free to offer up praise, prayers, and aid to them instead of grabbing them to keep from running into the street. And that way, you'll always be included in their lives, holding them in different ways, yet letting go to allow them to walk with Him.

Simple Solutions – The Virtual Office – by Georganne Schuch

I predict that the office cubicle will be as extinct as the mimeograph machine in a decade. If you don't know what a mimeograph machine is, well, let's just call it a manual copier with a distinctive smell that went the way of the 8-track tape. And if you don't know what an 8-track tape is, let's just drop the subject.

Anyway, back to my prognostication regarding the current office setup. Offices went from four walls and a desk to two or three half-walls and a table top about 20 years ago, and are now moving toward virtual offices, which means you can plug in and work just about anywhere. Generally, that's pretty nifty, but there are a few scenarios which you should consider if this is your goal. We'll review just a few:

1. ***You're only as mobile as your Internet connection.*** A virtual office requires a connection to the outside world, the Internet, namely. Yes, you can work "offline," and upload on occasion, but an Internet connection is key to mobility. Most hotels have WiFi (wireless) connections, as well as coffee shops, doctor offices, and even service stations. It's not hard to plug in somewhere. If you are truly a road warrior, consider getting a mobile service. The wireless providers, such as AT&T, Sprint, and Verizon offer ones with their phone packages. All are functional, and all are subject to reception limitations. So, don't think you can move to a mountain-top retreat and stay connected as if you were in downtown USAville. Give each a test drive to find the one with the best reception and price for your needs.
2. ***Learn how to control your data usage****.* High speed Internet connections, such as DSL and cable, have lulled the general population into a false sense of security. We expect fast service and unlimited data. When you're working on the go, that's not always the case. WiFi can be a bit sketchy and slow. Unlimited data is a thing of the past. So, before you stream music or videos, consider how much data that takes. My teenage daughter taught me this lesson when she sucked up six gigs one week listening to Spotify, and who knows what else. I was left scrambling at the end of the month for data to finish my work…you know, the stuff that actually makes money…
3. ***You're only as productive as your electrical source****.* Laptops and tablets and cell phones all have two things in common. Mobility and batteries. Funny thing about batteries. They need to be recharged. Typically, an electrical connection is required, however there are solar chargers if you're the hardcore, off-grid type...as long as you don't live in Alaska during their 6-month night season. No sunlight equals no solar charging. If you're going to take that sabbatical and hike Europe, remember that North America and Europe do not share electrical standards. Adapters are cheap and easy to use, just don't forget them or leave them at the hotel...not that I know what I'm talking about.
4. ***The walls have ears and eyes****.* When using a free WiFi connection at the friendly corner coffee-shop, remember that nothing is sacred. An open, or unsecured, connection allows all users to see each other's privates with the right x-ray vision application. So, no logging on to a bank account or other sensitive site. That innocent-faced kid in the corner could be a savy hacker waiting to scoop your

passwords. Change your passwords if you use free WiFi often. It's better to be safe than sorry.

5. ***Mobile devices get banged around a lot.*** Laptops and tablets are thankfully lighter than they used to be, but they are still going to get dropped, stepped on, crammed in a backpack or briefcase, and shoved under someone's oversize suitcase. Which means they're going to get cracked, overheated, and outright broken. Be prepared to find the nearest PC repair place. Just saying.
6. ***Turn it on; turn it off.*** TSTA recently announced that electronic devices may be subjected to extra scrutiny, which means you will have to power them up during check-in. I can attest that this may sometimes be a problem. Many years ago I had a client in another city, and I often brought their broken equipment back with me for repair to save the shipping cost. I was not a favorite at the security checkpoint and was often asked to power up these odd-looking pieces of equipment. I made the tragic mistake of joking that if I could build a bomb out of a laptop I could probably figure out how to turn it on without detonating it. TSTA does not hire people for their sense of humor. I narrowly escaped being strip-searched, and I missed my plane. I now have the good sense to keep my mouth shut at all times, no matter how aggravated I get. Of course, once you have turned on all those devices, you immediately have to turn them all off and repack them to get on the plane. Plan an extra hour for this inconvenience.

While working from home or on some exotic beach sounds great, it is not without challenges. Plan for inevitable problems. It’s not a matter of if, but when.

A Night to Remember - The Big Picture by Marcy Lytle

It's hard for kids to see the big picture when they're crying over something trivial. In fact, it's hard on adults to see the big picture when our lives get all jumbled up like a jigsaw puzzle. Why not spend a winter's night, around the table, in front of the fire, putting together a puzzle and learning about God's ways and his perfect pictures?

Preparation: *You will need a completed jigsaw puzzle (50-piece or smaller) put together on a table, with pieces missing which will be given to each participant. However, keep out a few more pieces of the puzzle and hide them in the room. (Remember where you hide them!) Cover the puzzle with a cloth before you begin.*

Read this to the family: *We are going to learn about how we are like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Underneath the cloth is an incomplete jigsaw puzzle and you hold the missing pieces in your hands. Here we go*:

Compare your piece of puzzle to the others. What things are similar? What things are different? (*Allow answers, such as they are similar size, but different patterns, and all cut from the same large puzzle or picture*.) When God made us, we were uniquely "cut" or designed. He took great care in forming us, giving us our special features and coloring. (*Complement each other on one particular physical feature.)* ***Read Isaiah 45:18.*** God fashioned and designed the big earth on which we live and every living thing on it.

(*Uncover part of the puzzle with one missing piece showing*.) As we live our lives, we only see in part. That means God has a huge plan and design for the world, but we only see a little part of it while here on earth. We cannot see the whole picture. He knows the whole picture and he knows that we have a part and a place to fill. However, no one else can fill the place we were designed to fill.

(*Find which puzzle piece fits the space and place it securely in the puzzle. Let each person try their piece, seeing that only one fits properly.*) Each one of us has a specific place, plan and purpose in the big picture God is painting. Only one piece looks right and fits right in the missing spot. When we all work together, we can help each other find our specific place in the picture.

What happens if you try to force your piece into a spot it doesn't fit? (*Allow answers such as: the edges of the piece will get bent, the colors won't match, the puzzle won't be smooth, etc.)* ***Read Ephesians 4:16.***

Now that one piece is securely in place, does that mean that particular piece was more important than the other pieces? No! Each one completes the picture. *(Uncover the whole puzzle and let each one find where their pieces fit.)*

Every piece is important to make the picture complete.

Oh my, there are still pieces missing! How does the puzzle look without them? Would you want to hang this picture in your house with those spaces in it? Without even one little piece, the picture is incomplete. That's the way God feels about one lost sinner. His picture is not complete until all spaces are filled. That's why he seeks to save everyone. (*Look for the hidden pieces, until all are found. Then let everyone who looked help place the pieces in their correct spot in the puzzle.)****Read Luke 19:10.***

Now, let's consider one last question. What if the entire puzzle was never put together and the pieces stayed in the box? What if each piece was too busy complaining about their size, their shape, their place, their neighbor, etc. and they never were willing to hook up with the other pieces around them? How sad that would be. The picture on the box would never become a reality because the pieces were never willing to get out of the box.

Read Genesis 2:3. God rested after he made his beautiful picture of creation. Man has scrambled it all up, but God is at work putting each piece back together again. ***Read Revelation 21:1-4.*** Isn't that a beautiful picture?

Scramble the puzzle pieces and put them together again, praising God for his creativity, his purposes in our lives, our uniqueness, and for his ultimate guidance in putting every piece in its perfect place, not leaving one piece missing, so that the end result is a beautiful sight to behold!

The Family Practice – Speak Well – by Rachel Toalson

Our household is wild and crazy and LOUD every day.

There are five boys vying for the attention of only one mama and daddy, and they are wonderful and creative and energetic boys, always wanting us to read some story they've written in one of those journals stacked on a counter, always wanting us to listen to some song they've created out of the blue, always wanting us to watch some amazing acrobatic somersault over the arm of a couch.

Too many times I still, after eight years of parenting, find myself answering in an irritated tone, letting my frustration at too many people talking at once creep through my words, or just answering automatically instead of intentionally.

The way we speak to our children is the voice they will hear in their heads and their hearts.

So when they ask us to look at this beautiful drawing they made during quiet time today, and we answer hurried and frazzled and annoyed, because we're trying to get dinner on the table and their baby brother just dumped out all the crayons they shouldn't have left out in the first place, and all our tone says is they're bothering us with their request, they will hear that they are annoying and not worth the time it takes to look and see and smile.

So when they're telling us about what they did on the playground today, and another brother is begging for more milk and someone left the refrigerator door open and the phone is ringing and we let those words slip, "Too many people talking! Too many words!" all they hear is that they are too many and too much.

So when they ask us to watch them walk on their hands across the living room but we're washing dishes or wiping a potty-training boy's bottom or organizing the crafts for tonight's Family Time and we say nothing, since they should be able to see that we're busy, they will hear what our words don't say: *I'm busy. I don't have time for you.*

It matters what we say to our children, but it matters more *how* we say it.

We can speak in those distracted and not-time-for-this tones, with those careless words, and this is the voice they will hear in the quiet spaces.

They may be children, but they know how to read between the lines. They know how to see into words.

It's not easy to keep caring when they're taking a million years trying to figure out what they're trying to say and they're stumbling all over words and starting over from the very beginning, for the four hundredth time, and they're stretching a story across way too many minutes when so many other brothers want to talk, too. It's not easy in those moments to speak in tones that say, *I honor you.*

"And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth," James says (James 3:10).

Our words, and the way we say them, can bless or curse a child.

Which one will we choose?

I want my voice to become a kind and loving and always-encouraging voice in my boys' heads. I want them to always know, through my words and my tone and all the words I don't say, that they are treasures beyond compare.

Because they are.

Ways we can practice speaking well:

1. Minimize words when angry. Speaking when angry is dangerous because we use words and a tone we wouldn't normally choose in those calmer moments when we're not emotionally flooded. When we're angry, take 30 seconds or a minute or 10. Ask, "What am I thinking right now?" Sometimes the stories we tell ourselves about our children and their actions are not accurate, and knowing them (and their inaccuracy) before we act on them can make a world of difference.

2. Try to go one whole day without interrupting your children. This is NOT easy (at least not for me. I like to finish sentences for them when it's just taking too long). When you interrupt, pay them a penny or give them a hug or do some jumping jacks—anything that gets you to notice where you have the tendency. If we want to change, we must first become aware.

3. Commit to encouraging each other as a family. At the beginning of each week, have each member draw a popsicle stick with a family member's name on it. Then spend the week encouraging the person whose name you drew, writing them notes or giving them handmade gifts (a drawing, a coloring book page, a rock that reminds you of them). Tell them how you saw them complete their homework sheet even though they didn't want to, and that's perseverance. Admit that you felt happy when their clothes made it to the hamper instead of staying on the floor. So many of the words we use, as parents, are correction words, and we forget to point out that we notice all the positive ways our children contribute to our lives and to the world. Let's tell them.

YOU

UNDER THE INFLUENCE - My Little Circle – Marcy Lytle

I have this circle around me that houses family, friends, and others, which includes those that are related to me, those I love to hang out with, and those I know about and feel compassion toward. We all have this circle. For some, it's a tiny circle, and for others it's a very large circle. And a good amount of our thoughts, prayer time, and concern are spent running around in this circle, so much that we often find ourselves dizzy and about to fall over.

Can you relate?

Family alone is enough to keep every part of our being occupied 24/7. Husbands need our attention and love, our kids definitely require all of our energy, and then there's the extended family – that group we love and feel a duty to care about and tend. Family time, work, and sleeping pretty much sum up our existence. And when there are family *needs*, which is pretty much 24/7 as well, we're exhausted as we tend to, care for, and pray for all involved.

Friends are a blessing, if we can find time to spend with them. Weekends come and we hope to get in a date, a visit, or even just a good chat. And when we have a conversation with friends, we find out about a death in their family, a child who's causing trouble, or an illness our friend is suffering from – all of which widens our circle of concern and speeds up our circular trek.

Others are the ones we know we're supposed to care about – like our neighbors, those who attend church with us, and co-workers. We try to find a moment to wave, to send up a little prayer for that guy at church (What's his name again? We can't remember because he's only been coming six months…), or to send an email to the lady at work with a verse of encouragement. And when we are able to do one of these things at least once a month, we feel pretty good about ourselves.

Call it a circle, a merry-go-round, or a spinning top. Life is quite an experience of going round and round with the same activities, the same people, and the same issues, over and over – day in and day out. Oh, there are fun times to be had for sure, but then there are days when the merry-go-round gets a little too fast, we are shoved a bit too hard, and we go flying off and land on our heads with a, "Thud!"

The entire above description is where most of us live and breathe, in our circular world. It's not a bad thing, it's just reality.

But what about those who are "outside" that circle? How in the world are we supposed to invite anyone or anything else inside our roped off arena, or make a place for them to sit among all the other spectators watching us in our three-ring circus? *And who are these outsiders, anyway?* Should we let them in?

The destitute. These are the faces of those who are victims of sex trafficking, those who are on the street without a home, or the little children that go to sleep at night, hungry. We see the faces, but we've got no time or money left to give.

The degenerate. These are those who hate, desire to kill, and have no remorse about either. They're not just present in other countries. They live among us. And their acts are evil.

The depleted. These are the ones who have lost everything due to natural disasters, and all that they have had is now gone, and their resources are dry. They need help to recover, and money to rebuild, but we've got no time or extra to give.

There are more categories that exist; in fact, they're probably limitless in number, but you get the picture. Our circle is full to the rim, and all of these other circles float in space around us, begging to get into our circle. They want the family that we have, they desire friendship like we experience, and they would love to get an email of hope.

But, back to the picture above…

Our circle is too full. It's spinning too fast. We are quite dizzy. We're about fall over….

- What if we opened the circumference line of our circle and let some of those inside escape "out there" to serve and give?
- What if we spent some of our family time volunteering to help others, instead of paying for the next level of club soccer?
- What if we invited our friends to join us in a garage sale and then gave the money to a charity or a person in need?
- What if we used our social media outlets to post about God's love and mercy, instead of sharing our controversial opinions about the news?

I don't open my circle often enough. It's usually closed tight and I'm running around on the edge. But when I choose to cut an opening to allow some of my circular activity to seep out into the atmosphere, so to speak, then I find that the opening allows coming and going, it encourages a flow to and from, and it allows for expansion of an eternal perspective, because it never closes back up to pin me in.

Is your circle completely full? Are you on a hamster wheel daily, and exhausted every night?

Don't feel guilty. Life is circular sometimes. But when that circle starts rotating and we no longer have our footing, something, or someone, has got to give. Pun intended.

Strengthening Your Core - Grated Love – by Marcy Lytle

The heart and mind are two of the most complex things in our created being, in my opinion. We can think we love someone with all of our heart or think we've overcome a particular sin, and yet a situation occurs, a word is spoken, or even a tired mind and body is responding, and that love we thought was solid comes unraveled and turns into hatred and rage that we really don't mean, and we really don't recognize – except – there it is. And that sin we thought was over and out of sight, suddenly appears, as big as the moon, an ominous full moon, surrounded by darkness.

Recently, some feelings surfaced in my heart that I thought I had overcome, had buried, had worked through. On the same exact day, someone said something to me that sounded a bit religious (condemning and judgmental), when they didn't intend it that way at all, but it set wrong in my ears, and sank into my stomach, bubbling like a volcano, until it happened. I erupted.

I came home and fell apart, as I was disappointed in my own response to this loving person I knew loved me, and frustrated and confused by the other feelings of inadequacy and shame that I thought had been replaced with confidence and gratitude. I felt about two inches high.

So there I was, late at night, faced with these ugly monsters, and I cried myself to sleep.

Just like He often does, I awoke to that still small voice nudging me to write about grated love, using nutmeg as my example. *What?* That sounded so interesting, so here I am listening to Him, and writing and hoping to share with you something that will encourage you when you, too, experience reactions and emotions out of the deep recesses of your heart and mind that leave you feeling limp, vulnerable, and less than comfortable…and even a bit hopeless.

Did you know that the nutmeg tree takes seven to nine years before a harvest is produced, and doesn't even reach full production until it's 20 years old? And besides that, we don't eat whole nutmeg, we enjoy it grated or in powder form, scraped from the nut, as we sprinkle it for that most aromatic flavor of the winter season.

What does all of that trivia have to do with our emotions and feelings?

- God so gently reminded me that nutmeg is scraped and grated in order to be used for flavor in a dish. And if I were to imagine myself as that nut (no pun intended), I'm sure that grating and scraping would be quite painful, yet necessary, for my intended use – to flavor the dishes set before others to eat.
- God so gently comforted me by reminding me that from time to time, that grating has to take place, so that the hard nut isn't left to spoil or render itself useless. It's in the grating that the flavor and aroma emerges.
- God so gently confirmed to me that I am made whole, complete, and ripe in my walk with the Lord, but even a ripe and whole nutmeg is only good for the table if it's grated and sprinkled in the baking or in the dishes.

Those three qualities of the nutmeg are bringing me hope today.

I saw some ugliness in me that I had hoped was gone, but I realized that outward circumstances and even other people can still bring those things to the surface. That's an uncomfortable realization, but it took me to my knees to ask the Lord for more of his loving hand to continue the process of making me a sweet aroma and a sweet spice, so that when the world comes and sits at my table, they taste Him – not that ugliness.

I was completely broken when I failed in my responses the other night, two huge epic failures. I cried a lot, thought over the situation and even mourned because in my own estimation, I was sure I had missed the mark, disappointed my Father, and hurt the person that hurt me.

The great thing about God's grace and mercy is that both are new daily, and available for me, because he knows I'm going to need them often. He's not surprised by that. And I know the truth. I did not miss the mark, because Jesus met the mark for me – all I have to do is ask him – and he forgives and restores. And as for the hurtful words I let slip from my tongue, those cannot be taken back. But I can bless, I can pray, and I can ask forgiveness, all gifts from my Father that he has given me to freely lavish on those I love.

Do you ever feel as though you've done it again? You've messed up, you've reacted immaturely, and you've misread others and their intentions? And you've felt a volcanic eruption flow from your mouth, your thoughts, and your deeds?

Remember the nutmeg. Grated love from our Father is very often scraping, releasing, and sprinkling us over his table. If we allow him to do this, realize that the discomfort is momentary, and see the good that results all of that hardness releasing sweet aromas – we will arise with hope and healing.

And each time that grating love takes place, each time that aroma and fragrance floods the air, we can rest assured that time and his loving hand is maturing us for the reaping, the harvest of all harvests, and we will one day be like Him – complete – because of his grated love.

I messed up. The hard parts of my heart hurt others. The vulnerable parts of my mind suffered a blow. But Jesus lifted me up and reminded me of his goodness and his completed work in me. I don't know if next time I'll feel the same way, but I do know that more of Him is appearing each time I fail, and that's what it's all about, isn't it?

More of him, less of me, as that hardened nut dwindles, and the aroma strengthens…and fills the room.

HEALTHY HABITS - Out with the Old. In with the New – by Georganne Schuch

Habits are easy to make and hard to break. Ever notice how you can "fall into" a bad habit, but it feels like climbing a mountain to break it? I never seem to fall into good habits. Actually, they seem to take a great deal of effort, for some reason. Bad habits, on the other hand, often affix to me with duct tape-like tenacity.

Many people use the New Year as a time to make resolutions for accomplishing something for the year. Unfortunately, too many make unreasonable resolutions…ones which are bound to fail. Instead, consider two different ways to make resolutions this year.

First, consider the bad habits you have (everyone has one or two dozen.)

Second, brainstorm a few good habits you would like to have.

Let's pick a bad habit, say gossiping. There's something about gossiping which draws in almost everyone. It usually takes the guise of concern for someone, like sharing a prayer request. Too often, the concern is really disguising a feeling of superiority, which says something like, "Thank goodness I'm better than that." While it's not wrong to fill in someone on what so-and-so has been doing since they last saw them, you might ask how much of the news is positive and how much is negative. If you always seem to paint a picture of gloom and doom, then, rest assured, you're gossiping.

Identifying the habit is step one. Humans are usually very good about overlooking their own shortcomings while zooming in on someone else's. After you have identified the problem, then prayerfully consider how to break it. In the case of gossiping, resolve to overlook the inadequacies and failures of others. Make a list of things to be admired or praised and share those first whenever you are updating a long lost friend. Love covers a multitude of sin, after all.

As for good habits, take your pick. If you're like me, you probably have a long list of things you wish you could do or be like. My challenge is picking just one or two. Let's face it, I can't do them all, or at least not all at once. For instance, many years ago, I resolved to eat healthier. The change didn't happen all at once. There were numerous bad eating habits which had to be broken and good eating habits which had to be established. None of those changes happened in a week or even a month. Each had to be identified and gradually implemented. When I realized how much sugar and salt I consumed in convenience and processed food, I began to weed out recipes which didn't fit my new habit and replaced them with similar ones that met my new healthy eating goals. I would not say that I have completely broken the old habits or clinched the perfect healthy eating habit, but I have made great progress.

Therein lays the secret to breaking old habits and making new ones:

- Gradual progress.
- One foot in front of the other.
- Adjustments here and there.
- Trying again when you fail.
- Pressing ahead when you succeed.

While the New Year might seem like the best time to “turn over a new leaf,” any time will do. Take a long honest look at what habits you need to break. Ask yourself which habits you want to acquire. Then, get started.

Beauty for Ashes - Reflecting God's Glory – by Pam Charro

I was asked an interesting question last week.

“How can the people you live among see God's awesome work through you?”

My first response was that I must live a transparent life so that others can see what God is doing in it. And also that I should be talking about him and all that he is doing at every opportunity.

And all that is fine and good, but then I had another thought.

What are my motives in wanting to impress others? What matters most to me? Do I want God to receive all of the glory for all that he is and does ... or do I want a little of that glory for myself?

That question really challenged me, because I tend to be insecure at times and really want others to be impressed with me; especially at this time of year, when I am often around family and friends who have known me and my struggles for many years. I SO want them to see how I have overcome, and often I focus on all of my own efforts and how proud I know I will be once they all see it. **Because I am human, I have the capability to be self-aware, but that ability can be a real hindrance to humility when it turns into self-consciousness.**

Then I got to thinking about Moses.

In Exodus 33, the Bible says that Moses was desperately focused on wanting more of God. He had a familiarity and comfort with the Lord that enabled him to ask for more, and God honored his requests for both God's presence among the people and for God to show Moses His glory. Moses had no food or water for 40 days and nights because he was so into the time he was spending with the Lord. When it was time for him to return to his people, the Bible says he shined so brightly that he needed to wear a veil so that they were not distracted by the bright light. He had encountered such intimacy and intensity in his relationship with God that he couldn't help but show it!

But Moses was not even aware of how shiny he was until others told him. How he appeared to others was not even on his radar.

Wow. I am astounded by that! (And so very challenged.)

How can I imitate this in my own life?

I have a long way to go; that is for sure! But it seems the best thing I can do is keep asking God to help me be closer to him. **I want my God-awareness to so overpower my self-consciousness that God's power cannot help but be seen in my life!**

God wants and deserves all of me, and being in love with him is the most powerful testimony I can have.

A MOMENT IN THYME – Over and Over – by Debra Brown

2015. Facing another year of resolutions is like waiting in line for a roller coaster. I never know what twists and turns the ride may bring, but the possibility of exhilaration lures me back to the line – over and over.

Here we go again. Hopelessness and failure fill my nostrils.

Why haven't resolutions worked for me in the past?

Arcade music invades my space. My four-year old grandson nestles beside me playing a game on my phone -- the same game over and over.

No, the song's the same….

The **level** of the game has changed.

My Women's Bible group studied 2 Peter 1:1-11 this fall. The Lord keeps taking me back to that passage - over and over.

2 Peter 1: 1-11 (The Voice)

Simon Peter, a servant and emissary of Jesus the Anointed One, to those who have received the same precious faith we share through the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus the Anointed. I wish you a full measure of grace and peace as you grow in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

His divine power has given us everything we need to experience life and to reflect God's true nature through the knowledge of the One who called us by His glory and virtue. Through these things, we have received God's great and valuable promises, so we might escape the corruption of worldly desires and share in the divine nature.

To achieve this, you will need to add virtue to your faith, and then knowledge to your virtue; to knowledge, add discipline; to discipline, add endurance; to endurance, add godliness to godliness, add affection for others as sisters and brothers; and to affection, at last, add love. For if you possess these traits and multiply them, then you will never be ineffective or unproductive in your relationship with our Lord Jesus the Anointed; but if you don't have these qualities, then you will be nearsighted and blind, forgetting that your past sins have been washed away. Therefore, brothers and sisters, work that much harder to confirm that God has called you and claimed you. If you do this, then you will never fall along the way;

What did I learn?

- It's all about **His** righteousness (Not mine)
- Grace and Peace (My breath, can't forget to breathe)
- Knowing **Him** is my food. (Why do I run from you?)
- I have everything I need for life and godliness (Yet I keep running to other things)
- **He** enables (Not me)
- God's promises are mine (I've got to wear them)
- These traits are part of everything I need (There's no fruit without them)
    - Faith – I'm hanging on for dear life
    - Virtue – Being so wrapped up in Him that I can't tell where I stop and He

starts
- Knowledge – Honestly, It's intimacy I long for. I must show up.
- Discipline – He enables. Submission. (Sigh…)
- Endurance – It's the over and over and over and over and over…
- Godliness – Simple devotion
- Brotherly love – Vulnerable in community
- LOVE – Being a funnel. Choosing to step aside.

My resolutions may be the same song, but I am at a new level. I believe I'll keep standing in that line – I'll just change my paradigm. 2 Peter 1 will be my kaleidoscope, and I'll not cringe at the word "failure." I'm moving it to my positive column and letting what I learned from those failures move me to *a new level*.

Yes!

And I'm going to grab a friend or two to help me not allow the "over and over" to wear me down."

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road - When Opposites Annoy – by Lynn Cherry

My husband and I are quite different. I suppose that's why we got married. We adhere to the old adage that opposites attract. While I believe it to be true, I think there are moments in every relationship when opposites annoy, and we ask ourselves,

"Why can't he/she be a little more like me?"

What comes to mind, when I think about our opposites, is David's neatness. He gets lost in the kitchen store at the outlet mall. He longs to be organized, to label containers and have only the contents on the label inside the container. David's dream kitchen would rival Martha Stewart's. Like a true chef, he cleans while he cooks so when we sit down to eat we have both a lovely meal and a clean kitchen.

I bring a little more chaos to the picture. I have a Christmas ornament that gives a shout out to cooks like me, a red oven mitt that reads "Mom's Kitchen…a spot here, a spill there, lots of love everywhere." I leave a trail; and unfortunately, it's not all love.

When I make quesadillas, there are bound to be a few stray shreds of cheese. When I make parmesan chicken, cornmeal scatters like seed on the countertop. When I carry freshly washed celery from the sink to the island, a trail of water droplets follow me across the floor. But when my husband (who likes to walk around the house in his fluffy, dry socks) comes in contact with my trail of H2O, his socks are no longer fluffy or dry. Sometimes, I'm convinced he would be a happier man if he could just have dry socks.

Is it too much to ask, for every citizen to simply wipe up their trail? Like camping in the National Forest, "Leave no footprint." Certainly not the footprint made by a wet sock. (Imagine a tracker trying to identify the creature whose footprint was obviously made by a large mammal with soft padded feet.) But it seems as if everywhere the animal steps, it comes in contact with small pools of water where there should be dry ground. It's a mystery, like water is somehow attracted to the cottony underside of its feet."

The problem with me is that I'm oblivious. I don't get lost in kitchen stores, I get lost inside my own head. As hard as it is for neat people to comprehend, I don't even see the water droplets because I'm wondering if I have enough Italian dressing for a salad, if the dishes in the dishwasher are clean or dirty, and the long-term effect of not feeding my children the recommended daily servings of vegetables.

I like to think and process and come up with a theory for everything.

I also get lost in books and have been known to stir spaghetti sauce with book in hand. My idea of quality time is everyone curled up in a comfy chair with a pillow for low back support, a book in one hand and hot chocolate in the other. Add a little rain and an occasional, "Listen to this!" and my love tank overflows. At least, I think so.

Would life actually be better if everyone were more like me?

Of course, we are not opposites in every area. We share quite a lot in common. But here's my theory. (*See, I told you I'd have one…)*

The opposites that sometimes get under our skin are the same things that save us from ourselves.

Although David is neat and organized, he also loves to laugh. He is perpetually optimistic and so good at enjoying life. When things get deep and dark inside my head, he is the light.

It's odd, isn't it? David gets uptight around the house. I get uptight in the head.

If we were more alike, we'd either live in an immaculate home inspired by The Container Store where we spend all our time cleaning and organizing or we would both have ulcers.

I am grateful for the way my husband can lift my head and open my eyes to the good, good life around me. And I'm pretty sure he would say he has benefited from the books I've read and some of the theories in my head. It's all about perspective, tilting and turning to find the angle that allows us to see our opposites in light of their ability to help us both grow.

I'm not sure he will ever find the same appreciation for my messes. After more than 20 years of marriage, it feels like my water droplets relocate to position themselves directly under the ball of David's feet.

I was already in the shower when I realized I left my face soap at the bathroom sink.

What time is that meeting?

Will the dust ever settle on this project?

If only I was a little more assertive and confident of…

Oh yes, my face soap!

No worries, I'll just dash over there and grab it.

I was rinsing off, when my husband walked in our bathroom. I saw his fluffy dry socks moving in slow motion across the landmine of puddles I'd left on the tile.

Noooo….

Date Night Fun - Begin Again by Marcy Lytle

January is the time for new beginnings. Whether or not you make New Year's resolutions, it's often the time you make new lists, cross off what you've accomplished from last year, and look forward to the newness of the months to come. So why not start again with newness in your marriage? It might be time to begin again some of the things that fell apart last year, and it might be the right time to resolve to make them last this year!

Begin Exercising. Working out as a couple, as part of your date, can be so fun. It's still the winter season, so think of five places where you can date…and walk. It can be the indoor mall, for a brisk walk, a cup of coffee and a movie afterwards. It might be dancing in your own living room, making dinner together, and then reading through the lyrics of the songs on a new CD. Or you could head out for a cozy dinner in a restaurant with a fireplace, then bundle up, replace your heels with sneakers, and head out for a cold winter's walk around town, ending the evening over a puzzle and a cup of hot chocolate!

Begin Devotions. It's hard to find the right moment to connect spiritually, as so often the kids are screaming, you're in a hurry to rush out the door, or he can barely keep his eyes open when you finally do sit down together. However, this awesome daily verses calendar is a great way to begin. Tear off the verse of the day and tuck it in your purse for the date night out. Begin your date with a word of prayer, and then over dinner, or alone out under the stars, pull out the verse and read it, pray over it, imagine it, and give thanks for it. What a perfect way to end a perfect evening…

Begin Date Night. Maybe these monthly date nights are something you enjoy reading, but you never have actually kept up regularly with consistent nights out with him. Don't wait for him to plan it all. Set the date now on the calendar, say every other Friday night, and begin again that much needed time together. If you've got little ones, start date night after they go to bed – at home – with candlelight breakfast at 10pm. If your kids are teens and have to be chauffeured around town, go together in the car, and catch an appetizer, or a movie, while the kids are having their fun. And by all means, if your kids are grown, or if you have no children yet, use this time alone wisely – build your relationship – go out and enjoy your town! Check out our archives to begin your dating again, as there are enough ideas to keep you having fun all year long!

Begin conversations. When's the last time you and your husband had long conversations that didn't include finances, kids, or arguing over the last thing he or you didn't do? Conversation time is a lost art. It can be so stimulating. Here are a couple of ideas: Enjoy your date at a local bookstore in the coffee shop area, grab a book and peruse it together. Perhaps you'll choose a travel book, a cooking manual, or a how-to home idea magazine, and share and visit as you dream and plan together. Or use these conversation starter cards and begin again with stimulating questions about each other! This is NOT the time to accuse, argue, or stir up trouble. The only thing you need to be stirring is interest in him!

Begin holding hands. This act of affection is strong when young love is alive and there are no children in between us. But if are not careful, our hands drift apart, just like we can drift apart

emotionally, if we don't work at connecting! Plan a date where hand-holding is part of the evening's activities. Grab his hand in the car, hold it as you walk into the theater, leave one hand free to hold his while you enjoy your popcorn, and take his hands and tell him what you love about them! End the evening holding hands in prayer, giving thanks for each other. And finally, enjoy and discuss these cool quotes about holding hands.

This month's list is mostly just general ideas to get you started again on your dating journey this year together. Begin again your connection with him, mark it on the calendar, and don't let family, parties, or obligations interrupt. Make date night the most important activity in your busy life, and anticipate the fun as the calendar date draws nearer…as you both begin again in 2015!

After 30 Years - *For*…Not Regarding – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever worked in an office and gotten a memo, and at the top it reads "Re:" and then on the line is written what the memo is regarding? It might be about a staff meeting, time off, or pay scales; and it serves its purpose well to inform you of the content you're about to read.

Our prayers for our husbands are often just like that. We start out by letting God know that the content of our prayer is going to be regarding our husband: his behavior, his lack of initiative, his waning romantic side, etc. We've got an agenda for our prayer regarding our husband and we want God to take note, respond to each request, and wrap up the answer in a memo back to us, stating "Done."

I've spent a good part of my married life praying prayers *regarding* my husband, just like that. First, I tried telling my husband what it is that I want and need, and then if he didn't respond like I expected him to, I wailed and wept to God, hoping he would then take up my cause and make me happy.

However, it came to my mind one day that maybe I should be praying *for* my husband, instead of *regarding* him.

In other words, what if I started asking God to speak to my husband and let him know how much he is loved, to encourage my husband with favor at work, to heal my husband's wounds from his childhood, or to bless my husband with rain from heaven? What if I changed up my prayer life to include petitions *for* my husband's well-being instead of *regarding* my own desires and demands?

This may seem like a small thing – the difference between "for" prayers and "regarding" prayers – but it's anything but small.

When we pray *regarding* our husbands, we're usually frustrated, disappointed, and angry. We can't remember the last time he actually asked us out on a date, we can't forget the way he screamed at the kids, or we are still fuming that he forgot to take care of that important item we asked him to do…and now we have to do it. It's the same with the memos at the office. When they arrive in our inbox, we know someone somewhere has complained, noted a problem, or there's a change in policy about to take place.

But what if…one day we were sitting at the computer and a memo arrived with nothing on the subject line, and the content was full of compliments, praise, and bonuses we had no idea our boss was sending us? Wouldn't that be a great place to work, where we received those kinds of messages daily?

That's the kind of message and memo we need to send up to God, our heavenly father, who loves marriage, loves the family, and loves us. We need to petition God *for* our husbands, so that our husbands receive God's love, acceptance, forgiveness, power, and maturity that only comes from walking close to Him, hearing his voice, and responding to his direction.

Somehow, when we begin to take the focus off of ourselves and start focusing on our husbands and their needs…our own needs begin to fade…and we realize something huge.

Our husbands have difficulty being all that we need them to be, often because they never measure up, and we let them know about it way too often.

God usually works in complete opposite ways from the norm, and our marriage connection is no different. **The more silent we are in the ears of our husbands and in God's ears "regarding" all of his faults, and the more verbal we are in petitions "for" blessing and goodness to follow our husbands every day, the more our own needs are met.**

God has a way of getting our husband's attention that doesn't include our memos regarding him. All we have to do is pray for our husband and his relationship with his Father, and the rest falls into place. And the quicker we learn to place our husband's pitfalls at the foot of our Father, trusting in his goodness and mercy to follow us daily, the more satisfied we become in our walk with Him…and our walk with him.

Next time you start to pray for your husband, check and see what's on the memo line you're sending up to God. Is it blank, allowing God to fill it in with what he sees is necessary and good for the moment? Or is that line full of your complaints, notices, and changes you want done…pronto?

It's a hard thing to do, for sure. And it requires making a choice daily. But it's a lot easier and fulfilling when we learn the secret of praying *for*…and not *regarding*.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems: What Is My Purpose? – By Kayley Ryan

With college approaching, *senioritis* corrupting my studies, and a sense of uncertainty growing, I sometimes just want to shut down. Turn off the clock. Sleep through the school day. And stop for a moment to breathe.

Am I the only one? I doubt it. In fact, I'm pretty positive you clicked on this article because you feel the same way. Purpose is something that is terribly hard to define and even harder to identify in one's own life.

In fact, purpose is so difficult and so significant a subject that Samuel Clemens, under the pen name of Mark Twain, writes of it, "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born *and the day you find out why*."

I asked one of my friends if she knew what her purpose was. I guess I shouldn't have been, but I was shocked at the confidence in Alison's voice as she responded, without hesitation, **"Yes. My purpose is to glorify God and to live my life to the fullest."**

As a future political science major, Hannah envisions herself helping "those who are afflicted by war or their government's bad choices. And that they get justice by sending the people with these crimes against humanity to jail."

But as confident as my friends seemed regarding how to define purpose, they struggled with how to practically apply that purpose to their lives.

At age 16, Christi has one or two years before she has to file college applications and the FAFSA. Yet she still faces the pressing issue of her future career choice, and in this day and age, she and other teens like her seem to be pressed into that decision more and more.

I find it interesting that so many movies and books reacting against the themes of conformity and being stuck in a single career for the rest of one's life are gaining traction in this generation. Popular movies such as *Divergent*, *The Hunger Games*, and *The Giver* come to mind. But this is not a new theme. **We teenagers constantly struggle with how to avoid being stuck in a box and yet still have a definite purpose.**

In response to why these books and movies have such an appeal with our generation, Christi offered, "…the main reason they're putting [that media] out there is because people feel the need for purpose; and because they lack that, they don't feel they're needed."

Christi wasn't the only friend I spoke with who faced the uncertainty of her future.

When it comes to choosing the right college, Hannah expresses how difficult it is "…to continue applying and continue researching—because it's so hard when you don't know what's going to happen."

To sum up her response, I would use one word: uncertainty. I believe all teenagers come to a point where they are simply frightened at the *uncertainty* of their futures.

I remember as a young girl, transitioning from a nightlight to lights out, that I had to face my door while I slept because I didn't want to be crept up on unawares by some unseen foe. Uncertainty haunted me then as it does now.

However, when I asked my friend Alison about whether she feared the future, she startled me by saying, "I never really think about the future too much because it's ultimately completely out of my control. **And so just living in the moment I think can help you shape your future: taking each moment at a time."**

As strange as it seems, this really does ring true. Your future will eventually be your present, and your present will lead up to your future, so why do we pay so much attention to that word future when we can begin living life to the fullest now? Jesus certainly recommended that we focus more on living each moment "to the full" (NIV, John 10:10) than we do worrying "about tomorrow" (NIV, Matt. 6:25-34).

So how do we stop worrying about our *future* purpose and start living our *present* purpose?

I asked for advice on this theme from Christi, who replied decisively,

"Sit down. Shut up. And listen." I probed for more details, and she explained, "Listen to your elders. They probably have a load of wisdom for you. Listen to what God's saying. Listen to…your peers. You really need to listen to the kids that are younger than you because they see a lot of things that other people don't see. So if you are willing to sit down, wait, and be patient and listen to everything, you'll figure it out. You'll figure it out real quick."

At the time, I thought, *Well, I'm not a good listener. I'm a great talker, but listening isn't really my thing.* And yet maybe that means that this is the area I need to grow in the most. For others, finding purpose involves different struggles such as choosing a future career or college major.

Hannah advises young people to not "freak out and choose something completely unrealistic or freak out and choose something they're not going to like…You really need to research and see your options before you make a choice."

Live in the moment, listen to others' advice, research your options rather than making a rash decision—all great advice. But what each of my friends emphasized most was this: *trust in God.*

"I think that if you trust in God, he will patch for you a purpose," said Hannah.

Alison's thoughts were similar, as she identified her purpose in the Holy Spirit, **"I believe the Holy Spirit lives within me, so it's like a constant fire that's burning…you can't really ignore that. It's there; you don't have to look for it."**

Christi simply said, **"I know I'm here for God."**

I know; it sounds cliché. But maybe that's the point. Maybe trusting God and following his will for your life is the best definition of purpose there is.

As I reflect back on the conversations I had with my friends, I am brought back to that startling statement of Alison's: **"I never really think about the future too much because it's ultimately completely out of my control."**

I think I finally understand that now. The future is nothing to worry about because…it's in the Lord's hands, not my own.

"The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands."

(ESV, Psalm 138:8)

MOVING FORWARD - Who I Really Am – by Pam Charro

One of my greatest struggles is with my identity. I seem to need constant reminders of who I really am because the battle for what I believe about myself is never-ending.

- I have lived through this victory or that shameful experience.
- Others have spoken this or that over me.
- I have or have not performed well in a given setting.
- My current situation, whether good or bad, seems to be a reflection of who I am.
- Other people have snapshots and opinions of me and my value, but nothing necessarily trustworthy.

Life's circumstances are always a roller coaster, and not a reliable indicator of any constant truth about me. Yet, in error, I have given all of these things power to shape me that was not deserved. I have accepted blame and condemnation when I did not have to, and I have felt puffed up when "things" have turned out well (or I have a good hair day or have lost a few pounds).

When I focus on what is true, though, I know that circumstances do not define me or my value, they only make me feel insecure. Blame and condemnation only produce paralysis, and trusting in accomplishments only brings insecurity, because I can never consistently perform up to par. Anything that is negative is not of God, so I know I need to replace those kinds of thoughts with life-giving ones. **The only constant that I can trust about who I am is what God thinks** ... and he speaks life about me and wants me to be secure in all areas! His promises about and for me are nothing but good.

In Philippians 3, Paul encourages God's people to forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead. That means that nothing I have been through, whether wonderful or traumatic, should have power to define who I am. God says that I am set apart, made holy and righteous, and that I am pleasing to him. He smiles when he looks at me.

What does that look like for me?

- Am I intentionally working on training my mind to agree with God about my identity?
- Am I willing to consciously let go of past experiences that have branded me in ways that God says are not true?
- Am I just believing every lie about myself that life throws my way?

When I focus on God's truth about me, every other belief seems to lose its power. And I am free to just ... be. Be my very best possible gift while I am here.

Thoughts and words of death will never bring life, and temporary situations have no stability. Only God's thoughts and promises can empower me to let go of negativity and live an abundant life.

All I have to do is keep believing them.

Saddle Up – Sucked Dry – by Melissa Critz

"Chemotherapy Drug."

This is written in big black and yellow lettering on an ominous thick plastic bag, and it stares at me, awaiting its use. After working my right hand into a plastic disposable glove, I unscrew the lid on the tube and carefully squeeze the drug onto my gloved, pointer finger. Domingo is haltered and tied securely to his stall. Being that I am applying this drug twice a day for several days now, anticipation has set in and the twitch (a device which averts the horse's mind away from what the person is doing to the temporary, prominent top lip pain), won't be used today or anymore.

With quick action, I hold tightly to the haltered equine with my left hand and dab the meds on the cancerous tumor located on the upper eyelid with the right hand. *Done!* This treatment is not new to either Domingo or to myself. Upon purchasing him over 10 years ago, I knew then what I was inheriting, as he had a massive tumor already growing on an eyelid that had been extremely neglected by a previous owner. This process has been a part of both of our lives on and off for over 10 years.

However, this tumor is being very stubborn and, alas, Domingo must face surgery. The tumor cannot be manipulated anymore with creams or even the flymask which Domingo wears daily as a guard against the sun's powerful rays. It *must* be removed. Cut out. Completely taken away from the suffering host.

My *saddle partner* was showing me something even in this situation.

- *Are there things in life that just cling and won't end?*
- *Are there things that hold on and suck the life out of a person?*
- *Are there things that are definitely detrimental but stay attached and won't relent?*

While thinking this through and pondering what this could mean, I realized that it can even be something that we don't even know is there; it's feeding on us without us knowing. And not just being neutral in the matter and just existing but taking something that is meant for good and turning it against us.

My first thoughts took me to things in our daily life – television, internet, texting, YouTube, twitter, Facebook, and on and on. You get the idea – things that suck our time. All of these are so ingrained into our lives now that there are just extensions of us. I know that all of these things can certainly be used for good. But can they also become attached to us and then suck us dry of ourselves? Take away time that is needed and meant for others (Not other *things*, but others) period? What about time for quiet, time for talking with the Lord, time for plain ole listening?

Okay, I know this is starting to sound cliché. I sure don't mean it that way.

The power of this picture with this tumor that the Lord showed to me was so strong that I wanted Him to show me how deeply this meant to Him and go beyond the cliché.

I get bombarded daily with so much that needs to be done, from people and/or organizations asking for help with this and that. Don't get me wrong. It's all very worthwhile stuff, and meant to help others. It's not even something that is directly sent to me – it's what all of us see via electronic media or via mailings or hear via conversations. If we get bombarded with these things and say ,"Yes," to everything and we don't spend time with the Lord in conversation over what He asks of us, then we may be sucked dry.

In a devotional that I own, I read just recently about our faith and how we must nurture it with the Truth. If we do not nurture our faith daily, then fear may come on us, fear that can be just waiting there like a tumor that isn't just attached but is working against us. So, faith must be nurtured. (*Boy. That is good.)*

- Get rid of that cancerous tumor that wants to hinder you.
- Get rid of it completely.
- Nurture that healthy part that seeks after Him.

Don't let things rob you of time with your Savior. Make Him a part of everything in your life and get rid of the unhealthy stuff for good! Let Him be your saddle partner. He has just the right antidote to get rid of those maladies that can suck you dry.

Our Father is gentle in Spirit and tender in all He does towards His children. Just be still, soak Him in, and let Him be the surgeon and bring healing.

That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases."
Matthew 8:16-17

Bush Bean Blessings - Choosing Choices by Tammy Morrison

Change doesn't come easy. As a matter of fact, change and resistance often become opposing best friends. Sometimes, it can actually mimic a love-hate relationship. One moment you've determined to set a change in motion, then the very next moment you've talked yourself out of it, *again.* Your emotions and logic seem to be at war. (I know you know what I'm talking about. It feels as though you're crazy, or at least headed that way.)

Up.
Down.
All around.
Sideways.
Diagonal.
Forces pulling you this way and that.

You make every attempt to clear your mind and revisit the change situation another day, but when you do, the whole bundle of confusion begins *again*. And just when you think you've opted to stay the course, you talk yourself out of the change, again. You throw your hands in the air, groan with frustration and say, "Forget it!"

Change is one of the most difficult tasks we all continuously face.

One of the reasons it's so hard to change is that changing requires making *determined* and *purposeful choices*. Another matter of fact is that there are so many choices from which to choose; the selections and possibilities before us are endless and can be overwhelming, oftentimes debilitating.

So how can we know if the choices we make for change are the right ones?
How can we know if the choices we choose will bring about the change for which we strive?

There is no guarantee. Sometimes we've just got to take the plunge, a leap of faith, so to speak (but that's a whole other article for another day). That being said, there *are* a few foundational guideposts we can utilize as a source of mindfulness.

Consider these thoughts for choosing choices to bring about change:

C*hrist-centered*: The change you seek should be one that will glorify God and fulfill His will for your life. Will this change hinder or help in your life's purpose? Is this something that God has placed in your spirit to grow you or something that will compel you to help others? Is it the fulfillment of a God plan or a man plan? Allow His Spirit to lead you in all areas of your life. Live out His mission, not your own. When it's His plan, although you may experience some misgivings, you will possess a peace that passes human understanding. Peace is an excellent gauge.

H*ope*: Whatever you do, let hope, not hurt, guide your choices. Hope captures an essence of life that is vital in bringing about change. Without hope, what you face in life is too bleak to even think about. That's why it's called *hopeless.* If you don't have hope, life is *less.* Looking to the future with hope (positive thinking or a can-do attitude) will, quite literally, be the difference of making or breaking your outlook and thought process. You must possess hope for now and

hope for your future. Hurt will cause you to stagnate and flounder in despair and won't get you anywhere. Hope, on the other hand, will spur you on to better and brighter things.

O*pportunity*: It is vital that you consider every single angle that you choose to bring about change--the good, the bad, and the ugly. You must consider the best-case scenario as well as the worst-case scenario that will grow out of this change. Will you be better or bitter for the choices you make? What will happen if you *do*? What will happen if you *don't*? Think through your opportunities.

I*dea*: How long has this idea for change been brewing? Is it a rash or hasty decision, a dangerous "I need it now, I need it now!" mentality that can be detrimental? Take some time to breathe it, think it, speak it out. Does it look different today than it did yesterday? If that's the case, hold on a little longer; the time may not yet be right.

C*haracter*: Carefully consider how this change will affect your character and integrity. Will it bring about negative or positive results? Will rivers of living water flow out of this wellspring, or will toxic waste seep out and contaminate everything in its path?

E*motions*: Too many times people make choices out of heightened emotions. It's hard to make appropriate decisions during times of emotional crises. That's why it's so important set a foundation for rational thinking so that change can come about from intentional choices that you won't be sorry for later. Wait for your emotions to settle before you decide.

S*olicit counsel*: Seek out the wisdom of a few trusted sources. These people can provide different approaches and perspectives you might not think of yourself. That's not to say you have to fulfill every consideration they bring to the table, but their thoughts and ideas can give you insight you might not otherwise think about.

With every new year, people resolve to make changes.

Hopefully, you have determined to remain sharp and focused. In doing so, be sure that you are mindful of the consequences of your choices. Remember to take into consideration those you hold dear and how your actions will affect them. The choices you make today absolutely affect your tomorrow. There is no way to fight the consequences of your choices. There is no way to defy this little ditty: good choices = good consequences. Therefore, it only stands to reason that bad choices = bad consequences. Each choice brings about change, sometimes for good...sometimes for bad. Living life to the fullest will come about when you learn to set aside rash decision-making and concentrate on purposeful choices that will help you fulfill your destiny.

Don't just talk about change...do something about it. Use the guidelines set before you in this word and choose positive, life-altering choices to bring about the change you desire.

Come on...sttrrrrretch!

Spread your wings and fly!

REAL STORIES – Transitions - by Jeannie Center

The past nine years have included some of the toughest times of my life and at the same time, the best times of my life.

In May 2005 I began a new journey of, what seemed like, never ending change – my world turned upside down and took me on paths I never imagined. I was laid off from the second best job ever in terms of what I did, the freedom to excel and grow in the gifts and talents God gave me, plus great pay. Again, it was one of the toughest seasons but BEST times in my life and I would not be the person I am today without it. It was tough in terms of circumstances like financial hardship and loss of "status," but best in terms of my relationship to God becoming more intimate and my journey of finding Joy in the journey *despite* the hardships and challenges.

Seeing and beginning to live my life differently was a breakthrough versus only defining breakthrough as a big pot of money or an awesome job. Experiencing more peace, being able to relax and actually enjoy the journey, letting go of things I have no control over versus making everything a never-ending relay race, juggling and carrying what God never intended me to carry were all more breakthroughs!

This was illustrated to me when I went to Big Bend National Park for the first time at Thanksgiving. How appropriate it was that I went at Thanksgiving with friends that have made it a family tradition. My mental picture of Big Bend was desert, you know - tumbleweeds rolling around without life, snakes, hot, miserable and no place I wanted to be. Well, it is a desert, but not what I had envisioned.

I became keenly alert to the beauty of this desert, how God designed life to be sustained in the desert, peace in the desert, a "good" quietness in the desert, rest in the desert, fun in the desert, protection in the desert and provision in the desert.

The beauty includes waterfalls, breathtaking Texas mountains, (hills to someone else), trails, cool temperatures in the fall, beautiful rocks and formations, color, wildlife, plants and more! (Thanks to Marilyn for inviting me!) God used that picture, because He knows I am a visual person, to help illustrate that the desert was not something to dread or avoid but to appreciate and experience.

During this season, I made a deliberate choice to draw closer to God, even when I did not "feel" like it. I did this the best way I knew how and begin to trust Him with areas of my life where I lacked experienced in trusting Him. It should not have surprised me that others would not "get" where I was because I did not "get it" either!

It is easy to "trust" when everything is going great, but growth occurs with pressure.

After some self-pity, anger, and depression, I began to yield, since I did want to enjoy life even if my circumstances did not change according to my expectations. I say *deliberate* choice because it was tough in the midst of the significant financial hit of long-term unemployment

more than once, eroding retirement and savings, and my ever-eroding self-confidence. I made a choice to seek God and stay connected to a few who would be a good influence for me.

Going through a tough season can impact your relationships in that some may continually offer "suggestions" thinking you must need to *do more* or *do something different* to get yourself out of the situation, when all the time God is in control of the situation and is using it for your good. Others may just fall away because they do not know what to say after a while.

During this time, I began a landscaping business (aka mowing yards) to keep my mind occupied, give me a sense of purpose, and provide some structure to my day. For the first time, I really had to accept the fact that I was not in charge, I could not fix my circumstances, and the usual methods were "not working" in any area of my life. BUT God was still there with me all along the way doing what He does best, loving me, and taking care of me.

He promises to never leave us or forsake us.

He showed me tenderness that endeared me more to Him than ever before. God allowed me to experience a season where I went from being on top of the world (or just riding the wave as I refer to it) to being flat on the ground. Examples include loss of favor with others, no longer sought after for answers / solutions to problems, and sometimes I was just flat ignored. Even God was seemingly silent at times, but He did give me nuggets along the way just at the right time. I spent most of my time reading the psalms when I did read His word. God showed me (notice He was not completely silent – just different than what I had grown accustomed to) things about myself that were not very pretty – like self-reliance – which was easier to see when I had needs that I knew I could not meet. He allowed this for my good and His glory.

During this time, God also gave me a horse – yes *gave* me. (I had reunited with some friends, Alexis and Nancy, who had horses, and I began to pray for a horse.) My girl is a beautiful paint and has a white heart under her throat. I call it *sealed with a kiss* just for Jeannie, from Jesus. Having a horse is quite a commitment but has taught me so much and kept me occupied.

To be successful with a horse, you must learn to "read" your horse, and focus on your horse and the task at hand. Horses are very sensitive (like the Holy Spirit) and if you are not paying attention you will miss the message and might end up on your backside! Developing mutual trust while setting boundaries and extending grace are essential to progressing successfully. I knew I needed to focus on what the Holy Spirit was trying to communicate to me.

The season of extended unemployment (twice in 10 years) was the beginning of slowing me down and a segue to improving my relationships, letting go of expectations of others and myself, serving, loving, extending more grace, and humbling myself. I cannot give to others what I do not have and I cannot see what I need to see without God showing me. Loving people is something I am called to do as a child of God. I cannot love until I am loved and then I can only love through the power of the Holy Spirit, which includes putting others first and giving up on my expectations of others, including myself. I am called to love the lovely *and* the unlovely. And then I cross paths with someone that is just really over the top with things that annoy me!

I was graduating from just keeping my mouth shut, or walking away to avoid saying something I would regret, to *initiating* love in situations where I was treated unfairly, ignored, and more. *What? I did not sign on for this.* My previous method would be to take off or just ignore them /

the situation. Love requires continual sacrifice. For me, I wrestled with how to love someone without losing me. I did not want to "fake" something I did not "feel." I went back to I Corinthians 13 as my guide, among other scriptures, and stayed on my knees. I continue to be a work in progress (I do not get it right all the time) but I am experiencing more success than ever before.

Loving others first may mean giving them the best half of the sandwich when they would have no way of knowing which half was better, speaking truth of what God says about them rather than complaining about what you see with your eyes, allowing them to share their heart without immediately trying to lay out a detailed solution, and returning good for an evil done and then forgiving!

God has given me many opportunities to practice loving others and it is a continued focus. God first loves me, I receive that love, and then I am able to love others with His help. He has been so gracious to me, tender, gentle and patient. As I practice loving others by serving, blessing them with my words instead of *cursing* ("They always do ____", "They will never change"), I have success. As I continue to grow in this area, I see fruit and gain favor. I do not worry as much what others think, including what I think about myself.

What God says is truth, so read His word and speak His word and see what God will do in your life. Seek Him and you will find Him. Knock and He will answer. You do not need to be "perfect." Just come as you are and share with Him what is in your heart (and sometimes that is not pretty!)Thanks to my family, both by birth and by choice, for loving me when I am not lovely.

If you do not know God personally, you can today. Ask Him to forgive you of the things you have done that you know are wrong; ask Him to come into your life and to guide you.

- I pray God's best for all readers as you begin or continue your journey toward true Joy.
- I pray for breakthroughs and the revelation of God's love for you right now.
- I pray that God bless you in every area of your life exactly where you need it most right now.

I would like to insert a quick comment for those who need this:

If you are in an abusive situation, get to safety and get help today! Most likely you may not be able to see things as they really are without the help of Godly counsel. If you are the abuser, get help today! You will never be satisfied until you do. You have needs that you cannot see as well.

I am an outdoor gal, fun loving, adventure seeker, advocate, and one who has overcome much. Thank you God for pursuing me, showing me love and giving me the opportunity to live life! I love to dress up and go out but my everyday preference is jeans, boots and cotton T shirts – comfort. I am a horsewoman and love it! My almost 1000-pound baby girl is CJ which is short for ***Celeste*** *(Heaven) sent* ***Joy****! I love contrasts in everything from food, clothes, friends, decorating and more. I love to spend time outdoors and regain peace when I find myself stressed, tired or just "sideways" as I like to call it. I love to be with people and to "connect" which is more than just small talk. Eyeball to eyeball and heart to heart. I love all types of music, to sing, dance, ride my horse, take care of horses, enjoy great food, see movies, hang out with friends, go off road, sail, problem solve, advocate and more! I have been single longer than I have*

been married and I'm open to sharing the rest of my life with "Mr. Wonderful." Next year I turn 60! Yikes, that sounds like a BIG number.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Don't Pray About It – by Marcy Lytle

Just recently, I stopped, when I started a prayer that went like this,

"Lord, help me to be more _____."

Sometimes I fill in the blank with "kind," "loving," "faithful," and other adjectives that describe a loving daughter, fully devoted to her ever loving Father.

Don't get me wrong. I pray often for lots of things and prayer is necessary and good. However, I've come to realize that there are some things I don't need to pray about at all. I just need to make a choice. The continual stumbling, fumbling, and bumbling in my walk with him isn't because I haven't prayed enough, or that he hasn't answered me. It's simply because I've made the choice to disobey or ignore what I know to do. Or even worse, I've simply enjoyed the old me more than the one I know I need to be.

For example, there have been times when I've listened to gossip and even joined in the conversation and later felt bad about it. I then prayed that prayer above and asked for God's help "next time" to be able to bite my tongue. But the reality is that I enjoyed the gossip and I wanted to hear more. It was a choice I made, and had nothing to do with God not answering my prayer.

For example, I've said unkind things to my husband and shooed him away because I was too busy to be bothered, only to feel remorse later in the day for not stopping to hug him or listen to what he has to say. So again, I prayed that prayer above for God to help me be more kind to him. But the reality is that I chose my needs and busyness over his attempt to hug and kiss me, and there was no need to pray. I just needed to make a choice.

For example, I've wallowed in fear for an entire day because I woke up from a bad dream, or had a scary thought that overtook my otherwise peaceful day. So out comes that prayer for God to help me trust him and to not be afraid. But sometimes I hear no reply, because his word has already told me that I have nothing to fear, and that I'm to trust him with all my heart – leaning not on my own understanding. It's my choice to wallow…or not.

It all sounds so simple, when I type it out, and I think it can be much simpler than we make it.

When we pray that same prayer all the time and hear no answer, we often get mad at God for not aiding us, rescuing us, or enabling us to overcome. But in reality, we don't need aid, a rescue, or an enabler. We need to stand up and choose what we already know to do. I believe that's the reason why some of our prayers go unanswered.

Prayer is obviously something we must do. And prayer with faith is a combo that works.

But just like stopping to lend a hand to a friend is more important than praying for that friend's needs, so is stopping our prayer to make a choice, rather than badgering God to move his hand.

I'm still thinking on this one. But more often than not, **I'm realizing that I can free up my prayer time for others and higher purposes, when I just choose to do what I know is right and good, instead of praying for the strength and ability to change.**

Choices are hard, sometimes. And we're going to mess up. But once we make the right choice and we realize the power that comes from obeying what we know is right, it gets easier the next time.

Keep praying. But think about what you're asking God to do, and see if he hasn't already told you a long time ago…

And then just do it.

FRESH THYME - Faith is a walk. Not a park bench. – by Marcy Lytle

Oh, wait! Before you stop reading, and say to yourself, "Oh yes it is! Faith is a place of rest," let me explain what I mean.

There's a small lake not far from my house; in fact, a friend calls it a "lake-let," because it's really tiny. But it's so beautiful, and has a great walking trail around it. Along that trail are park benches at different intervals, where we often sit to rest for a few minutes. If we're walking in the brutal summer heat in Central Texas when there are no clouds to give us a reprieve from the heat, we most definitely take advantage of those benches.

However, I'd like to now take you with me on that walk around the lake and share with you how our faith in God is a walk like that, and it's definitely not parking ourselves on one of the benches along the way.

If we park on a bench, we miss what's up ahead. Imagine starting out our walk at a brisk pace only to sit on the first bench and stay there. In the first leg of the walk (depending on where you start out) there's a cool view of some beautiful farmland, and a nice bridge over the spillway, but that's it. The beauty has only begun. Why start the walk if we're only going to sit at the first answered prayer, and revel in God's goodness in that one place? There's so much more up ahead!

If we park on a bench, we settle for the distance we've come, sometimes thinking we've "arrived" when we're not even halfway along. There's a movie I recently saw in the theater called *The Theory of Everything* – a true story of the life of Stephen Hawking – a renowned atheist. He has spent his life trying to figure out the beginning of the universe, and he says this that if we find the answer to that question, it will be the ultimate triumph of human reason, for then we will know the mind of God. In other words, it sounds to me like he believes if he can figure out the how of God, he will then believe in God. Not only is faith not a park bench, but faith is not *knowing* the mind of God, it's *trusting* the mind of God. If we sit down and park ourselves along our faith journey, declaring that we've figured out this "God thing," then faith is dead, no longer needed. And again, we're missing what's up ahead.

If we park on a bench, we might decide to play too long in the water and shrivel up. A good distance around our lake there's a sandy beach where families set up picnic and play in the water. This area is super inviting, because there's a covered pavilion, big rocks for sitting, a small playground, and even a station where one can rent kayaks or pedal boats. How fun! But imagine with me what will happen if we stay at this beach and park ourselves there, never moving! Wouldn't that be absurd? We can sit and observe others, listen to the laughter of the children, and enjoy a lunch that hits every receptor of our stomach, but we can't park in that experience. The night is coming, the water will get cold, and it's time to move on around the next bend. There are places of reveling, laughter, and enjoyment along our faith walk, but just like staying in the water all day shrivels up our skin, so does parking ourselves and reveling in God's goodness in our lives. We have to continue on to bless others, learn more, and experience new heights ahead.

If we park on a bench, we may feel we need a rescue because we've walked so far, and we cannot go another step. One summer day we walked the lake in close to 100 degree heat, with humidity. I'm not sure what we were thinking, but I experienced heat exhaustion and had to definitely park myself on a bench. In fact, I couldn't walk another step in the heat, and had to have my husband get the car and come pick me up. The car wasn't that far ahead, but I couldn't go any farther. If I'd walked that far, come that distance, arrived so close to the finish line only to park and sit on the bench and continue to swelter, I would never have experienced the rescue. Sometimes we walk a long way in our faith, but we suffer one too many blows and we see a bench of apathy, bitterness, and frustration up ahead where we'd like to park and stay. However, God wants us to cry out to him, fall into his arms, and ask him to carry us on around the next curve. It's okay that we find ourselves weak at times on the walk, and he knows when the sun is too strong on any given day. But he doesn't want us to park ourselves in pity and depression. He wants us to call on his name. He never said we had to walk in faith alone, burned up, become sick to our stomachs, thirsty to the core, and near death. He will enable us to finish strong, show up with a ride, offer us a cold drink, and reveal the last leg of the journey where that we can complete together.

We've now made it around this lake and arrived at our destination, and it feels oh so good, a great sense of accomplishing something good. Our eyes witnessed the beauty that grew alongside the lake, we paused to enjoy others on the journey, we kept looking ahead in anticipation of the next turn, and we made it!

If you get a chance this month, go on a trail that has a beginning and an end, with park benches along the way, and open your eyes, go with a friend, walk forward, and refuse to settle yourself on any of the benches, so that you can reach the finish line. Yes, please take a rest on each bench, think about where you've walked, but then get up and move on.

Share with us what you learn on your faith walk.

FRESH THYME - Men in Traffic by Marcy Lytle

The three men in my immediate family all commute a long ways to work, and my husband and my son drive around in traffic all day. Traffic in my city is horrendous, and if there's a wreck on the highway – forget it. They're stuck in a gridlock for a long time. No one likes being stuck in traffic, anywhere, at any time. But my men are in traffic, it's a fact of life nowadays for most, and so I pray for their safety.

But what about all of the "other" traffic our men encounter on a daily basis? We're in a society full of comings and goings, fast drivers, and roads and bridges being built constantly. How do we pray for guys in all sorts of potential traffic jams…or even wrecks of a different kind?

Pornography – This is the fast lane that ends up sending our men careening off of a cliff of disaster. It's the lane in which many men are driving, unable to see the warning signs along the road and the exit signs that flash "Get off now!" According to Covenant Eyes, 66% of young men and 18% of young women view pornography online at least once a week. There's a verse in Psalm 119:9 that asks the question, "How can a young man keep his way pure?" And it then supplies the answer, "By guarding it according to your word." We can pray for our guys to be hungry for the word of God, provide them opportunities to hear it, and offer encouraging verses to them in sticky notes, by text, or by reading it over them as they walk out the door.

Work Ladder – This is the traffic lane where the traffic is congested, cars overheat, and cars break down. It's the workplace where men feel the pressure to succeed by doing whatever it takes to climb to the top of the ladder, even if they have to abandon their family to do it. Men and women fall into this lane of traffic too often, and families suffer from it. We can pray for guys to prioritize God and family before work, and we can encourage them in this by not pressuring them to make more money, so that we can buy more things. We can pray for favor at his workplace and that others will notice and appreciate him and his contribution, not his ability to step on rung after rung.

Mind Games – Depression and Bi Polar Disorder are among two crippling diseases affecting many men. Both seem to be on the rise, at least among those in my circle of friends. The mind is so important in maintaining good health, and men who are in this lane of destructive thought patterns end up stuck on a side road, off the beaten path, in unrecognizable territory. They cannot function well at home, at work, or in the marriage and with the children. Philippians 4:6 instructs us to be anxious for nothing but with thanksgiving make our petitions to Christ…and his peace will guard our hearts and minds. Pray with your men, build them up by giving thanks together for God's blessings, and present his anxious thoughts to the Lord with him…trusting that the peace of God will rule his mind – not despair.

Addiction – Whether it be video games, alcohol, sex, or a myriad of other behaviors to which our men become tied down to, when an addiction is present, our men are in one of those traffic roundabouts, where all they do is go in circles, trying to get back on a straight path – only to find themselves at the same point they just passed, again. Addictions are serious and they wreck marriages and homes. Addictions meet needs in our lives that are meant to be met by God. We can pray for our men and their addictive tendencies, and ask God to intervene in ways that

only he can. We can seek help, and be willing to let go and let God, and others, rescue and save.

Anger – This lane of traffic is the one where our men travel and they are cut off, rear ended from behind, yelled at, and literally pushed off the road – to which they reply with a fist up – ready to fight. It's the day to day grind of work, being passed over for that promotion again, feeling distant from God, reeling from that financial loss, losing control of their son, or any other disappointment and train wreck in life. Our men get hurt, just like we do. And very often, their response is anger against others, against us, and ultimately against God. We can offer encouragement and very often turn away their wrath with what the verse in Psalm calls a "soft answer." Just what is a soft answer? It's one that soothes and sings of the goodness of God.

Maybe you've read this far and are thinking, "I've got my own set of problems, work frustrations, deadlines, and kids that need me. How can I help *him*?"

The best way I've found to help my husband is by helping myself to my own relationship with the Lord, finding my fulfillment and needs met in Him. It's then that I'm able to reach out to my husband with grace and honor, instead of accusation and disdain.

Is your man in traffic all day? What lane(s) lure him into their fast flow, and what signs are being avoided?

Men in traffic arrive home tired, irritable, and sore. They want food, relaxation, and down time. Of course, we need all of the same. And many of us drive in the same traffic and need the same attention.

The sooner we realize that prayer, honor, and gratitude go a long way in our relationship with our men, the better they will be able to maneuver and enjoy the commute to…and from…home.

FRESH THYME - Triple D Interruptions by Marcy Lytle

Life gets interrupted almost every day. Maybe it's a simple interruption like a child tugging at our shirt because his tummy hurts, so we have to stop cooking dinner to hold him. Or perhaps it's an interruption of a vacation because a plane has been delayed, so our next fun event is missed due to late arrival. Those types of interruptions are annoying, but they're not life-changing. They're not huge, in the big scope of our future. They just mess up our plans for a given day.

However, there are interruptions that come and take our breath away. It's not in the breathless way that beauty makes us gasp and then let out a long sigh, but rather in the way that we actually think we may not take another breath – because death, disease, or disaster has shown up at our door and interrupted our life as we know it.

Let's think about interruptions in the physical world. When we're watching a television show and it's interrupted, it's always for a huge news event going on – one that preempts the current show we're enjoying. When a classroom is interrupted with an announcement to take shelter, it's because a tornado is near and safety is paramount – more so than the learning taking place at the moment. And when our kids are crying in the middle of the night and interrupting our sleep, it's because something's wrong – nightmares are taunting, fear is present, or sickness is rising, and we must get up and attend.

Every interruption happens when something of greater importance, something that's pressing, or something that needs attention, takes place to stop us in our tracks and divert our focus for a moment, an hour, or an eternity.

When ***death*** comes and interrupts, what could be more important than life on this earth with the ones we love? The only thing that is more important than life with friends and family is life with Him, the One who loves us.

When ***disease*** interrupts, what could be more important than health and a sound mind? The only thing more important than being whole is the experience of healing, or the endurance that comes to run the race all the way to the end, with full knowledge that He is there to carry us over the finish line.

When ***disaster*** interrupts, what could be more important than dwelling in safety, knowing our needs are met? The only thing more important than sitting in security is knowing that restoration is a promise, provision is a sure thing, and one little loaf can feed five thousand.

And honestly, we cannot experience full life with Him unless we see His hand at work in the interruptions that life brings.

I love a song by Sara Groves ("What Do I Know") about life's interruptions – namely – death. It knocks on our doors at the most inopportune times and rocks our world. There's not much to know at a time like that, as to the why of the interruption. And for a while nothing brings solace.

But the one thing we can know is that there is a God in heaven who sees and knows all. And if we know his character by reading his Word and walking with him daily, we know that when life interrupts, there's something of higher importance going on in our lives. And while we're grieving, hurting, or reeling, we won't know why or understand it all now, but we will know this:

He loves us.

He is powerful.

He is faithful.

It won't look like he's any of those things while we're in the middle of one of the three D's but the higher purpose for our life will emerge…and we will see clearly…one day. **What we thought was the most important thing will fade as we see the face of the most Important One.**

The best thing we can do for ourselves, for our families, and for Him, is to get to know Him. We can read about the goodness of God, listen to it spoken from those who know him well, and let the lyrics of worship music lift our souls and strengthen our hearts.

Then when life is interrupted in a way that sends us to our knees, we won't sink into the floor never to rise again. That foundation of faith will sustain us through the most seemingly senseless tragedies that show up in all of their ugliness.

That's what I know.

A BUNDLE OF

February 2015

TIPS

The Dressing – Heels that Don't Hurt – by Marcy Lytle

I love to wear heels, but those spikey ones that are four inches tall are a bit much for my idea of a night out on the town in style and comfort. Why wear heels that make us look like we're prancing around on stilts, trying to look tall and lean, when our feet feel squished and achy? I wish had the money to design and make my own shoes, because when I shop I mostly see all flats or all spikes – and not much in between!

Valentine's Day is this month, but really, why not have dressy nights on the town more often? We can do it, if we choose heels that don't hurt, heels that are really cute, and heels that we can dance the night away in…if we so desire…

I've found some heels that work well for prettiness, comfort, and style. They're worth shopping for until you find just the right one for you! And then you can wear them everywhere!

Kitten Heels– How about a navy pair of plain kitten heels from Zappos? The heel is thin and sleek but not so high, so thatyour foot sinks into the shoe and you can wear it for hours. This classic dress pair is one you'll want to keep for years, to wear with your dresses, your skirts – in all seasons.

The Wedge – I'm not a huge fan of the wedge, but there are some cute ones out there if you can find them. This wedge from Modcloth is cute and stylish, and in a neutral color that will complement just about any outfit you slip into for a night out downtown.

Cone Heel – These come very tall, but there are also mid heights that are much more comfortable to wear! This pretty shoe in an emerald hue will make your feet look absolutely beautiful! Modcloth has very cute styles from which to choose, and this heel is great for stability and comfort! It's actually my favorite.

Spool Heel – This is a super dressy pair of shoes for those of you who like to dress it up big! The spool heel isn't so high, or so low, but it's just right – like Goldilock's chair! This shoe gives you the illusion of a very high heel without the instability of a tiny spike that sinks into the ground when you walk. It's from Abbydress and it's actually a "wedding" shoe – so if you like it – wear it to all of your dressy events!

Chunky Heel – Chunky heels can sometimes make a shoe look not-dressy at all, but if you add an ankle strap, they totally will work for date night. This pair from 6pm is affordable, and super cute with that side buckle and shiny finish.

Stacked Heel – Check out this cute shoe made by Aerosoles, and how nice that it comes in this pretty shade of green, as well as your normal black and tan? Yes, the heel is wood grained, but the shoe is so cute and dressy, it will brighten up any outfit and enable you to skip around town!

Platforms – With a little bit of lift under the front of your shoe, a platform, it releases the pressure from the ball of your foot, and makes this heel wearable for hours. These shoes are by Clarks, another name known for its comfortable footwear. What a really nice shoe for the really nice you!

Now, where can you shop for these heels? You can totally shop online at the sites I've included above, but my suggestion for affordable heels is Marshalls, TJ Maxx, or Ross. These stores are often hit-and-miss but if you catch them on their delivery days, you'll hit a mother lode! These stores get shipments 3 or more times a week, the variety of styles is always there, and the trends show up – and then they're gone. So visit often, look for the style you like, and snatch it up.

Don't let hurting feet deter you from dressing up for your fun nights out with him, with your friends, or even just by yourself – if you feel like it!

Heels are here to stay, and there are some that feel AND look great – you just have to try them on and wear them!

Seven for You - Single on V-Day – by Marcy Lytle

Maybe you had a boyfriend and he just broke up with you. Perhaps you're alone because of a death, and your heart is achjng. Or you might be single by choice, but you're drawn by the romance of the big V-day this month, and you yearn for love. Whatever the reason that you find yourself alone and without chocolate or flowers this month (the proverbial Valentine's Day gifts), there is someone who loves you completely, who gets you, who actually created you, and who wants to be with you. In fact, he has some personal things to say to you this month:

1. You know this verse well. It's the traditional box of chocolates from God. You know it's full of sweetness and goodness before you open it. John 3:16 ***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***. But this verse needs to be received over and over again, yearly, monthly, daily. It's the foundation of his love for us. If he spared not his own son, then how much more will he freely give all that we need to us? Can you receive this heart-shaped box from him today?
2. This next one is the bouquet of flowers from Him. Zephaniah 3:17 ***The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing***. He's holding out his hand to you with this one, so take it – receive it – and smell the scent of his love for you. He thinks you're awesome, and he enjoys your company. In fact, it makes him so happy that he sings. Can you hear him?
3. Psalm 86:15 ***But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.*** Some relationships we find ourselves in, and out of, are full of anything but faithfulness. In fact, we find that we've been hurt one too many times, so we have up our shield over our heart, for protection. God isn't like our faithless lovers. He's gracious and abounds in his love for us, and he never leaves us. Can you believe again in a love that never fails?
4. Part of having a lover is dreaming and planning about the future together. Check out this verse. Jeremiah 29:11 ***For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope***. Smashed dreams with previous partners leave a hole in our hearts gaping wide open, sucking us into a black pit of despair. However, the truth of the matter is that the Lord, your Maker and your Husband, has good plans ahead for you – and your future is not a bad one. In fact, it's a declaration of his love for you. Can you dream with him and relax in his arms while he plans your days before you?
5. Romans 5:5 ***And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us***. You know that scarlet letter that we sometimes feel is the only thing people see when they see us? It's dark red and emits shame, because we're so afraid that others see us as marked, because of divorce, failure, or for just being single…so long. That hope we mentioned in the verse above is the eraser of shame. God comes into our black hole in our heart and pours his love into it, closing it up, sealing it with his Spirit – never to be open to shame again. It's a free gift from Him. Can you visualize the pour?

6. What price have you paid for love? Did you give up your career, perhaps years of your life? Did you spend money to support someone who then left you? Whoever you loved and lost, it cost you time and effort, often two things you're not willing to fork out again. Psalm 36:7 ***How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*** God's love is free, it costs you nothing, and it never fails. In fact, we are like a baby bird sheltered from the storm and the blazing sun because we rest underneath the wings of our protective Father. There's no price tag on God's love. You can afford it because it's a free gift. How about running under his shadow now to rest, and to experience his great love for you?
7. Do you know anything about an olive tree? It is known for its tenacity to flourish even under hard conditions. In fact, even when cut down, an olive tree will emerge again from its roots. So there's hope, even if you feel as though circumstances have left you alone, afraid, and abandoned for good. Psalm 52:8 ***But I am like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God; I trust in God's unfailing love for ever and ever.*** God loves you and nothing can stop the fruit from showing, when you are rooted in that love. And that fruit will be a blessing to all who stop and rest under your branches. You're like an olive tree. Are you feeling His love yet?

Valentine's Day for many is one super romantic outing with two star-struck lovers gazing into the stars, arms tight, as they whisper sweet nothings in each other's ears. That's SO not true. It's more likely that girls are disappointed, guys are frustrated, and the perfect evenings are ruined by weather, long lines, or bad food…or an evening of unfulfilled expectations. It happens to everyone.

Even if you're not single, maybe you feel alone. And even if you have the best of the best, when it comes to romance, you know you'll be back at work the next day, the flowers will fade, and chocolates will be eaten.

God's love is eternal, it's available every day, it's free, and it's completely satisfying…always.

He's asking you to dance, so he can sing his song of love over you. Do you have on your dancing shoes?

Don't be afraid. You are not alone, never have been, and never will be…

Selah's Style – The Zebra Stitch – by Selah Irwin

A very very long long time ago.... Like two months ago...I got a sewing machine!

I had wanted one for about a year! Finally on this very, very exciting Christmas Day it happened! I unwrapped the paper and to what did my wondering eyes appear?

A glorious sewing machine!

Ever since then I have been wondering and wondering if I could sew something. I didn't have anything to wear for Valentine's Day so...time to bring out the fabric and start stitching!

Here is what I came up with!

I bought zebra fabric, a pretty flower, and wonderful lace. I drew a picture of how I wanted my outfit to look. My mom helped me figure out how we could make it appear!

First, we sewed a tube of cloth for the top. We made a tunnel for the elastic at the top of the top.

Next, we created a larger tube for the skirt because I wanted it to puff out.

After that, we then attached the top and bottom with long stretchy stuff called elastic.

To finish it off, we added straps, lovely lace trim, and a fantabulous flower!

If you are stumped on what to wear on Valentine's Day, there is always a solution.

And if you have a sewing machine, whip it out and start stitching!

The Fearless Kitchen - All Things Chocolate – by Christina Vetter

February is the month of love, and here at The Fearless Kitchen we're celebrating the love of chocolate! Truthfully, I'm not a huge chocolate connoisseur with the exception of dark chocolate, but one thing I can definitely appreciate is the versatility of this wonderful bean. I'm always impressed that the cacao bean can be transformed into so many different chocolate forms.

There seems to be an option for all taste buds. From super sweet white chocolate to its bitter dark cousin, women seem to have a special chocolate shaped love in their hearts. Who can blame us? With Valentine's Day this month, I've decided to put the New Year's diet on the backburner for a day or two. I'll be sure to pick it back up again, but I know even the strictest diets can afford a little treat every now and then.

I searched for some of the most delicious and creative chocolate recipes to share with you, and Dark Chocolate Waffles, Chocolate Croissants, Chocolate Truffles, made the top of the list. I know you will be drooling over them as much as I am. As usual, I want to encourage you to not stop here! There are so many ways to enjoy this special treat, even some savory options for those that seem to be missing the common sweet tooth. Do a little digging, the results are delicious!!

Make sure to share your thoughts on these delicious recipes in the Comments section below. I always enjoy reading what you have to say! I hope you are able to enjoy some tasty chocolate this month and I want to wish you a Happy Valentine's Day, Happy February, and as always Happy Eating.

Chocolate Croissants **Difficulty:**

Serves 8

I can't hardly call this recipe a "recipe," because it's so easy. Nevertheless, these croissants are an absolute favorite at breakfast time in the Vetter house. Feel free to use any type of chocolate you wish, my favorite is dark chocolate. Serve straight from the oven if possible, reheat for 20-30 seconds in the microwave if needed.

Ingredients

1 package cresent rolls, 8 count
Desired chocolate chips, chopped small

Directions:

-Preheat oven to 375F, or according to package directions.
-Unroll premade cresent dough triangles.
-At the base of each triangle spread chopped chocolate, and roll into croissant shapes, making sure to firmly seal all edges.

-Bake on a parchment paper lined cookie sheet according to package directions, until golden brown.
-Serve immediately.

Chocolate Truffles **Difficulty:**

Makes 30-35 truffles
Recipe Courtesy Alton Brown

Truffles are in my opinion the best way to enjoy chocolate. I love the soft velvety inside and the snap of the chocolate shell. Yum! Next time you want to impress your guests, set these babies out. They are sure to bring in a raving response.

Ingredients
10 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped fine
3 tablespoons unsalted butter
1/2 cup heavy cream
1 tablespoon light corn syrup
1/4 cup brandy
1/2 cup Dutch process cocoa powder, finely chopped nuts, and/or toasted coconut, for coating truffles
8 ounces semisweet or bittersweet chocolate, chopped fine

Directions:
-Place the 10 ounces of chocolate and butter in a medium size glass mixing bowl. Microwave for 30 seconds. Remove and stir, and repeat this process 1 more time. Set aside.
-Heat the heavy cream and corn syrup in a small saucepan over medium heat until simmering.
-Remove from the heat and pour the mixture over the melted chocolate mixture; let stand for 2 minutes. Using a rubber spatula, stir gently, starting in the middle of bowl and working in concentric circles until all chocolate is melted and mixture is smooth and creamy. Gently stir in the brandy. Pour the mixture into an 8 by 8-inch glass baking dish and place in the refrigerator for 1 hour.
-Using a melon baller, scoop chocolate onto a sheet pan lined with parchment paper and return to the refrigerator for 30 minutes.
-Place the cocoa powder, nuts, and/or toasted coconut each in its own pie pan and set aside.
-In the meantime, place the 8 ounces of chocolate into a medium mixing bowl which is sitting on top of a heating pad lined bowl, with the heating pad set to medium. Depending on the heating pad, you may need to adjust the heat up or down. Stirring the chocolate occasionally, test the temperature of the chocolate and continue heating until it reaches 90 to 92 degrees F; do not allow the chocolate to go above 94 degrees F. If you do, the coating will not have a nice snap to it when you bite into the chocolate. Once you have reached the optimal temperature, adjust the heat to maintain it.
-Remove the truffles from the refrigerator and shape into balls by rolling between the palms of your hands. Use powder-free vinyl or latex gloves, if desired.

-Dip an ice cream scoop into the chocolate and turn upside down to remove excess chocolate. Place truffles 1 at time into the scoop and roll around until coated. Then place the truffle into the dish with either the cocoa powder, nuts or coconut. Move the truffle around to coat; leave truffle in the coating for 10 to 15 seconds before removing. In the meantime, continue placing the chocolate-coated truffles in the cocoa or other secondary coating. After 10 to 15 seconds, remove the truffle to a parchment lined sheet pan. Repeat until all truffles are coated. Allow to set in a cool dry place for at least 1 hour; or store in an airtight container in the refrigerator.

Truffles are best when served at room temperature.

Read more here

Dark Chocolate Waffles **Difficulty:**

Serves 6

Recipe courtesy of *Bon Appetit Magazine*

As if waffles needed it, this is an upgrade to the traditional morning fare. These waffles are a great treat for any occasion, whether Christmas, Valentines, or a random Thursday morning. Just a tip: if you don't have any buttermilk, add 2 Tbsp of white vinegar to 2 C of whole milk.

Ingredients:

2 C flour
½ C unsweetened cocoa powder
¼ C packed brock sugar
2 tsp baking powder
1 tsp baking soda
1 tsp salt
3 large eggs, seperated
2 C buttermilk
½ C olive oil
1 tsp vanilla extract
6oz bittersweet chocolate, finely chopped

Directions:

-Preheat oven to 250F.
-Whisk flour, cocoa powder, brown sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt in a large bowl.
-Make a well in the center and add egg yolks, buttermilk, oil, and vanilla. Blend with a fork, then gradually incoporate dry ingredients, mixing just until combined.
-Using an electric mixer on medium-high speed, beat egg whites in a small bowl until soft peaks are formed.
-Working in two batches, fold egg whites into batter just until combined. Fold in chopped chocolate.

-Heat waffle iron until very hot, and lightly coat with nonstick spray. Working in batches, cook waffles until cooked through. Transfer to a wire rack and set inside a baking sheet, cover loosely with foil, and keep warm in oven until ready to serve.
-Serve waffles with butter and syrup, or fresh fruit and powdered sugar.

Tried and True – 15 Funny Little Tricks

Sometimes we happen upon funny little tricks for all sorts of chores, dieting, or dressing that work! Pinterest is full of these things, and they attract attention when we see the heading "25 ways to…" or "A dozen tricks for …."

So we thought we'd publish our own list of ways you might not have thought of…that you might want to try!

Ways to save calories:

- If you want a coke, and not the diet version, ask for lots of ice. You'll get the full flavor, you'll trick your mind into thinking you've had a full glass, when actually you've had much less than you think!
- If you're craving an order of fries, then get them, but instead of a burger to go with, enjoy a cup of fruit! This way, your taste buds enjoy the salty goodness of a fried potato, but you're also getting nutrition from your red, green and purple-filled cup!
- If you're headed out to dinner at a place where you know you'll overeat, drink a huge glass of water and enjoy a bite of fruit before you go. You will feel full and desire less when you get there!

Ways to feel and look great:

- Do your bra straps keep falling, causing the "front" of you to fall as well? This adds 10 pounds! Take a ribbon (from your giftwrap box) and tie your straps together in the back. The straps stay up, and so do your breasts!
- Does your makeup look as though it's disappeared by day's end? Carry three things in a zipper bag in your purse – tinted lipgloss, undereye concealer, and a bit of blush. Those three things will make you look fresh and rested, even if you aren't!
- Do your feet hurt when you decide to dress up on heels? Carry a pair of flats in your purse, or keep them in your car. Use them to walk your distances, then slip into the bathroom when you arrive, and put on your heels! You're looking good!

Ways to keep the bathroom fresh:

- Keep a room freshener spray by the sink for guests, and for stinky family members, so they'll think to refresh the aroma of this room when they use it and leave it!
- Keep a small basket of guest paper towels to place out when you have guests. This way, they don't have to use your family hand towel and spread their germs, or take in yours.
- Keep an extra roll of toilet paper hidden in a basket on the back of the toilet, in case your guests run out and don't know what to do – so they don't have to ask you!

Ways to be prepared in the car:

- Keep little trash sacks in the console. Every few days, make it someone's job to take a sack, clean out the doors, the floors and the seats, to keep the car fresh and neat!

- Keep these three things in the car at all times: A blanket (for impromptu picnics or cozy movie nights), a pair of tennis shoes (for spontaneous walks or sore feet), and a journal of blank pages (for waiting for kids, husbands or others) to fill with thoughts, songs, and ideas.
- Keep a little baggie or plastic container with the following in your glove compartment: small scissors, safety pins, scotch tape, and a hair clip.

Ways to organize the kitchen:

- Place your recipes for the week in a folder, or written on a paper with cookbook page and number in a journal. This way it's all there when you're ready to start your meals!
- Place your washed fruit in small colanders (found at the Dollar Store) in your fridge drawers. This makes the fruit more appealing to eat and keeps it separated and dry.
- Place grocery bags all folded up, nicely inside one bag, hanging on a hook in your pantry – so you see them to grab them – before you head out the door!

We could go on and on, and I'm sure you have little tricks of your own. What are they? Contact us with your own cool lists of tricks or savers, and we just might publish them for all to read and enjoy!

TIPS - Reviews

Spare Parts

What a great movie, based on a true story! Four Hispanic males in high school, the most unlikely of friends, come together to form a robotics team against all odds. They each have their own obstacles in their families, as well as the fact that they are illegal immigrants. One substitute teacher shows up and is won over by these four young guys, who then set out to build an underwater robot to compete against other students from prestigious high schools. Their robot is put together with whatever they have on hand, and they go up against students who have spent thousands on specialty parts.

The characters in this movie draw us into their lives, and when they show up for the competition, after so many setbacks, we are moved to tears by what unfolds. Emotions run high, relationships are tested and solidified, and a substitute teacher (played by George Lopez) finds his true calling. Spare Parts is a movie worth seeing. It will make you feel good, inspire you, and make you want to stand up and cheer. Not many movies like that – so enjoy it! – Marcy Lytle

A Most Violent Year

Jessica Chastain and Oscar Isaac – two great actors – play husband and wife in this drama set in 1981 New York City, when crime was rampant. They own an oil company and have plans to progress, but theft and violence of their oil and against their drivers takes place, and this threatens all that they've worked for. Isaac and Chastain wear most of the color in this otherwise colorless film, and it's a bit slow going at first, but the drama and intensity does build as the story unfolds. (*I honestly grew tired of Isaac's character wearing the same double breasted coat in almost every scene.)* As a man of means and "integrity," he is against taking violence into his own hands, but his wife is feisty and has plans and moves of her own. The city law enforcement is corrupt itself, so the violence continues and the company *almost* folds….but it doesn't. A Most Violent Year is a good movie, very well done, and the way it was shot only enhances the mood and intrigue as we are drawn into the corruptness of the 80's in the oil business of New York City.- Marcy Lytle

All about Eve

This is an old classic movie from the 50's starring Bette Davis. Our Cinemark theater is showing classics this winter on certain nights of the week, and we opted to see this one. If you haven't seen it, it's a winner! Bette Davis plays a 40 year old actress, completely adored by a young woman who follows the actress' every move. At first, it seems very flattering to be so adored, but it is soon apparent that the young woman wants to *be* Margo (Bette Davis' character), and she will stop at nothing to achieve her goal. This movie was nominated for 14 Academy Awards, and you will see why, when you watch it. Bette Davis' performance alone makes All About Eve worth the time to invite some friends over, set out some snacks, and snuggle in for a movie night! – Marcy Lytle

Blackhat

It sounded like a good story, the one of a convicted criminal being released in order to help solve a major cybercrime that is having worldwide impact. Chris Hemsworth plays this guy, and the intrigue starts…but it falls flat…in my opinion. The movie is long – 2 ½ hours – and there's only so much one can take of looking at the big screen and seeing computer code scrolling on a computer screen, listening to lackluster characters mumble, and worst of all seeing Viola Davis in a role way beneath her showcase talents! My husband enjoyed the movie somewhat, as it does involve some action in the latter part. However, he and I both agreed that Blackhat lacked more than it possessed. And the music throughout the movie distracted me. It was repetitive and annoying, as it tried to add to the suspense of this no-success thriller. The last comment my husband made as we left, was "It was sort of like an episode of Scorpion and MacIver." Enough said. – Marcy Lytle

American Sniper

War wreaks havoc on the men/women who serve, and it tears apart the families left behind while they wait, and they wait… American Sniper is about one particular young man who had a gift and a passion – a gift to aim and hit a target successfully at a young age – and a passion to protect "his own." This movie is based on a true story of the Navy Seal Chris Kyle, who was married, with two children, and serve four tours of service for our country, becoming a legend for his kills. Bradley Cooper does a fantastic job of expressing the heavy burden these soldiers bear as they feel compelled to return, yet pulled by the wife and kids at home, to stay. I couldn't help but feel as though for the entire run of the movie that I was somehow in a jury stand, watching and hearing testimony of the pros/cons of abandoning life stateside to serve vs. staying and caring for the family you've created at home. Should young men/women remain single if they're going to enlist? Is it really worth it to defend a country by learning to kill so many who are our enemies? Should a mom with children be more understanding, when her husband leaves her for almost a year at a time, while she's left home alone, in worry and dread that she will get that fateful call? I don't know the answers, and the movie only presents the questions. – Marcy Lytle

Selma

I didn't really care to see this movie, since I assumed it was just another "I Have a Dream" remake of Martin Luther King's speech. But I went to see the movie because of a couple of great reviews I had read. And I was not disappointed! Selma does tell the story of Martin Luther King, but it's more focused on the man, his "call," his obedience to do what God told him to do, the heavy load he carried with a wife and kids, demonstrators being killed, threats being made on his life and on the lives of others, and his firm stand against all odds, including his confrontations with President Johnson. I was 7 years old when the events in this story took place, and of course I don't recall anything except hearing about MLK's assassination. However,

this movie isn't about that; in fact, the killing of MLK isn't even part of the movie. It's about the faith of one man, who knew in his heart that he must speak up, stand up, and march for what was right. I found myself shaking my head at the sobering fact that these events happened in my lifetime, wondering if we've made any progress at all against racism, and being inspired with the proclamation of the Truth, as I felt tears well in my eyes at the end of the movie. And as I left the theater, the conversation I had with my friend who went with me was about how we wondered if there's a cause around us now, present day that we need to be aware of and join in the fight...or are we just as blind as our predecessors… - Marcy Lytle

A Night at the Museum – Secret of the Tomb

The museum displays are alive again, this time traveling to the British Museum of History to find out why a golden tablet is decaying, in order to keep the "magic" alive each night at the museum. I'm not really a fan of these movies, mostly because they're full of what I call corny humor (which doesn't really amuse me), but there is a good amount of creativity that goes into the making of each installment of these movies, including A Night at the Museum – Secret of the Tomb. Add in the fact that this is a family movie, a clean one in fact, and that Robin Wilson (from *Pitch Perfect*) is the British version of Ben Stiller, and you've got yourself a fun family time. The movie was also bittersweet as we observed both Robin Williams and Mickey Rooney, two Hollywood icons, in their final roles. If you enjoyed the other two movies before this one, you'll enjoy this new one as well. Familiar characters, a new storyline, and a heartwarming relationship between Larry (Ben Stiller) and his son make it a movie with a little something for everyone… - Marcy Lytle

Taken 3

I liked it! Even though the "other" reviews weren't so favorable, and even though the movie is somewhat predictable, and even though Liam Neeson is getting old, Taken 3 is a great thriller of a movie with action, drama, and among the list of actors – Forest Whitaker! He plays the police officer on the hunt for Neeson's character, when a death occurs and Neeson is implicated. Neeson once again is the all-loving and protective dad, with a job that puts him on the run from the law and in pursuit of the one who dares to threaten his family. Yes, there are times in the movie when I thought, "That's crazy – how did he come out of that alive?" But there were other times when I watched the expressions on Neeson's face and realized that he is just the right face for those steely looks, he is the perfect voice that sends chills to one on the other end of the phone, and he's the protective father at all costs. It's a movie worth seeing, if you enjoyed the other *Taken* films, or if you just enjoy a good chase, a mysterious killer, and a young damsel daughter in distress. – Marcy Lytle

Annie

I had heard this wasn't like the "original," and it wasn't. But I loved it! The little girl who plays Annie is the same little girl from *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (If you haven't seen it, do! She was nominated for an Oscar). Quvenzhané Wallis is her name, and she's an expressive, talented young actress who portrays the character of Annie in this musical so well! Jamie Foxx plays Daddy Warbucks, only he's Mr. Stacks in this version, and Cameron Diaz plays Ms. Hannigan –

the old hag who "cares" for the orphans. It's the same heartwarming story of a young girl hoping her parents will find her, only to be found by the most unlikely parents of all. Annie is an updated version of the original, and it's super entertaining and fun. It's nice to see a movie like this once in a while, if you're a kid, or even if you're not…. – Marcy Lytle

Foxcatcher

Steve Carrell is unrecognizable in this movie, as he is transformed into John Du Pont, a disturbed man who coaches a USA wrestling team, including gold medalist Mark Schulz, played by Channing Tatum. The movie is extremely slow getting started and it doesn't pick up the pace at all during the movie. Foxcatcher is a true story of an extremely wealthy man with mental issues and an unhealthy relationship with his mother. He preys on a young man with his own self-esteem issues, and brings him into his home and life, to coach him as a wrestler, but to also *own* him as a friend. Mark Ruffalo plays this young man's older brother, an esteemed wrestler and coach, who also arrives at Foxcather, with wife and kids in tow. I assume the movie was super slow to emphasize the slow, calculated movements and looks of John Du Pont, but it was a hard movie to watch – even though the acting was superb. I wasn't expecting what happened at the end, but let me say this isn't a feel-good movie, an action film, or even an intriguing drama. It's boring, disturbing, and creepy. If you like that sort of thing, this movie's for you. – Marcy Lytle

Big Eyes

The previews of this movie tell a lot, but they don't tell it all. Amy Adams plays Margaret Keane, a real lady who is a real artist and still alive. When she was younger, she married a man Walter Keane (played by Christoph Waltz) who took all the credit for her paintings of children with "big eyes," and intimated and controlled her into not revealing that she was the true artist. This all took place back in the 1950's and Margaret believed him, when he told her that "lady art" wouldn't sell. However, time and the burden of the lie take their toll on Ms. Keane and she soon reveals the truth, hoping she will be believed in the courtroom. Big Eyes is entertaining and disturbing at the same time, as we are drawn into the unbelievable scenario of a wife who lives with a husband who claims to be an artist, yet she never sees him paint a thing. *How does that happen?* I wondered that as I left the theater, but I also wondered what happened to her daughter, who observed a mom who was hidden away and a stepdad who was crazy. I think you'll want to read the real story after you see this movie. – Marcy Lytle

The Imitation Game

Benedict Cumberbatch is one of my favorite actors, and he is superb in his role as Alan Turing, a super brain who secretly was able to build a machine during WWII to break the Enigma code. His character is spellbinding from the onset of the movie, as we are drawn into this exceptionally smart man's way of connecting (or not connecting) with others, because of his social ineptness. We see (from flashbacks) the sad experience he suffered as a young boy, losing his dearest

friend, and how even the name he gives his machine he's inventing (Christopher) helps to keep the memory of that friend alive and with him, throughout his adult years. Keira Knightley plays another super brain that enters his life and the two of them pair nicely as a couple, and as co-workers. Cumberbatch's character in The Imitation Game is misunderstood, mistrusted, and misjudged many times, because of his differences from the "norm," yet several times throughout the movie we understand and nod our heads as we agree with the fact that being different can often result in amazing things that change the world. And sometimes being different can leave a person with problems too big to be solved, by even the smartest of brains. – Marcy Lytle

Into the Woods

If you're curious to hear your favorite actors sing, and you see how many of your favorite actors are cast in this movie, you'll want to see the film – like I did. And early in the movie, I was delighted with the singing, the lyrics and the storyline. At one point it seemed like the movie was about to wrap up and be done, which would have made Into the Woods a good watch. But…it kept going. And going. And the story unraveled, much like life does, when we think everything is going well. Fairy tale endings and wishes aren't so much what we expect them to be, and disappointments wreak havoc on our homes and in our relationships. But this story, of tangled up fairy tales and wishes gone wild, went too far and sort of ruined the thrill and excitement of the first song. And by the end of the movie, even the songs became a grating noise of the same lyrics in just a few monotone notes that really got on my nerves. So, should you see it? Probably. But I don't think you'll buy it to place on your shelf along with your classics. – Marcy Lytle

Unbroken

"This is a true story" was on the screen at the beginning of the movie, which told the horrid tale of an Olympian athlete (Louis Zamperini – played by Jack O'Connell) who ended up being a prisoner in a Japanese war camp (after already suffering through weeks of barely surviving after his plane crashed in the ocean). I've seen many films about prisoners being tortured, but I think this might be the worst – it was hard to watch. But a promise made to God, and the words of a sibling who saw the gold in his little brother, kept this young man alive, strong, and a hero of sorts to his fellow prisoners. Unbroken is the title of the film, but it's also an adjective that describes the spirt of this runner who amazed the crowds as he came from behind to win the race, time and time again. It's that same spirit that keeps him alive as the most ruthless of all Japanese commanders tries to break his body and his will, without success… - Marcy Lytle

The Hobbit

I must confess I'm not a fan of these movies, but I went with my family and I was pleasantly surprised with this one. Or maybe it's that I purposed to like it! The story was easier to follow, and it was certainly full of action, as the "armies" fought for the gold and the mountain home. This movie is full of scenes of peril, so little ones might be frightened. The dwarves, the earth people, the elves, and all of their costumes, made for an exciting dramatic movie-going

experience that went well with a large bag of popcorn. The Hobbit is a great holiday movie for the gang to see… - Marcy Lytle

Wild

I heard talk of Reese Witherspoon and Laura Dern (who plays Reese's mom) being up for an award nomination, so of course I wanted to see this movie. However, Wild might be one of my least favorite Reese movies. This film is based on the true story of Cheryl Strayed, who goes on a 1,100 mile solo hike to grieve, find herself, heal, and prove something – I'm not sure what. The scenery is pretty, but two hours of watching this woman carry a backpack way too heavy for her across desert land, all the while flashing back to memories of her husband, her sexual encounters outside her marriage, and her dying mother, were a bit too much. And it didn't appear that she learned much, grew any, or changed at all…by the end of her trek…when she made her final statement (in the movie) about life. I guess it's supposed to be a profound statement to sum up her "adventures," but it wasn't worth waiting for. And I didn't leave the theater thinking what a strong, amazing woman she was, but rather what a long, arduous trek and a waste of time. – Marcy Lytle

Exodus: Gods and Kings

I did not like this movie, and I'm suggesting you save your big movie bucks and go see something else, unless you just want to sit through 2 ½ hours of the film to see the graphics, which were pretty great. It seemed to take forever to get to the juicy part of the story – the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea – as we watch Moses learn of his ancestry and receive God's word – and marry his wife. He and his wife had a little "saying" when they married and again at the end, which seemed cheesy and contrived, and didn't fit with the rest of the movie. That aside, Christian Bale played Moses and didn't bring the character to life at all. In fact, it took so long to get to the plagues I fell asleep, and awoke for the mighty sea scene, only to be disappointed again. I went to the movie with three other people, and we all left the theater saying, "What?" I always loved the story of Moses, and envisioned the passing through the sea as a glorious event, full of victory and rejoicing. There was none of that in Exodus: Gods and Kings. In fact, there was not much of anything to rejoice about. – Marcy Lytle

The Homesman

I saw the previews for this movie, starring Hilary Swank and Tommy Lee Jones (& Meryl Streep and James Spader), and I thought I was in for a great old west story of a sweet young single woman, willing to transport three women who had lost their minds, across the prairie back home to where they could get help. She enlists the help of a man about to be hanged, because she saves his life. However, I was so wrong. The actors are some of my favorites, so I did enjoy seeing them and watching them in their element. However, The Homesman is a dark film with characters that are – well – disturbed, in the most disturbing of ways. There are scenes that are hard to watch, and characters you'll want to take to heart, only to find yourselves appalled and aghast at the turn of events near the end. I'm giving this movie a thumbs up, only because of the actors, and because some do like a twisted story. But the combo of disturbing, with the old

west, with literal craziness and eye-popping cringes, didn't make for a mix of a movie I'd want to see again. – Marcy Lytle

The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part I

Walking into the movie theater, I expected this latest installment of the *Hunger Games* series to be just as action-packed as the first and second movies were. I was surprised to find that it had much less action and much more character development. Exploring the psychosis behind the games, Mockingjay Part I exceeded my expectations in terms of emotional development of the characters. It made me feel a little crazy as I watched Katniss Everdeen (played by the fantastically talented Jennifer Lawrence) battle her inner demons, but thankfully there were bouts of comic relief from the beloved characters, Haymitch Abernathy (Woody Harrelson) and Effie Trinket (Elizabeth Banks). District 13 is a completely different setting from what viewers of the *Hunger Games* are used to, with less glamour but much more harsh realism. Deserving of two thumbs up, this film left me with a hunger for more action but filled my emotional quota to the brim. – Kayley Ryan

The Theory of Everything

I went expecting to see great acting, but to be distraught over this true story of a renown atheist, Stephen Hawking. I did see great acting by Eddie Redmayne and Felicity Jones, but rather than the movie focusing on the atheism, it focused on the relationship between husband and wife, amid his debilitating disease and his quest for the theory of how time began. Hawking's wife, as portrayed in this movie, is a believer in God and this is evident throughout the movie. Hawking loves her, and even gives her "a moment" at one point in the movie, as his theories continue to develop when he acknowledges that God might exist. Redmayne's smile throughout the movie, surrounded in by his grimacing face, is captivating. Jones' emotions that show on her face, as she takes care of three children and her husband, is equally magnetizing. And the way The Theory of Everything wraps up left me with a glorious thought all my own, *Yes, one day the lame will walk again, but it won't be because of man's theories of how to turn back time.* – Marcy Lytle

Beyond the Lights

This movie is one of those movies that could have been thoroughly enjoyable except for…. Let me explain. Young cop catches a young starlet as she is about to jump from a balcony, because she's fed up with her life. That life is one created by her mother (Minnie Driver) who wants the young girl (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) to be everything she wasn't. Sound like a familiar storyline? The young man "savior" is portrayed as being a prince of integrity and honor, as he sees the girl for who she is without all the glamour and glitz, and loves her. This eventually changes her, and well…you can guess the rest of the story. The music was great, it's a romantic story on the big screen, and I loved the ending. But I always wonder why these young heroes who rescue the girls still sleep with them outside of marriage? And besides that, the

beginning scenes of the movie might make you want to walk out. This is not a movie for teens or kids. If you want to see a great love story played out beautifully and don't mind shaking your head a few times at this PG-13 movie that should have been rated R, then Beyond the Lights might be something you'd like to see. – Marcy Lytle

Interstellar

I was told to see this movie in the IMAX but I didn't. It was still awesome. Matthew McConaughey plays a single dad of two kids who is chosen to make a space flight like no other – to save the planet. Time travel, amazing graphics, an emotional storyline, and a three-hour screen time, all make for a movie going experience unlike anything I've enjoyed before. If you sit and analyze it too long, you'll miss the point. But if you think, "Would I risk never seeing my children again in order to ensure their future?" you'll engage in this man's angst, his fierce love, and his determination to "return" to his daughter, played (as an adult) by one of my favorite actresses, Jessica Chastain. And a big plus about Interstellar – it's not full of junk – so you can take the whole family. - Marcy Lytle

Whiplash

JK Simmons and Miles Teller give an outstanding performance as teacher and student. Teller is a drummer in an elite music school, run by a ruthless instructor who pushes the musicians way too far, past any reasonable limit – especially Teller. Whiplash is full of drumming, which is spellbinding to watch. But this movie is also full of language and abuse, which is hard to watch. When we think the instructor can't do any more harm, he does. And when we think the student can't take any more abuse, he does. The emotion these two actors display is amazing, and the connection they make is disturbing. Whiplash is the name of a piece of music, not a jerk of the neck, in case you are wondering. – Marcy Lytle

Nightcrawler

What a great thriller of a movie, with a storyline and twist I've not seen before. Jake Gyllenhaal plays a driven man (to put it lightly) who won't stop at anything to get a news story, as he roams the city at night looking for crimes he hears about on the police radio. Gyllenhaal's face, his skinny frame (he lost weight for the movie) the way he wears his hair, and his eyes, all contribute to making him a scary man indeed, as he pushes the limits until he goes too far. He finds a connection with a news veteran (played by Rene Russo) who's almost as scary as he is. Gyllenhaal also hires a young naïve man that he takes advantage of, and this young actor is perfect in playing this part. There's a lot of language in Nightcrawler. (R-rated). But if you like thrillers, you'll like this one. It's a tiny bit slow at the beginning…but keep watching. You'll be thinking, "Oh my, did he really do that?" – Marcy Lytle

Birdman

Celebrities and their demons. That's what this movie is about, and it's told and filmed in a very unique and unusual way. Michael Keaton plays an old actor who was a once famous actor in films, but he's now trying to make a comeback by appearing and directing on Broadway. However, his motivation is to rid himself of the voices and images in his head that tell him how washed up he is, and that he will never amount to anything. Adding to those voices, are a daughter just out of rehab, an ex-wife, and a cast of actors with their own problems. There's no musical score per se in this movie – but there is the beat of drums throughout the movie…and many metaphors that are pretty obvious but well written into the story. Birdman is full of language and mature themes, but the characters in the story have fallen to the lowest of the low in the Hollywood life…and it's not a pretty picture. – Marcy Lytle

St Vincent

I hadn't really noticed this movie until I heard a couple of the actors talk about it on television. Naomi Watts, Bill Murray, and Melissa McCarthy play in this comedy/drama about a divorced mom who has no option but to leave her 12 year old son in the care of an old "crusty" man without a nice bone in his body. However, it turns out that the little boy has the uncanny ability to see beneath the crust of this man to the real person he used to be, the one who deserves a certain kind of recognition. I've never seen a movie combine comedy with such a serious theme in a movie, and do it so well. All of the characters are flawed greatly, due to life's hardships, and this somehow makes them totally relatable and loveable in St. Vincent, a movie worth seeing – with a little boy actor who will win your heart. – Marcy Lytle

FURY

It's World War II, the Americans are in their tanks fighting the Germans, and Brad Pitt plays the leader of a group of men on one particular tank, when a boy of a man, a clerk typist, shows up to report for duty and join Pitt's troop. This young man is the focus of the movie's story line, as Brad Pitt trains and pushes this scared young man to learn to fight and kill. The group of five men on the tank fight and bond, and curse and quote scripture, as they move against the enemy, ending up at a "crossroads." It's bloody, there's lots of language, and it's hard to watch. Fury is the name of the tank, and it describes the passionate anger these men feel towards the enemy as they fight together to the finish. The "jury" is still out on the "fury." I just can't say if I enjoyed it, because I didn't. But I can say it was a good war movie, because it was. – Marcy Lytle

The Judge

Robert Downey, Jr. and Robert Duvall play father and son in this moving drama about family relationships. Don't go late or sleepy, because this movie is long! Downey is a successful defense attorney, and Duvall is a reputable judge, but the two are estranged because of an event that happened when Downey was a teenager. However, when Downey visits his hometown for a funeral, father and son are thrown together when son has to defend his own father in the courtroom. Adding to the drama are Downey's two brothers, his young daughter, and an old flame back in the hometown Downey's character swore off years ago. Duvall is exceptional in his role, as always, and The Judge has a bit of mystery to it, as well as tender

moments that might make you cry. The father and son relationship is believable, sad, raw and real… - Marcy Lytle

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible No Good, Very Bad Day

This movie stars Steve Carrell and Jennifer Garner as a married couple with four children, one being Alexander, who is turning 12. If your kids have read the book of the same title, you know the story. From the beginning until the end of the movie, it's nonstop mishaps for each person in the family, until they are all out of sorts and blaming one another. However, they each one begin to realize the real meaning and value in life, and one by one, attitudes change and the family thrives. Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day is amusing (lots of laughter in the theater), entertaining, and clean…so how can that result in anything but a wonderful, great, totally good, very good theater experience for the whole family? – Marcy Lytle

Gone Girl

I went in, knowing there were scenes that would be hard to watch. And there were. I also went in, knowing this was supposed to be a great thriller. And it was. The music in the background of this missing person mystery added to the suspense of the story, starring Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike. Pike plays a grown woman, still under the control of her parents, who meets and marries a man who loves her. However, after a few years of marital "bliss," the marriage falls apart, and Pike's character goes missing. From all appearances and "clues," her husband is suspect. To tell any more of the story would ruin it for you. Let's just say the story is riveting, the acting is amazing, and the nasty scenes were unnecessary. Gone Girl ended with some questions still lingering in my mind, and I desperately want to see a sequel that will answer all of them. – Marcy Lytle

The Good Lie

Reese Witherspoon didn't even appear until well into the movie, because she's not really the star. This movie was inspired by the true story of the "lost boys" of Sudan, refugees who came to America more than a decade ago. The Good Lie follows the lives of several brothers and their one sister, as they were orphaned because of war, and ended up in a refugee camp…and finally in America. Reese Witherspoon plays an initially disinterested employment worker, but later a very involved friend to these young people. The actors who play these young people are captivating in their enthusiasm for life, their gratefulness for kindness, and their humility and honor for others – maybe because they were refugees themselves. You'll want to watch the movie closely, and try not to take a bathroom break, because you'll learn why the movie has the title it does – and you'll leave saying it was a "good movie." - Marcy Lytle

HOME

Practical Parenting – 25 Ways to Survive the Bad Days – by Georganne Scuch

Some people call parenting a marathon. I think it more closely resembles an Iron Man Triathlon. No doubt about it, parenting is a long-haul prospect – running to chase a toddler with enough energy to power a nuclear reactor, bicycling up and down hills (mostly up) of hormones, and swimming against the current of modern culture.

There is a way to survive a bad day, because there ***are*** bad days. I'm just being honest here.

I don't have any magical formula for avoiding bad days, short of hypnotizing the kids or myself. It's tempting, but not advisable.

I don't have any sure-fire cure for bad attitudes, laziness, or brain farts. Sadly, they are unavoidable.

I don't have a secret for painlessly teaching obedience, responsibility, and manners.

I don't have a perfect schedule that gets everything done in a day. My to-do list has a lot of past-due items on it.

I don't have a crystal ball that sees into the future to tell me everything will be all peachy-keen tomorrow or the day after. There are no guarantees. If life is a rose garden, don't forget there are thorns, too.

If one thing goes wrong, five more will follow. Not being fatalistic, just telling it like it happens.

After all that bad news, let me tell you a little good news. It wouldn't necessarily be any better doing it differently. The grass might be greener on the other side because their sewer is leaking; they're spending a fortune on yard maintenance; or they painted the dirt and planted plastic flowers. **Anyway you dice it, life in general, and raising kids in particular, is hard**. You won't win because someone else lost. You'll win because you just keep going. And going. And going.

Getting back up every single time you think you can't take it anymore. Knowing you have at least one person in your corner who gave you this because He knows you can do it. God. If you don't have Him, God help you.

And here is what I do know, in no particular order:

1. Coffee helps. A lot.
2. A good diet helps even more.
3. Adequate sleep is more precious than gold.
4. Exercise boosts the oxygen to your thick brain and theirs.
5. Smoke breaks. Not the tobacco kind; the letting-off-steam kind.
6. Laughter is the best medicine. Use it often and liberally.
7. Change it if it's broke.
8. Leave it alone if it ain't.
9. Take the high road in conflicts. Then, lock yourself in the bathroom and cry, bang your head against the wall, text your husband, whatever helps.

10. Use prayer more often and more liberally than laughter. Rant and rave all you want. When you're done; the kids won't even know you were mad (except for the dent in the wall.)
11. Deep breathing exercises aren't just for childbirth.
12. Smile when you feel like crying.
13. Speak softly when you want to scream.
14. Learn to count to 100, at least, before responding.
15. Pick your friends and activities wisely. All open doors do not have welcome mats.
16. Schedule down time and know when to step back. Even God rested on the seventh day.
17. Be grateful for what you do have. Stop whining about what you don't. You'd be surprised how little you actually need when you shift your focus.
18. Step outside your comfort zone. You'll see how small your box was.
19. Realize you're not perfect, and no one else is, either.
20. Do your best. Then do it again.
21. Don't get wrapped around the axle over everything. Let go.
22. When you're overwhelmed, schedule the important stuff, like showers and meals. Let the rest go for a day or two.
23. Love your kids.
24. Love your husband.
25. Love God.

Bad days are sometimes good days in disguise, like deep undercover disguise. They teach us to appreciate the good days and to take nothing for granted. You won’t win a gold medal. No one is waiting at the finish line yelling your name…because there isn’t a finish line. Parenting is a lifestyle. And you get more than you give, even on the bad days.

Life as We Know It - The Mirror of God - by Erica Simmons

When I first started going to my current church, it was very difficult. Week after week, I was confronted with the kind of life I so desperately desired. I was surrounded by loving marriages, two parent families, and people who knew how to be in relationship with each other. I remember the first time there was an announcement about a special love offering for single parents. **I recall with such clarity the pain and shame during the announcement, the feeling of *not being normal* because I was a single parent.**

The good news is I have been attending my church for about 10 years now and gradually the feelings have diminished since that moment. The more I attended church, attended the classes they offered, and developed relationships with strong Christians, the more I realized that it wasn't being a single parent that made me feel like I did not measure up. It was not having a strong relationship with my Savior. This lack of relationship was causing me to have a distorted view of my entire life, not just my role as a parent.

Over the years, I cannot tell you the number of times I felt like I was coming up short in the parenting department and others would come up to me and say, " I just wanted to tell you, you are doing a great job with the boys." Always at the right moment, I received encouragement.

One such moment came when I was attending a Sunday night class where I compared being a single parent to an episode of *Spongebob*. It was the episode where Spongebob and Patrick were having a snowball fight and asked Squidward to join in. He, of course, refused, scoffing at them, until he was hit with a snowball and retaliated. This led to him to join the fight, so he started making a fortress snow wall. He suddenly realized he was exposed to the back so he quickly built the snow wall all around him. Even with this circular fortress, he kept getting hit from the enemy's fire, so he kept making the wall higher and higher. In the end, we see that Spongebob and Patrick had quit the game long ago and Squidward was battling snow falling from a tree. When I finished the story, I compared it to being a single parent. There is only one of us as we are focusing our attention on an issue, and we are exposed to the backside attack of the schemes of the evil one. Later in one of the classes I was attending, these words were spoken to me by someone who was not at the meeting where I shared the previous story, "God has got your back." *Now*, I no longer worry about my flank.

Time after time, I have received valuable advice from those who have gone before me on the road of parenthood. Notice, I did not say "single" parenthood. Even though we are in this as a singleton, the goal for us is the same, to raise God-loving men and women of God.

I am about to share one of the best pieces of advice I ever received in raising my kids. I want to put the warning label on it that was also given to me, before I share. Before you read on, know that God will be faithful, and you have to be ready to handle the things He reveals to you. **Seek advice, pray, and ask God to catch your kids whenever they are doing something wrong.** I am here to tell you it works.

A recent example:

My boys started high school this year and as freshmen, and they are not to leave campus for lunch. I picked Jerimiah up one day after school and he told me how one of his friends bought him a Subway sandwich. He made it a point to tell me that he insisted he could not leave campus, so his friend brought him lunch back to campus. It just so happened that I had a

meeting with a co-worker a day or two later (who knows my boys) and she told me she saw Jerimiah crossing the street, going to Subway. *Oh the fun I had in calling him to the carpet*. Jerimiah is not one to go down without a fight, so I had to get creative and throw in that I had video proof. After that bit of information, he cracked like a softshell pecan. The fun part was letting him come up with the consequences. This situation was serious, because of the pre-meditation of the lie.

The reason this advice comes with a warning is because God will honor your prayers as a parent, and you must willing to deal out the consequences of some things you may not be aware of otherwise.

This brings me to my *life as I know it* moment.

It happened about two weeks ago in church, and the beauty of it hits me now, as I write this story. It was in my church that I was made the most aware of being a single parent, and it was at my church where I received the awe-inspiring truth.

At our church during praise and worship, we have the opportunity to partake of the sacrament. A couple of weeks ago, a “normal” family caught my eye and I again dwelled on the fact that I had a “broken” family. It was then that ever so softly my heavenly Father spoke to my heart and said,

“To me, your family is just as beautiful as that family.”

You see, we have the tendency to look at ourselves and our lives as reflections of our experiences, our family, our dreams, our circumstances, etc., when we should be looking at them as a reflection of who we are in Christ. His mirror is the only one we should concern ourselves with, because it is the only one that will give us an accurate picture of who we truly are to Him. And in the end that is all the truly matters, how He sees us.

So to you single parents,

I encourage you to be of good cheer. Our Heavenly Father is always near. And because He is near, there is no need to fear.

I DON'T DO TEENS – Wild Oats - by Marcy Lytle

I once had a friend ask if I was concerned that my teenage son would view pornography on line. I've heard others say about their teens that they're "bound to" sow their wild oats, because they (the parents) did. And many parents just expect the parenting of teen years to be the hardest thing, the most rebellious phase, and they dread these years like the plague.

Call me crazy, but I don't believe our teens have to go wild for a season before they settle down and live pleasant, productive lives. Just because we were a certain way at their age is no reason to project our weaknesses and failures on them. And sowing wild oats is not something we have to just expect in this garden of children we are watching ripen toward maturity.

I will admit that there are no "guarantees" regarding our teens and their outcome into adulthood, because they have a choice of their own to make regarding obedience or abandonment of God's ways and his word. But, as parents, while they live under our roof, we have certain authority over them that God has given us that we can use effectively, and if they decide to stray…those purposeful seeds we've planted will give way and emerge through all the dirt one day. We can be sure of that.

Here are a few simple things to consider as your kids approach those teen years…or even if you're already in the middle of the not-quite-adult years:

You're still in charge. Your teens are not adults and not on their own until they leave your home, and even in college – if you're footing the bill – you've got authority over their whereabouts, their friends, and what they do while under your roof. Your rules are the ones they abide by, and that's that. You can explain the why's of them, listen to them plead their cause; but as you pray and ask God for guidance, what you say is what they are to do.

Kindness leads to repentance. Once you've established that you're in charge, it does not bode well to scream, threaten, and rage about the rules you've established. This is not great leadership. Great leadership leads by example, loves those he leads, and loves those who follow. We can be kind but effective parents by stating our rules, sticking to them, and loving our kids as we enforce them.

Monkey see, monkey do. If your teens see you cheating, lying, and watching things you've told them not to watch, they will want to know why it's okay for you…and not them. And they have a valid point. If parents are watching a show that includes sexual encounters and scantily clad women and men, and teens observe this behavior, their curiosity will get the best of them.

Laziness and boredom are not acceptable. We are training our teens to be contributors to society, family, and the workplace in just a few years, and we do them a disservice by catering to their every whim, every whine, and every excuse. Yes, they can make their beds (if that's one of your rules). Yes, they can be required to tell you where they're going with their friends. Yes, their phone is completely open to your scanning eyes; it doesn't "belong" to them. Some of our kids' problems stem from our own lack of diligence to see to it that our kids get up, move, create, and give to others.

Pray and discern. I can't say enough about praying for your kids. But while you're on your knees, ask God for discernment. If your teen is moody, pray for insight as to what might be the reason. If your son is closing himself in his room, shutting out the whole world, pray for wisdom as you approach him and listen to his heart. If your daughter takes a sudden interest in dieting to the extreme, pray for a way to encourage her in her beauty, inside and out, and to dispel every lie she might be storing in her head.

Your kids need support. One of the best things you can offer your teen is time with their friends in a safe environment, where good teaching is happening, and growth is occurring – in a youth group. And as parents, stay on top of what's being taught and how your teen is interacting,, and be careful to offer solutions to problems instead of pointing fingers.

There are just a few simple things to put into practice long before your teens arrive at that magical number – 13. God has given you one of the greatest gifts of all – children. And it's not a given that they are going to be a pain in the butt once they assert their independence, notice the opposite sex, and get behind the wheel. In fact, the experience of raising teenagers will give you a few gray hairs due to the challenges that arise, but relationships between parents and teens can grow stronger and become tighter, if we continue parenting, loving, praying, and leading by example, trusting to God to guide us as we obey him, in leading our kids to a life full of love, joy, and peace in HIM.

That's a solid foundation on which they can stand against every storm of life when they eventually leave home, with wild oats aside, rebellion behind them, and the fragrance of ripe fruit surrounding them.

Simple Solutions – Those Pesky Passwords – by Georganne Schuch

The human brain is designed to hold a gazillion trillion amounts of information. I made that number up, because really no one knows for sure how much information the human brain really holds. Like when you recall some obscure childhood memory where you put play dough in a door lock thereby cementing the internal mechanisms and rendering the lock useless. *That wasn't you?* Oh, then, maybe that was just me.

Well, one thing I know is that the human brain is not designed to hold an unlimited number of passwords. Or, at least, mine isn't. Certainly I am not the only person on the planet who has locked herself out of her bank account because the answer to the question, "What is your mother's maiden name?" was not actually my mother's maiden name but my grandmother's maiden name. Because, you know, someone might know my mother's maiden name and hack my account.

Everything requires a password or a PIN (personal identification number). EVERYTHING! And to complicate the matter, every website, bank card, parking garage keypad and children's play scape security checkpoint requires a different combination of letters (a, b, c), numbers (1, 2, 3), characters (!, @, #), and upper and lowercase letters (A, a, B). *Confusing.*

To further complicate the sign-in process, many sites require a user name, account number, or some other kind of account identification. How many times a day do I have to ask myself, "Who am I?" Talk about your fragmented personalities.

First, let's define a hacker. I won't get into the untold damage a hacker can incur on an individual or business. I'll save that for a rant article one day. But let's just boil it down to something simple: A hacker is a person or persons who delight in crashing, maiming, stealing and otherwise destroying a person's computerized life. The fallout from a hack can cause serious harm and residual damage for years in the form of identity theft, financial theft from a bank account or credit card, and loss of personal data, including photos, videos, and documents.

That's why passwords are important to protect your logins. While they can be a nuisance, they are meant to secure your information. To try to keep some sanity in the process of setting up usernames and passwords, without writing anything on my hand in invisible ink, I have devised…

A simplified process:

1. For account names, many sites use an email address. Establish a dedicated email address setup to use for non-personal accounts. By doing that, you will funnel a lot of spam into that account and avoid overflowing personal email. This email address should not be used for accounts and sites where you get time-sensitive emails or communication which requires any kind of action from you. Obviously, you ***want*** **to know** when your account is overdrawn, or your payment hasn't been received, or someone has stolen your credit card number and funded a lavish European vacation at your expense.
2. Pick a basic word or phrase, four to six letters. Don't use the name of anyone in your immediate family. Or pets.
3. Then, pick at least three numbers. Birthdays and phone numbers are a no-no.

This combination can be your basic password. Many websites require a minimum eight character password, so you're set with a five letter word and three numbers, such as monet341. Use this type of password for websites which do not have sensitive personal data.

For websites that have financial information or other sensitive data, your password needs to be what is referred to as "strong." Hacker-unfriendly, in other words. Throw in a random uppercase letter and a character, for example moNet_341.

A few words of caution:

1. Don't share your passwords. Don't write passwords down where anyone can find them or save them to a file called passwords and leave on your hard drive for the computer nerd to copy.
2. While some sites like to link logins, (you know the Login with Facebook or Twitter buttons?), it's not generally a good idea. I read an article last year about a tech writer's nightmare hack. The gist of the story was how the hacker secured access to one of the writer's accounts by resetting the password. The hacker had to snoop around a little, but apparently was able to call in a password reset and talk his way through a couple of low-end security questions. That opened him up to a number of other linked accounts, ultimately giving the hacker access to erase his Mac laptop remotely. The writer lost all his family photos, written articles, etc. He confessed that it was a hard lesson learned and one in which he was partly responsible.
3. Don't share account logins with anyone else. I'm not talking about hiding information from a spouse, but the more people who know a login the easier it makes a hack possible.
4. Never login to financial sites on an open-access Wi-Fi connection, such as at a library or coffee shop. Once you type in the login information and hit enter, anyone else logged in on the Wi-Fi can intercept your information and use your login.
5. Likewise, never login to an important account on a public computer or even someone else's computer. Programs (called keyloggers) on a computer can capture the login information and pass it to someone who will use it to hack the account.
6. Lock your devices. A PIN, even a simple four-digit one, adds an extra layer of protection if someone picks up your phone, iPad, laptop, etc.
7. Never use links in emails to login to any account. If you get an email encouraging you to go to a site to do anything, open a browser and type in the link independently, ensuring that you're going to the right site. Some hackers use these emails, known as phishes, to redirect you to a site which captures your login information and any changes you make, such as credit card information.

As for PINs, which are usually three or four digits, do not use current phone numbers, birthdays, or addresses. Instead, recall a random childhood memory, such as your high school locker combination. Yeah, I don't remember that either. Anyway, you get the idea.

Secure your personal information with good passwords. But don't lock yourself out of all your accounts with ones you can't remember. Plan it.

A Night to Remember - That's Funny! – by Marcy Lytle

According to an article in Psychology Today, time a child laughs about 300 times a day, and an average 40 year-old laughs about four times a day! What happens to us? We need to spend part of our family time laughing with our children, because laughter is something they enjoy, and we tend to lose, as we "mature." The Bible says in Proverbs 17:22 that a merry heart does the heart good like medicine.

So this month of all-things-hearts, why not make our hearts merry together by taking a huge dose of the laughter medicine right out of a bottle?

Preparation: You will need an empty medicine bottle and seven tiny rubber bands (or tiny strips of tape). You will be cutting out each rectangle below, rolling it really tight and placing each one into the bottle. You are creating a Merry Heart prescription bottle. Cut out the prescription label and tape it to the bottle. You will also need four socks, each tied in a knot, paper and markers, and an empty plate on the table.

Place the "medicine" bottle in the center of the table. Open the bottle and let each one take a "dose" out, unroll it, read it, and instruct another family member to read or do what it says. The answer to each riddle is in parenthesis – so don't read it until everyone guesses. Let laughter and merriment erupt while you have a fun time together. Keep the bottle handy for an evening of healing laughter. End the study by asking God to fill your home with his joy.

The sound of laughter is the goal for this study, as we laugh together. Laughter is contagious and can cause all of us to feel better, connect with each other, energize us, and enjoy our lives. In fact, laughter can even heal our bodies and minds when we're tired and run down!

(Cut out this first rectangle and tape it around the medicine bottle):

MERRY HEART prescription:

Open as often as needed.

May cause uncontrollable laughter.
Take as many doses as your ribs can stand.

Never expires…

You are driving a bus. 4 people get on, three people get off, then 8 people get on and 10 people get off, then 6 people get on, and 2 more people get off. What color were the bus driver's eyes? (Whatever color *your* eyes are because it says *you* are driving the bus!)

A man left home running. He ran a ways and then turned left, ran the same distance and turned left again, ran the same distance and turned left again. When he got home there were two masked men. Who were they? (The catcher and the umpire!)

Johnny's mother had four children. The first was April, the second was May, and the third was June. What was the name of her fourth child? (Johnny!)

Psalm 126:2 says, “Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.” (Start laughing one at a time, until all are joined in together in one loud roar!)

Proverbs 15:13 says, “A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit.” (Ask someone to make a super smiley face with goofy eyes, and then take turns copying him/her.)

MadLib:

Have the group tell you a verb, a noun, a body of water and another noun. Fill out the following mad lib with the words you were given. Sing the following mad lib to the tune of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”.

_____, _____, _____ your _____, gently down the
(verb) (same verb) (same verb) (noun)

_____ Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a _____.
(body of water) (noun)

On the count of three, everyone jump for joy. On the count of ten everyone do it again. On the count of three, everyone bend a knee. On the count of seven everyone shout “Heaven!” On the count of 1 say “We’re done!” and tickle the person next to you.

Theater in the Air **-** Lie on your backs, with your heads together like spokes on a wheel. Put your hands straight up, so you can see everybody's hands. It's like a stage up there, where our hands can carry on conversations as we let our fingers do the talking. It's like shadow puppetry without the shadows. Have the hands shake hands with the one next to it. Have the hands give high-fives. Ask the hands to dance. Ask the hands to be happy. Ask the hands to take turns telling the story of Daniel in the Lions Den, or some other well-known story from the Bible. And laugh away…

Group juggling: Have everyone sit in a circle. Toss one knotted sock to each other in some pattern, zigzag or side to side, whatever you choose. Then introduce the second sock and toss in the same pattern. Introduce the third sock and then the fourth, and see how long you can keep the juggling socks going, as you smile and laugh for all of the fun you’re having!

Blind drawing: On a sheet of paper, have someone in the family draw a head and neck of a person or thing, at the top of the paper. Have that person fold the paper so the head and neck are folded under, and hand the paper to the next person. They are to draw the body of a person or thing. Have this person fold the paper again with the head and body underneath, and hand the paper to the third person. They are to draw some legs. Unfold the paper and see what kind of odd thing you have drawn. Do it again, and laugh each time.

Funny feast: Have each member go to the kitchen one at a time and find something small that all can eat. Don't let each other see what the other one is choosing until all items are retrieved. Have them hide the snack behind their backs. All at once, have everyone place their food on a plate. See if together you can make a funny picture out of your food and then eat it together, laughing and smiling.

Delirious dancing: Each person is assigned a particular part of the body (the head, the arms, the legs, the hips, etc.) Some parts can be repeated if necessary. They are to come up with a dance move with that part of the body. Put on a worship song and begin with one person's dance move, adding the other dance moves one at a time, until you are all moving in joy and worship together, falling at the end on the floor, in a heap of laughter!

When you're finished with the prescription for your merry hearts, give thanks together as a family for the joy of knowing Jesus and his great love. Ask him to continually fill your home with laughter that is so contagious others will ask what it is that's making you all so happy, and you can tell them it's because of the love you have for each other.

Enjoy your Merry Heart Prescription bottle all of the month of February and throughout the whole year!

The Family Practice – Because We Are – by Rachel Toalson

More than a year ago, my family was in the middle of learning more about our family values, and I was reading some poetry out loud after dinner one night, and the words of E.E. Cummings hung in the air, because I could not move past them.

“Love is the whole and more than all,” he wrote.

We had been thinking and praying about a family mission statement that would sum up our family values, and this seemed like the perfect phrase to do it.

Even though the oldest was only 7 and the others didn’t really know what a family mission statement was, they all agreed (something rare and worth celebrating in our home)..

In all the months after, my husband and I set out to teach our children what it meant for love to be the whole and more than all.

Love is not an easy concept to teach our children.

There is the way we love them when we’re feeling connected and rested, that overwhelming rush we get when we look in their eyes and it’s been a day of playing and cooperating and deep conversations and we can see all the way to their lovely little souls.

And then there is the way we love them when we didn’t get enough sleep last night and they’re getting into everything they’re not supposed to as soon as we leave them alone for 20 seconds and they’re whining about this and fighting about that, and we just want a moment’s peace, so we snap a little too harshly.

We are the best teachers of love and honor our children will ever have.

Sometimes I feel afraid of this.

Because it’s not just the way I love them, these little people in my house. It’s the way I love all those others outside our home, too, the good friends who look like us and think like us and live like us, and all those other others who aren’t like us and don’t think like us and wouldn’t want to live like us, ever.

No one can ever love, perfectly.

But in all those months of teaching my children and learning myself, I discovered that honor and love go hand in hand.

Love is a tender affection for one another, and honor is a high respect for another, and they cannot exist apart.

And so part of teaching our children how to love is teaching them that love and honor have nothing to do with what people do or how they behave but everything to do with who they are.

Love and honor hold no conditions. We are loved and honored just because we are, because we live, because we are children of God.

This isn't always an easy concept to uphold, in those moments when a boy lost his battle with anger and there's another boy crying because of it. But honor in our parenting, in our speaking and our emotion coaching, walks our children back to connection and the fold of forever-love.

The way we speak and how we teach and the looks we wear in those so-important discipline moments tell kids if they are honored or not.

If we don't teach them in our every interaction with them, especially the hard moments, how will they ever learn that all people, regardless of their color or background or age or economic status or romantic choices or spiritual leanings or chosen behaviors, deserve honor?

We, who are living in community together, under the same roof, can know too intimately the deep dark sides of one another, and sometimes it's hard to squint through that dark side, when the wrongs tally high. But the lens of love can always see past the deserve-it.

We are the first ones to teach our children how to put on the lenses of love.

So it's worth it for us to look for those tiny little places where we may have let honor disappear in our connection with our children, where we have allowed ourselves to see each other and the people who inhabit our world in ways that do not honor all.

Love follows the steps of honor.

And this is how love becomes the whole and more than all.

Suggestions to promote love and honor within the family:

1. Write love notes to each other. Kids love these notes in lunches or sitting at a table, waiting next to their breakfast plates. Tell them how you feel when they hug you. Tell them how they have changed your world for the better. Thank them for their love.

2. Start an "honor board." Notice when someone is honoring a family member by saying a kind or encouraging word or doing a kind deed. Kids love to be acknowledged for their kindness, and the acknowledgement helps develop a vocabulary for what love and honor look like, especially in young children.

3. Discuss around the dinner table how each family member loved or honored someone today. Our dinner table questions usually include the following: *What was something wonderful that happened today? What are you grateful for? How did you love or honor someone today?* Knowing that the question is coming at the end of the day gets kids thinking about it during the day.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - Green Paint – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever prayed for something, noticed circumstances and situations that seemed to confirm the answer, only to find out you're way off track? I have.

Say, for instance, you're praying for a new house, and a friend calls "out of the blue" and tells you a cute house is for sale near her, just in your price range. You drive over to her neighborhood to see it and it's painted in that cool green hue that you love, so it must be "confirmation" that this house is for you! And besides those two incredible things, the owner is standing in the yard and invites you in for a look-see, and you realize you both have a common friend. "What a coincidence!" you exclaim. When you drive away, you immediately phone your husband to let him know that God found you a house today.

But, wait!

You arrive home and find out that the job you thought you had in this new area of town fell through, you get a call that someone else made an offer on the house after you left, and there are plans to repaint it anyway – to the horrid shade of blue you despise.

What happened?

I believe God does confirm our decisions, but I'm not sure that he does it in ways that we think and hope he will. **We are setting ourselves up for disappointment and disillusionment if we look for God to confirm our decisions that we make by sending "candy" from heaven that tastes so good.**

I was so proud of my own daughter and her husband, recently. They were looking for a car and one became available across the street from my dad's house, in their price range, and I just happened to hear about in a casual conversation. It was an older car, but had very low mileage. *Was this an answer to prayer? A godsend? A cool set of circumstances affirming this was the car for them?* Maybe so.

But instead of taking the car right then, my son-in-law used the God-given wisdom he's learned through the scriptures, through teaching, and through experience of walking with his Father, to ask a few questions and probe a bit deeper. In doing so, he found out the car was super expensive to repair, and after talking to a couple of mechanics, he learned that this car was not a good deal at all. He felt uneasy about the purchase, so he walked away.

God does indeed orchestrate our lives and lead us. Proverbs 3 states that if we trust him with all our hearts and don't lean on our own understanding, he will direct our steps. The trouble comes when we only look at the circumstances for confirmation, instead of all of the other indicators of making a good decision.

The following instruction comes from Proverbs 3:

Teaching. Rely on the scripture and the sound teachings you've heard before you step out on a limb that might break beneath you.

Faithfulness. Walk closely with God daily, staying in conversation with him at all times, not just when you're praying for an answer. This way you will learn to hear and recognize his voice, and not your own whimsical fancies.

Trust and Submission. When you pray, trust that God will provide. Submit your desires and needs to him to supply in his way, his timing, and his answer. Then expect the answer to come, but don't look for it to be painted and tied in a bow to your liking. Sometimes your liking isn't the best.

Wisdom and Honor. Wise people honor Him in all they do and with all they have. Walk uprightly with God and love him with all of your heart, and your goal to please him and love him will result in his provision and blessings.

Discipline. The Lord ultimately knows what we need at all times, and sometimes his discipline includes the answer of "No," "Wait," or "Not this one." Don't receive these answers as disapproval, but rather as a loving father who knows best and protects and cares for his own children.

Sound Judgment and Discretion. These two things come from walking with the Lord, learning his ways, recognizing his voice, and obeying his whispers. And they come from falling and making mistakes, only to rise again stronger and wiser the next time.

Blessing. Give to others, love your neighbor, and bless those who persecute you. In other words, do unto others as you'd have them do unto you. Be a blessing and blessings will be yours.

We all hope that God will send a blimp over our houses when we pray, with a trailing banner of instructions or the answer in big, bold letters that flash in neon colors of pink and green. But our God is so much more than a blimp pilot, or a sign changer.

He wants a relationship with Him that takes a lifetime of walking with Him to enjoy His continued presence and provision. He wants us to pray, petition him for our needs, but then follow him as he provides, in complete trust and peace.

It's not easy.

It's easier to jump up and down for green paint.

Are you praying and waiting? Your Father has heard your prayer and he will answer. But as you wait, continue to serve and worship Him, so that your heart is full and your hope is secure, whenever the answer comes.

Under the Influence - The Multitask Monster – by Marcy Lytle

We're a society of women who can do it all. We are overrun with lists of things to do, people to meet with, children to care for, parents to tend to, husbands to be with, and oh yes – our own needs and desires to fulfill. And we've learned ways to manage it all with our laptops, our phones, our iPads, our planners, and our Bluetooth device that allows us to make all of our phone calls while we're driving so that we can mark "that" off our lists.

But what if we realized that all of this multitasking is a really a monster of a mask that we're wearing and we are slowly getting lost in its shadow, and forgetting who we really are and why we're here in the first place? **What if being a multitasker isn't such an accomplishment after all, because we're scaring those with whom we live by our uncanny ability to answer them, direct them, and manage them in one sweep of our finger?**

My husband often notes to me and to others about how many things I can get done at once. And he seems proud of me and even a bit envious, at times. But in all reality, I'm jealous of my husband and the peace in which he lives, when I'm awake with my pen in one hand, my phone in the other, while reading a magazine, because I'm looking for that perfect recipe for the party we're attending this weekend.

Don't get me wrong. Multitasking is necessary and a great skill that we women acquire when we "mature" and have kids, right? It really is. But it's that monster I'm referring to that is something we need to watch out for, when it shows it's ugly head.

So how do we multitask, and yet avoid the monster mask?

We have to train ourselves to remember this:

1. **That to-do list is a reference sheet, not a string of commands.** Make your lists, mark off the things you get done, but don't let that list dictate your day. Instead of feeling frustrated at how many items are on the list, be thankful for the ability to get them done. And learn to ask for help, instead of trying to do them all yourself.
2. **Your pile of laundry is not your wheelbarrow to push alone.** Sometimes…we carry more than we need to and we end up with a backache or headache by early evening. Get a basket for each person, place their clean clothes in it, and ask them to put them away. If your kids are tiny, why force yourself to hang every piece if you haven't got the time? Lay aside expectations others place on you and live comfortably with your own load, until your littles ones can help.
3. **Naps are sacred moments and guilt is not allowed in your dreams**. A short nap can make a world of difference in whether or not your monster mask appears at any given point of the day. There's no guilt allowed if your eyes are heavy and you're mind is mush. Take a few minutes and shut them. Lie down with your kiddos and leave the house a mess, while you get in a few minutes of rest.
4. **Cooking and cleaning are two jobs with levels, so only play at the skill where you can win.** If your life is too busy for set tables, candles, and gourmet recipes, then go for the quick and easy, and enjoy every bite. If a clean house is a figment of your

imagination, realize that it's just a season of dust, and before long the season will change. Life is way too short to cook and clean so much that we miss the laughter and the fun of being with our families.

5. **Your neighbor's house and family is only the black and white paper photo in the frame.** You know those paper photos in store bought frames? You're supposed to remove them and replace them with real photos of your real family. Instead of keeping up with her and what she's doing, trying to present yourself as Wonder Woman, insert your makeup-free face, your kids with jelly on their faces, and your husband's wrinkled shirt. Then stare at it and smile. It's yours, and it's lovely.

There are so many other areas where we find ourselves under a huge stack of juggling plates, and we often become super skilled and keeping them all in balance, without crashing to the floor. However, a plate juggler is only the one who sweeps the table clean, serves the food, and works in the kitchen. Don't you want to be the one who sits down and enjoys the meal?

Leave the multitask monster mask where it belongs – in the Halloween bag with the other scary faces. Put on your own smiley face, the one that's rested and happy, and join the world in which the peaceful ones live…

Beauty for Ashes - My Cup – by Pam Charro

John 18:11
Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away!
Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"

The Bible is full of examples of my need to follow in Jesus' footsteps in drinking my own cup of suffering. It is definitely not my favorite part of the Christian story, but I know that I can't be what God put me here to be, unless I go through hard times. I can't say I am fond of my cup, but I doubt I would prefer anyone else's, either. So the best thing I can do is set my mind to believing what God says about suffering.

One of the most challenging aspects of walking with God is recognizing that my suffering is a part of his divine plan for me (2 Timothy 2:3).

I can't help but wonder sometimes,

Even this, Lord? Surely this part is a mistake.

I have had to really force myself to believe that there are no "mistakes" that he hasn't already figured out how to work for my good and his own glory. I have to sometimes reaffirm it several times a day; but that very discipline has strengthened my faith that he is being good to me all of the time, even during a very long and dark storm that seems to make no sense.

I cannot be lost now that I have been found by him.

That is the beauty of who God is.

Drinking my cup will never be something that I enjoy, but knowing that it is bringing something eternally precious has been key for me in accepting life's difficult and confusing times.

It is because of God's gentle and patient persistence in allowing my suffering that I am able to learn how to cling to him and develop a stronger faith and trust that is worth more than gold (1 Peter 1:7).

Healthy Habits – Easy Hacks – by Georganne Schuch

Did you make any New Year's resolutions this year? Did they include healthy goals? Have you broken them yet? *Yeah, like who didn't?*

I know I'm one of those people who likes to jump into something with both feet then quickly reconsider the wisdom of such craziness. Especially when I seem to be the only person doing such nonsense. But the truth is, I'm probably not the only person doing it. And I don't have to do it all at once. AND it doesn't all have to be hard.

So, to soothe your guilty conscience I'm going to give you four really simple healthy habit hacks that you'll probably really enjoy, that no one else will know anything about, and that will make a big difference in how you feel. Ready?

Hack #1: Take a hot bath two to three times a week. Doesn't that sound good? Especially, if you have kids? And double especially if you have little kids. Besides the luxuriousness of spending time soaking without anyone tugging on your shirt and yelling in your ear, a hot bath is about more than washing your body.

Before you think I'm crazy for suggesting you spend 15-20 minutes in the bathtub when you can barely get a shower most days, let's look at the benefit of those few minutes. Add up to two cups of Epsom salt to your bath water, and you got yourself a healthy spa on the cheap. Epsom salt is not actually salt, or at least not the kind you put on your food, but a mineral compound of magnesium and sulfate. When you add it to your bath water and soak in it, the minerals are absorbed through the skin. Since most people are magnesium deficient, and since magnesium is best metabolized through topical application, a bath is the perfect time to get your magnesium fix and relax at the same time.

Epsom salt baths are great for soothing inflamed joints and achy muscles, softening itchy skin, relieving headaches, and improving circulation. Instead of thinking of a hot bath as a luxury, consider it a prescription for mineral deficiency and a little sanity. If you want to bump it up a notch, add essential oils to the water, too. Lavender works well for stress. Rosemary is awesome for sinus congestion and sore muscles.

Hack #2: Brush your skin before you shower or bathe. Your skin doesn't get tangles, but it does shed an unbelievable one million cells per day. By using a brush designed to lightly brush your skin, you help the body shed dead skin cells and stimulate the lymphatic system. Some claim it even reduces cellulite. I'm not promising miracles here, but it can't hurt, right?

There are different schools of thought as to where to start and how to properly brush, but it's really not rocket science. Slowly brush in a rotating pattern up your legs and arms, across your abdomen, and down your shoulders…always moving toward the heart. It's another soothing practice to help your body eliminate toxins and improve circulation.

Skin brushing is super easy and takes less than five minutes. The trick is to use a special, but inexpensive, brush designed for the task (available at Amazon and health food stores). Do it just

before you get in the shower when your skin is dry. Then shower like normal. After the shower, apply a natural oil-based lotion. I like whipped coconut oil.

Hack #3: Swish coconut oil in your mouth for at least five minutes a day. This technique, known as oil pulling, takes some getting used to, but it is a great dental hygiene trick to battle gingivitis, plaque and bad breath.

Take about a tablespoon of coconut oil in your mouth. If it's solid, it will take a minute to melt. Then, swish it around in your mouth for at least five minutes. Most directions recommend 20 minutes, but you'll probably have to work up to that. It's a long time to have something in your mouth. Make sure you get the oil between your teeth, but do not swallow the oil. Remember it takes all kind of nasty stuff off your teeth. Spit the oil in the trash can…not the sink, unless you want to pay the plumber to dig it out. Finally, floss and brush like normal. That's it.

Oil pulling won't reverse tooth decay. You can use different kinds of oil, but coconut oil is naturally antibacterial. So, it is a great choice to reduce inflammation from gingivitis.

Hack #4: Stretch several times a day. I really like to take about 30-45 minutes in the morning to stretch, but mornings aren't always cooperative. I oversleep. The kids get up early or were up in the night sick. It's too cold. The excuses are endless. Truth is, it probably makes more sense to stretch several times a day, and I would probably get more stretching done anyway.

First, stretch for five minutes in the morning. Your muscles and joints need a wakeup call in the morning, just like your brain. So, help them by stretching lightly as you get ready to shower. Raise your arms over your head and gently bend from side to side. Breathe deeply as you bend forward and let your arms hang to the floor. Stand on a stair or stool and hang the heel of each foot off, stretching the Achilles heel and calf, for about thirty seconds. Roll your head from side to side. Add any stretches you need to work out your own kinks.

Second, stretch throughout the day as you take a break or sit at the red light. Roll your wrists and shoulders. Personalize your stretching to accommodate your situation. Anytime you feel stiff, take a minute to breathe deeply and stretch.

Finally, stretch just before you go to bed. Sometimes I just want to crawl in bed as fast as possible, but stretching helps me get comfortable for a good night's sleep. The heel stretches, in particular, ward off those evil leg cramps which attack in the middle of the night.

Stretching improves flexibility and circulation and reduces tension (see a pattern here?). If you feel all knotted up after a long day, remember to stretch it all out.

Now, really, do those hacks sound so hard to incorporate in your daily routine? They are easy to do and easy to squeeze in during the day. Some can be done while doing something else (oil pull while showering).

No excuses.

Hack your way to healthy habits.

A Moment in THYME – One Load of Laundry – by Debra Brown

"I LOVE YOU!!!!!!!"

I found this love note my husband hid in the draft of this article. I've heard those three words so many times, but today they're ***RED*** *in 16 font size with exclamation points! (He knows I love exclamation points!)*

I used to ask him, "Why do you love me?"

Today, I choose to believe all the whys. I choose to believe the extravagance of the BIG RED WORDS exclaimed with !!!!! (FIREWORKS).

I LOVE YOU BACK!!!!!!!!

And I won't add five pages of my feelings because I know you already get it. Oh, honey, what a journey we've had! Oh Lord, THANK YOU, for this wonderful man!

Clothes piled high in my arms; I hurriedly walked toward the laundry room. Out of the corner of my eye, a portrait of two young, eager newlyweds caught my attention. So innocent and fearless, mere babes, my Jim and I walked down that aisle almost 45 years ago, arm-in-arm, ready to conquer the world. I stopped to gaze at the picture, bits of laundry beginning to fall to the floor.

I, Debra, take thee, Jim, to be my lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward...for better, for worse…in sickness and in heath…to honor and obey… to love and to cherish… till death do us part.

Those sweet romantic vows were now rich with meaning and dimension, hammered out on the anvil of life.

Like flipping through the pages of a magazine, I mentally skimmed back over the years:

- From high school sweethearts to our college years at The University of Texas in Austin.
- Marriage, college graduation and our move to Atlanta, Georgia.
- The excitement of our first job, first home, first child.

A chill ran down my spine as I remembered our early days when my unmet needs battled against Jim's. Mistakes littered that season in Georgia, leaving a faint stench of decay. We had begun to go our separate ways.

> *My son, do not forget my teaching, But let your* heart keep *my commandments... Trust in the Lord with all your heart and* ***do not lean on*** *your own understanding. In* ***all your ways*** *acknowledge Him, and* ***He will make*** *your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes… (Proverbs 3:1-7 NASB) (Underlining & bold - mine)*

Our lives looked so good on the outside. Jim and I both knew Jesus. We loved Him. In fact, we were serving in a small denominational church at the time. However, we were doing what WE thought was right in our own minds; not necessarily serving His purposes.

God got our attention. He sent my mother to Atlanta. "We've got to get the kids out of Atlanta!" She told my dad. Within months, we were delivered from our "Egypt" back to our hometown in Texas, but we still had to forge thru the wilderness of being wise in our own eyes.

As I look back, I now recognize the enemy's strategies. Divide and conquer. The struggles of becoming *one* played across my memory: the competition matches, the blame game, our two family cultures colliding with atomic force. I definitely had an "I" problem. My mission was to re-create Jim in my image. I went about serving him – according to *my* needs.

Those first few years back in Texas were humbling. We knew we'd been rescued, but the wilderness was hot and dry and barren. We worked hard to build a business, but we were still two very strong individuals trying hard to build a life together. That's all we *knew* to do.

God intervened. He moved us to back to Austin. He led us to a church that taught The Word. It was an oasis. At the same time, a lady's group found me! I was a dry well. Stepping into their worship service, desperation to have what they had hit me full force!

God, I want to know you, really know you..

Jim and I were growing in Jesus, but separately. Jim's focus was on The Word; my focus was on The Spirit. Self-righteousness entered in, and I began to pray, "Lord, change Jim. Remake him, take off him…" My religiousness began to stink.

God slam dunked *Lord, Change Me* by Evelyn Christenson into my hands.

"Lord, change me," I began. Desperate, miserable and totally convicted, I hit my knees. "Lord, change me**.** Lord, change me! LORD, CHANGE **ME!"** And amazingly, as I turned and repented, as I chose to focus changing JUST me, my life changed!

- I turned to the Lord for answers.
- I stopped listening to my feelings.
- I unplugged my ears.
- I stopped talking (nagging) and started listening to truth.
- I ran to The Word and ran to The Word and RAN TO THE WORD
- I started doing and obeying what He said.
- I replaced complaining with Thanksgiving and Praise.

The word exploded in my life.

God straightened our paths. We were becoming ONE! Mindboggling! It was a miracle, God's handiwork.

I stoop to re-gather our laundry. Jim's clothes and my clothes…

Intermingled…

One pile.

Laughing, I realize that oneness doesn't quite look like what I imagined almost 45 years

ago. I hugged my “load” as I headed to the laundry room.

Lord, keep changing me!

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road - The Art of Marriage by Lynn Cherry

I saw it on Facebook, another awkwardly cropped photo. You know the kind where you can still see the shoulder of the person whose face is no longer part of the picture. And then I read this in *The Message*, *"Because God created this organic union of the two sexes, no one should desecrate his art by cutting them apart."* Mark 10:9

Whatever you think of *The Message* and reading a paraphrase over a translation of the Bible, I have to say I am consistently inspired by Eugene Peterson's monumental offering, and it often gets me thinking about familiar passages in ways I haven't before. That is a good thing.

I'm not making a statement about divorce. It's painful enough to walk through a severed relationship. Far be it from me to stack any bit of shame on top of that pain. What I want to bring to our attention is the interesting choice in using the word "art."

Curious, isn't it, the idea that a relationship, a marriage, is a piece of art?

I'm reminded of the Disney movie *Brave* where heroine, Merida, tried to repair relational casualties by stitching up the family tapestry that had been torn in two.

Photos and tapestries are only a reflection of the relationship they represent; but just as there is beauty in the photo, there is beauty in the relationship.

Ephesians 2:10 tells us "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." The word handiwork comes from the Greek word *poiéma*, the very same word from which we derive the words poet and poem.

God is a poet and we are his poem.

God is an artist and we are his art.

I think the tapestry metaphor is quite fitting. The Greek root of *poiéma* is *poieo*, which means a product,, i.e. fabric (literally or figuratively), a thing that is made, workmanship. This means…

God is a weaver and we are his tapestry.

Earlier, in Mark 10, Jesus reminds us of God's original intent for man and woman, for two to become one.

Just how do two tapestries become one?

Honestly, in my imagination it looks like messy, heart-wrenching work. It seems to me that creating one tapestry from two would most likely involve some cutting, unraveling, tugging and pulling.

OUCH!

Maybe that's why we feel so vulnerable in this most intimate relationship.

Maybe that’s why it is so important to be open with each other.

I’m grateful that a tapestry is one-sided, so glad we get to hang it against a wall and only display the beautiful scene woven on the front.

If we flip our marriage over and take look at the back side we will find hanging threads and tangled up knots, places where we’ve come unraveled, and places where we’ve held on too tight to being right.

Can I make a suggestion? Don’t worry about the back side of your tapestry! Those critics who admire the back side for its lack of tangles and loose threads are just frustrated artists who only wish they had the courage to submit to the creative process.

Art is certainly not about perfection. We have a tendency to think of art in elementary school terms. When the marker gets off course or a drop of paint falls in the wrong spot we simply tear up the paper and grab a clean sheet. But that is not how a masterful artist creates. There are no mistakes for the master.

Every stroke, every chiseled fragment, every single thread is part of the creating, part of the becoming.

In spite of the mess on the wall-side of our tapestry, I see God weaving a lovely piece of art as he knits our hearts together. It is so good to pause occasionally, take a step back, and admire his workmanship.

Date Night Fun – It's a Mystery! – by Marcy Lytle

I love mystery movies, and there just aren't enough of the good ones being made much anymore! Mysteries are also fun to read, as we try to figure out who did it, why they did it, and how they did it. So why not bring a bit of mystery into date nights with him? How fun it can be to keep him guessing and wondering, and then to reveal to him the truth! Here are a few ideas to place a bit of intrigue into your nights out with him this month:

1. **What are we doing**? Tell him you've planned a date but don't offer details of any kind. This time think about what he enjoys doing and plan the date around that. Maybe he enjoys disc golf, a good cup of coffee, and an action movie. (Blackhat is one to consider) Leave a note in his car, the morning of, that reads "Meet me for Three" and then tell him a time to be ready for what you've planned to do!
2. **Where are we going?** This is a good idea for a road trip date, out of town. It doesn't have to be far. Get out your road map and locate about three small towns within an hour's driving time. Look them up and see what there is to do or see. It might be a historical marker, a cool soda shop, a lake with a view, or more – that you've never been to before. Don't tell him where you're going – just get in the car and drive! Record your findings and surprises in a travel journal to be filled with all of your adventures this year.
3. **What are we eating?** This is so fun! Find an evening you have the time to progressively eat your way through the night at different stops, by trying a new appetizer, a new entrée, and a new dessert, ending the night at a new coffee shop. Start off at a tapas bar for perhaps a new appetizer he's not tried before, then leave and stop at a second diner for a small entrée to share. Pick a drive-thru restaurant for a soft serve cone to enjoy in the car, and end the evening doing a word search together in a coffee shop at a table for two! You can custom make your own word search here!
4. **Who are we seeing**? Invite another couple for a double date, and have them surprise him when you show up for the fun night out. Double dates are great for playing games, so find a table, bring some snacks, and enjoy their company and some fun! It's also nice to attend a game, or a concert. Look through your local venues and see what's happening! Pack some fun goodies to enjoy on the ride to and from your destination! Check out these strawberry Valentine's ideas!
5. **Why do you love me?** Sometimes, and often, it's a good thing to remind your date of why you love him. This one will take a bit of pre-planning. Visit your local bookstore and find a poem in a book that describes why you love him – note the book and page. Look through the greeting cards at another store and find the perfect verse, but don't buy the card – just remember where it is. Decide on a drink and snack from World Market and purchase it, placing it in a cooler or basket. (Italian sodas mixed with club soda are divine!) Finally, bring a blanket for cozying up in the car or atop the hood (if weather permits) for star watching as the date comes to an end. Prepare your reasons and pour them on him verbally, as you hold his hand tightly.

Nothing says "I love you" like a bit of mystery planning ahead of time, showing your date that he/she is thought of, worth planning for, and a joy to be with. Instead of making it all about

February 14th this month, plan a date night every weekend to celebrate your togetherness forever…

After 30 Years – 8 Reasons to Date Him – by Marcy Lytle

I have a column in this magazine called "Date Night Fun" because I firmly believe in purposeful nights out with him, ones that are planned, ones that occur often, and ones that include just you and him. It's something I believe in strongly, and something I believe is a good foundation for a healthy marriage. There are a myriad of reasons to put aside date night, including finances, children, and lack of energy, or just plain apathy, but there so many more reasons to make it a part of our calendar, as something we look forward to more than anything else!

I don't think there are any verses in the bible that state we need to have a date night with our husbands, but Ecclesiastes 9 does say to "enjoy life with your wife, whom you love," and the second commandment Jesus gave, after he told us to love God with all of our hearts, is to love others as ourselves. That group of "others" includes our husbands. He should be top priority among our list of friends. We make sure we have lunch dates with our girlfriends, but it's even more important to make sure we have a date with him.

Let's address those reasons we don't do date night:

Finances. I've been there, when money was absolutely not available to pay a sitter, and if we paid the sitter then there was no money left for dinner and/or a movie – the common activities for a date night. However, we found a way. Picnics were options when money was tight, and dates were taken when the day was light – *how do you like that rhyme*? Finding friends who will trade nights with you also alleviates the burden of paying a sitter. And there are plenty of cheap date night ideas to be found by perusing the internet. Don't let the lack of finances keep you from heading out for time alone.

Children. One of the best things your children can observe, and one of the best things that blesses them, is seeing you date your husband. When they see you get dressed up, and watch you two leave hand in hand, they see something they want to model. Train your kids to adore their future spouse by adoring your spouse, now. You can put the children to bed early, and have date night in. You can even take the children with you (once in a while) and include them in a romantic dinner or a drive in the moonlight, all snuggling together on a family date night. Don't let your children miss out on seeing their parents enjoy each other.

Lack of Energy. You're tired, he's tired, and the sofa looks inviting, as well as the television remote. Or perhaps your retreat to your sewing or craft room, or to get lost inside a book, is more appealing than taking a shower and dressing up once again, just to go out with him. If life is that tiring for you, rethink what's making you so stressed and tired. Maybe you both could meet on the way home for a quick dinner alone. Sunday afternoon drives can be taken – relaxing dates – where both of you are refreshed from observing God's creation. It does take energy and effort to plan a date with him, but it's so worth it and it's like placing a few stitches along the edges of a frayed garment, so that it can be worn well for many years to come.

Apathy. Here's the biggest issue. Over the years of marriage, the raising of kids, the disappointments and frustrations of life, a date with him just doesn't sound appealing – because he's the one we're tired of. He doesn't converse, he won't do anything fun, and it's just not

worth the effort to be with someone so boring and uninterested in us. Marriage can become this way, but it doesn't have to stay this way. If there is unforgiveness, seek help. If judgment has occurred, ask God to give you new eyes to see him with adoration once again. And if he refuses to enjoy fun, pray for him.

Now that those excuses are aside, what's the big deal about date night?

Here are the wonderful stitches that date night sews into the fabric of your marriage:

Adoration – when you're out with just him, gaze at him and fall in love with him.

Affirmation – Dressing up for each other, planning fun together, it all affirms your love again and again.

Age-defying – Going out to walk, see a movie, hold hands and skip, etc. keeps you young!

Aligning – Taking time to be together alone gives you time to align your goals, your dreams, etc.

Amazing – Spending time alone can result in amazing times of refreshment and spiritual growth.

Appreciation – Planning time to bless the other one with fun they enjoy shows gratitude for them.

Attention – Noting what the other one enjoys doing shows him he is preferred and loved.

Awe-inspiring – Date night takes you away from the mundane into the star-filled starry night.

After more than 30 years now, date night is still a vital part of our marriage, it inspires us to laugh, hold hands, see and experience new things, and look into each other's eyes and smile.

When we were newly married, my husband and I saw a very old couple sitting right next to each other in a car (back when cars had full front seats!) and we commented, "We want to be like that when we're old!" In other words, when given the chance, we wanted to scoot close to each other, instead of retiring to separate Lazy Boy chairs.

Don't let date night be something you just watch your kids do, when they start dating. Show them how it's done and keep showing it to their children, and to the world around you, that you love him and he's a handsome keeper whose hand you love to hold as you grow "old" together…

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems: “Not Just an Acquaintance” by Kayley Ryan

My mom pokes her head in the door where my friend and I are busily working on a speech for an upcoming tournament, “You know, as much time as you two have spent together and haven’t killed each other yet, you must be good friends.”

I grin and nod my head in agreement.

Friendship requires work. I’m just going to say that outright. You can’t spend five minutes with each other once every two months and expect that you’re going to stay good friends. And Facebook is not necessarily the best way to connect. In fact, because of its consuming and addictive nature, Facebook tends to detract from real-world relationships.

There are so many ways in which we teenagers distract ourselves from face-to-face conversation. We check our phones every minute or two (perhaps even more frequently than that) for Snapchat, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter, text messages…when the people we should be focusing our attention on are those sitting three feet away from us. Incidentally, they might also have their noses buried in their smartphones.

I have felt convicted of this when I go to movie theaters, where—ironically—I spend at least two hours with a friend but never actually speak to him or her.

Now, I’m not telling you to decline every opportunity to watch a movie with a friend or to never check your social media outlets, but I do believe there is more to friendship than staring at a screen.

Friendship requires quality time spent together. After spending time together, two friends might discover just how much they have in common.

I love what C.S. Lewis writes about friendship in *The Four Loves*:

“Friendship is born at that moment when one man says to another: ‘What! You too? I thought that no one but myself . . .’”

And yes, thanks to *Frozen*, friendship is born at that moment when you finish each other’s “sandwiches”.

But then, what about friendships in which you don’t have that much in common?

I love all kinds of music, but I have some friends who detest a particular genre that I love. One friend of mine dislikes country music, and another dislikes rap. So, what do I do? Do I annoy them by playing my favorite songs or do I willingly listen to their favorite kind of music?

Though this is a simple example, it clearly illustrates how friendships require more than time spent together.

They require sacrifice.

One of my dad's favorite theologians, Dallas Willard, writes that "love is the will to good." In other words, loving a friend means that you want what's best for them, not that you want something *from* them.

Jesus defined love as the greatest sacrifice: ***"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (NIV, John 15:13)***

Sacrifice can be as easy as my refraining from certain kinds of music when certain friends are around, or it can be as difficult as taking a bullet for a friend, figuratively or literally.

Friendship also requires trust, mutual respect, and the willingness to listen.

In fact, you show that you respect your friends and that they can trust you by listening to their ideas and not just your own, by allowing them to decide the next fun activity you want to do together, and letting them have the last word in an argument instead of insisting that you are always right.

As Epictetus, a Greek Stoic philosopher, said,

"We have two ears and one mouth. So that we can listen twice as much as we speak."

You may remember that I began this article with this statement: friendship requires work.

These qualities of friendship—trust, mutual respect, and the willingness to listen—are some of the most difficult for me because I usually am the first to speak, first to lead, and first to want to be right. By not listening to or respecting or trusting my friends, I am communicating to them that I don't care what they think, and that is exactly the opposite of what I want to convey.

While these are definitely *not* the only qualities of a true friend, they are great first steps in making your friendships real and memorable.

For now, focus on one of these that might still need some work (for me, it's listening) and see how you can improve upon it in how you treat your friends.

With the work and love you invest in them, your quality friendships will last the test of time, long distances, petty fights, or crucial arguments. And the return on that investment is something of inestimable value: a true friend, not just an acquaintance.

Moving Forward - Thrill My Heart! By Pam Charro

I so desire to have a heart like God's.

I love the song that says, "Break my heart for what breaks yours." It is so beautiful to be wounded by the things that wound him; but I am convinced that since joy is a fruit of the Spirit, God is probably happy about many more things than those that wound and grieve him.

I was walking on the treadmill a few weeks ago, and I asked God, "Thrill my heart, Lord!"

Since he asks me to think the way he does, I decided to try and make a list of things that thrill God's heart. It saddens me to admit that this was work for me! Probably because I spend way too much time focused on what stresses me out, it took real discipline for me to come up with many things that bring God joy. There is so much beauty on this planet, so much to be awed by. It made me realize that I need to ask God to change what I focus on, so that I can be thrilled by the things that thrill him.

What thrills God's heart?

- A person who wants more of him. How beautiful it is when we respond to our hunger for joy by asking him to fill it with himself.
- His creation in all of its forms. From lakes and mountains to newborn babies of all kinds, to art and music and the written word; he has made so many things to take our breath away.
- When we persevere through difficulties or we offer kind words or practices to others, how he must love that!
- A couple struggling to learn how to love each other in their marriage.
- Anyone who obeys him in any situation.
- When he thinks of what lies ahead for us when we will be with him for eternity.

I know this is a short list and there are so many more things that can be added.

I am asking God for insight into how all of this affects him so that I can imitate him in how I view life. I have endless opportunities to fill my mind with joy and beauty!

One of my goals this year is to ask God to bless that discipline so that I am transformed into someone who has a thrilled heart more often.

Bush Bean Blessings - Unremitting Love - by Tammy Morrison

You are loved.

Yes, it ***is*** that simple.

Jesus loves you.

His love goes on and on and on without interruption.

It is ceaseless.

There's nothing you can do that will separate you from His love.

Maybe you've heard this story--the greatest one ever told--a bazillion times, and you just need to be reminded to stop and ponder this amazing phenomenon. Or maybe, must maybe, it's the first time you've ever heard this glorious news. Either way, this fact is staggering when you think about it: no matter what has happened in your life, no matter what is happening right now, and no matter what will happen in the future, **you can rest in the comfort of knowing Jesus loves you**.

As a woman, there are times I feel unlovable. I'm pretty sure you can relate because I don't think I'm the only woman out there who feels this way. I DO know that I don't necessarily like *admitting* that out loud. I go through phases where I look in the mirror and think to myself, "My gosh! Who is that hag?" In fact, quite often, I'm guilty of saying such self-deprecating statements aloud. (It's not too fun to admit to that one either, particularly since I have a degree in psychology and a certification in counseling). Sometimes I just feel downright ugly. I see my flaws and blemishes. (How on earth can I be 50 and *still* get pimples every now and then?) I see my lined face and the smrinkles (smile wrinkles--now those are positives) around my eyes. Let's not even talk about body image. I'm pretty sure most women--skinny or fluffy--aren't satisfied with their bodies. I don't know a normal lady who'd say, "I just love my body! I wouldn't change a thing!"

As women, we are ruthless when it comes to self-acceptance. We find the teeniest, tiniest flaw and capitalize on it to the point that the end result is feeling unlovable. Because we cannot accept ourselves as we are, we find it difficult to consider that anyone else--be that husbands, family, friends, coworkers, much less Jesus--could find us acceptable and love us unconditionally. This vicious cycle undermines our ability to relate and be relatable to others even though we're all in the same self-deprecating boat. Isn't that ironic? Women experience the same issues, yet too often we suffer in silence...alone...never truly addressing something that is fixable. How so, you ask? The fixability (the ability to fix) is truly as simple as I mentioned at the beginning of this article: It is imperative that we understand and accept the unremitting (ceaseless, constant, never-ending, perpetual, continuous, uninterrupted) love of Jesus.

I realize I'm pointing one finger out to emphasize this message, and there are four fingers coming right back at me. I'm preaching to you (and to myself) to exercise self-acceptance and to accept the love of Jesus. **We must remain focused and purposeful, even diligent in this mindset**. We can't let the cares and obstacles of everyday life weigh us down so much that we lose sight of this precious gift of life and love. Otherwise, we forget about His love. We rush. We scramble. We hurry. We stress. We worry. We flounder. And all the while, there He is...waiting to release His sweet freedom and awesome presence over us. He longs to fill us with strength, encouragement, hope, rest, life...love.

He's waiting.

Yes, it's that simple.

He's there, waiting for us to accept His unremitting love.

Years ago, one of the go-to songs I regularly sang in church was "Stubborn Love" made popular by Kathy Troccoli. Now let me emphasize while I realize I didn't do the song justice vocal-wise, I'm convinced I gave it a run for the money in emotion and passion. I know this because I FELT that song! I could relate, let me tell you. If you aren't familiar with the song, it basically says that we mess up time and time again and get caught up in the every-single-day grind, and we have a tendency to lose sight of God's Love. We don't really stop and consider that His determined, steadfast, and persistent love never really ever turns us loose.

The month of February represents and signifies love like no other time of year. People painstakingly search for just the right expression of undying devotion for their loved ones. All of that is fine and dandy; in fact, it's quite exciting, even exhilarating. Imagine as overtaken as we are with demonstrations of love, Jesus is the greatest lover of all. He is the lover of our soul. God's Love is so great that He engraved us on the palms of His hands.

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; Your walls are continually before Me.

Isaiah 49:16

Accepting the unremitting love of Jesus is the essence of a healthy and wholesome life. If you relentlessly pursue such a life--thinking beyond yourself--your quality of living will improve drastically in every area: spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically. Sometimes, all it takes is hearing a song, seeing a quote, or maybe even reading an article that gets your train back on its track. For all the times you feel derailed, I hope that you'll stop where you are and evaluate your self-acceptance and Jesus' unconditional, unremitting love.

Remember...He is as near as the air that you breathe.

Saddle Up – The Black Hole – by Melissa Critz

Have you ever thought that *maybe* there *might* be a point when life *might* settle for just a moment, and you can perhaps breathe normally again, and then, "Wham!" you get sideswiped by another life attack?

Well, that just happened to me.

If you have been following my column, then you are aware of one of my horse's need for surgery to remove a cancerous tumor on his eyelid. This procedure transpired and Domingo was a pirate for two weeks. He wore a contraption that covered one eye in order for it to heal without being succumbed to any kind of rubbing by him. I was on the downhill side of this life event. Domingo was healing nicely. All I had left was the daily applying of direct ointment, a lot like triple antibiotic for us humans.

It was a glorious Wednesday morning in Texas, two weeks before Christmas. I had just completed a fruitful riding lesson with a young lady who was riding Elijah. Later that afternoon, my two college kids would arrive home and we were going to make cookies and chat the night away as ALL of my family would be home. And I was VERY much looking forward to riding with my oldest daughter, since NOW I could ride Domingo, after his nine month recovery from foundering.

I was anticipating a late evening, so I thought I would grab my good read and take a quick catnap. My husband, who was working from home just today, had a frantic note to his voice when he came into our room. He noticed that Elijah was limping badly, very badly. My heart stopped. It seemed that I was being swallowed into a black hole.

This can't be happening!

I had just been out there a couple hours before. Amy, my student, had ridden him and he was doing just fine! WHAT?

With much trepidation, I laced up my sneakers, gathered my sunglasses, and grabbed a carrot for a treat. As I got closer, I noticed that Elijah could not put any weight on his back right leg *at all*. On further inspection, once a halter was donned and the hoof was picked clean of mud, I found the dreaded item, a nail. This is a dreaded injury in the horse world. Puncture wounds are just not good. This nail wasn't just in his hoof; it was IN his hoof – all the way.

Being that I don't have a trailer anymore and not sure about when a vet could see him, I decided to pull the nail myself. I gathered the twitch. My husband held the twitch which is attached to Elijah's muzzle, and I gingerly but firmly ordered the foot up into my hand. With pliers in hand and after three tries, I pulled that nail out. Elijah was still lame, "limping," in layman's terms.

After petitioning the vet, an appointment was made for the next morning and I had orders to wrap the hoof and keep it clean. I had already washed it while it bled, which was a good thing. *Truly, I was in shock still.* I couldn't believe that my reverie had been spoiled by this, another life event. This was NOT supposed to happen! My daughter and I were supposed to be riding that evening, not fretting over the potential damage that this sheetrock nail may have caused!

I sought the Lord. I knew my faith was once again being tested and my character being built…but why this? *Another* injury? *Another* vet bill? I have had horses all of my life (with a respite while I was pregnant four times and raising kids during their younger years), and I know horses are a money pit. I get that…but could the spending have been spread out a bit? And not happen when I had waited nine months to ride once again with my oldest?

Okay, deep breath.

I knew the Lord was in control and there was a reason for all this. I turned to Him and thought much about FAITH. I have always heard that faith is not a feeling so I do not rely on feelings. My feelings, right at that moment, were ones of discouragement and defeat. I knew I needed to rise above them but I also knew that I needed to really have a heart to heart with Him and share my feelings of discouragement and defeat. *You know what?* He can take that. He wants us to be completely honest with Him.

I was so tired of dealing with vet bills, injuries, and having no trailer, so I was always the needy friend. I wanted to just enjoy these horses – at least for a while.

Isn't that life? Don't things always seem to come along at inopportune times? It's not that we will ever arrive at the time of being completely settled with no cares or worries. We need to be able to go to Him with every life event and give it to Him and tell the Lord the truth. Tell Him how we feel! Share honestly. Open our hearts. Let Him help us build our faith daily and not let the black hole of despair steal our faith.

Hebrews 12:2 says,

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

I went through some turmoil with this event with Elijah – days of changing the dressing, giving antibiotic shots, administering bute orally, watching him daily to assess his lameness.

At the time of this writing, Elijah is slowly making good progress but he's not out of the woods yet. I have to keep giving Jesus my faith daily to help me see the truth. He is the one in whom I must always place my trust, the one that I can be completely honest with, the one that knows my heart, my desires, as well as all my faults, the one that girds me up in His strength.

- Keep your focus on the Lord and dump all that you want to, on Him.
- Share your thoughts, your feelings, your worries, your tears.
- Be honest.
- Let Him perfect your faith daily.

He is the best saddle partner to have.

Real Stories - My *Good* Versus His *Best* – by Amanda May

There was a time…there are still times…when the fog emerges and seems to not only pervade my mind and emotions, but my spirit. It's when the dust of the black and white in my life settles into an earthly gray that seems to steer my life in an autopilot direction, instead of an adventurously expectant one.

We all have a story.

We all have a testimony.

Some stories are stained with the tears that only true trauma can bring…death, divorce, addiction, disease. Some stories seem to have more empty pages than those filled with the life of words. Some stories seem to just keep going, with no true beginning or end, no true anything. I think we all navigate through all of these seasons of stories at one time or another, but the story where my life seemed to most recently land was the latter. It was February of 2012 and life was ***good*****,** but not the ***best.*** My husband of 11 years at the time was wonderful, but restless. My two boys (5 years and 3 years old) were blessings; but in and out of preschool, church, grandparent's houses, and our offices, more than they were at their own home. And I was just plain busy.

Aren't we all?

Isn't that always the excuse, the reason for our saneness in the insanity, our identity?

I am a wife, mother, daughter, sister, and friend, but by trade I am a pediatric physical therapist. At the time, I had a wonderful professional career as one of the managers of a thriving pediatric clinic in Austin, Texas. It was a job that allowed flexibility, certainty, and passion. But due to my character, it was also a job that opened the door to busyness. The type of busyness that multiplied with the "flexibility" of checking emails on iPhones, "certainty" that comes when managing over 40 other busy people, and "passion" that demanded not just my time but my emotions.

To add to our professional careers and home life, my husband and I were also very involved with our family and friends, were the college group leaders at our church, I led a weekly women's Bible study, and was a co-leader of our church's worship team. All *good* things, but did I ever stop to ask the Lord if they were the *best*? If I had done that, it would have first required stopping and possibly waiting for an answer, and that was not quite in the box of my "super-mom/wife/woman" identity, the identity where self-worth was rooted in my busyness.

God was gracious to keep blessing our lives, but my list of things I wanted to do when I had more time just kept growing:

Set up sheet forts with the boys, take our dog out for a jog, cook a real dinner, clean my house during normal business hours, go to bed at the same time as my husband, go on a date night, read a book (other than the book I stayed up to read until 1am the night before I had to lead the bible study), spend more time with my kids, spend more time with my husband, spend more time with the Lord, etc**.**

I wanted to be the one standing in the well overflowing from my intimacy with my one true God, but instead I felt more like Gulliver in *Gulliver's Travels*, lying on the ground pinned down by thousands of tiny strings.

It wasn't far into February when my precious husband came home from work one day, and I was in the kitchen washing dishes. He started a beautiful conversation talking about all of the things he loved about our lives….our marriage, our children, our family and friends, our church, our house, our jobs. I was nodding my head along with every one of his statements; but in my motion, the stillness of my spirit felt like it was waking up just a little bit, for I knew that these statements were the conversation starter and not a recap of our *best* world. He was very encouraging, but when the pause came, I turned the water off and put the towel down and paused too. He then went on to say that although he was happy with the *good* in our stories, he felt empty and longed for the *more* that the Holy Spirit was stirring within his spirit.

His dreamer self-began to light up. He started talking about going back to school, spending more time on his dreams of starting a non-profit. He talked about taking classes online through a seminary to get a master's in Ethics and Biblical Justice. He told me about a seminary outside of Boston (not Austin) that had a program where we could live on campus.

He stopped talking.

My mind said, "Act shocked. If you cry he will change his mind."

My mind instructed, "Go back to the dishes."

But in the stillness, I felt myself walk over to him and land in his arms. It was time to go. It was time to look my thief in the eyes, the raider of my stillness, the stealer of my time, and the robber of my patience. I had allowed busyness an open door into my life. And what once was a concealable pet quickly became a dragon that controlled much of my emotions, thoughts, and time.

***Together*, we finally stopped and asked the Lord what His *best* was for our family.**

I cried for the first 500 miles. We said good-bye to everything that I knew and everything that I thought I knew. I said good-bye to everything I knew about me, and everything I thought that I knew about me. The reality of how quickly routine can come and build a house on sand began to set in. The question was not how I allowed such a thing to happen, but if I was able and willing to stop in His stillness and wait for Him to take me step by step into this new routine, into His way of life.

At the end of August 2012, we moved 2000 miles away into an 800sq foot apartment on the campus of Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. The Lord showed me the stillness in the midst of the chaos of making new friends, finding new jobs, new insurance, new grocery stores, new schools, a new church, etc… For the first three months, there were more unknowns than knowns and more waiting than finding. But because of His graciousness, the Lord began to teach me how to stare busyness and its friends (anxiety, worry, and fear) in the face.

My busyness had left no room for waiting, no room for patience.

The earthly gray of my paradigms of God were the things producing a work in my life.

I was living in *gray* when He had called me to live in *hot and cold, black and white.*

In the midst of our transition, I had some free time as I waited for my physical therapy license to transfer from Texas to Massachusetts. My husband started seminary, my oldest started kindergarten, my youngest started a part time preschool, and I started doing the things that I had always said that I wanted to do when I had more time. I learned how to use a crock pot, started reading the Bible at Genesis 1, and went on long jogs through the beauty of the fall in New England.

I spent the first few jogs just telling the Lord how I saw this craziness, my fears, emotions, what-ifs, and allowing myself to grieve over my loss. I soon ran out of words and that is when the miracle happened.

I could hear the stillness and I let my spirit rest in it.

I was quiet.

I stopped.

He began.

The truths from the words that I was reading from His Word began to flood my thoughts and voice. Verses like Psalms 130:6 "My soul waits for you Oh Lord, more than watchman waits for the morning, Yes, more than watchman waits for the morning," and James 1: 2-5 "My brethren, 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 and lacking nothing." I began to speak out the words and what they meant. And

in the camouflage of earphones and the woods, I began to hear my voice speak from the overflow of my intimacy with the Lord.

I said things like, “I love to wait for you Lord.”

I heard my voice speak, “I was made to wait for you and to keep my eyes on you.”

I even spoke, “Moving to Massachusetts is my joy. Not knowing how we will pay for our rent next month is my deep good because you know.

I told him, “In you I am patient and it is having its good work in me. You are worth waiting for, I am lacking nothing.”

How I saw myself changed! It was because I was seeing myself in the black and white of how He sees me. **How I saw Him changed!** It was because I was seeing God in the black and white of His word and not in the gray of culture, routine, and paradigms.

Most people think we moved to Massachusetts for my husband to go to seminary, but I know that God moved us to save me from that busyness-breathing dragon that played the central character in my life story.

We all have a story.

We all have a testimony.

Busyness was my old story. He is my new story.

What is yours?

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FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Hang It Up – by Marcy Lytle

The other day I threw off my robe and tossed it on the bed, instead of hanging it on the hook behind the bathroom door. I looked at it and thought to myself, *Why did I just do that*? *The hook is right here*. So I did get the robe and placed it back on the hook, and started thinking…

It's so easy to hang up, put away, or place back things we've taken down or used – and yet we so often toss them where they don't belong – and we end up with a big mess! If I left that robe on my bed, and continued to toss and throw for several days, pretty soon my bed would be hidden underneath a stack of items that belong someplace else. And I just might lose a lot of restful nights of sleep, not being able to find my pillow – and I even might end up sleeping on a hard floor!

I know that's extreme, and maybe that picture is best reserved for an episode of *Hoarders*, but it happens to us spiritually all the time.

Anger. This is something that just appears, sort of like a big ball of dust that emerges from behind the sofa from a place that hasn't been swept in years. Someone makes us mad, it stirs us up, and we puff and huff until a cloud of anger is following us. However, we can choose to vacuum up that anger with forgiveness before it becomes out of control. People mess up and they do stupid things, and those things hurt us and make us mad. But if we can realize that it's up to God to deal with that person, and our anger really won't hurt them (but it will hurt us), we can release that person and go on our way, smiling instead of fuming.

Irritation. This is something we pull out from a shelf, a book of sorts, full of words people say, looks people give, or promises not kept, and we pile up a stack of irritations a mile high. One book gets stacked on top of another until one day the whole tower comes tumbling down like in a game of Jenga, when the block pulled out is just too tight for comfort. We can start the day with a clean house, so to speak, and by the end of the day every irritation is in plain view. He asked why his socks weren't clean, she touched our clean skirt with sticky hands, and the guy behind us honked because we weren't speeding fast enough. And all of that happened before 8:00 a.m.! If we take the time to breathe, let out a sigh, and even make ourselves laugh at the absurdities of the day, it's like keeping the books on the shelves, where they belong. And it makes for a pleasant evening when we get home.

Judgment. This is a big one! This is that big pile of junk mail that we let stack up a mile high because we don't take the time to sort and stash, one envelope at a time. He didn't call today to check and see how we are feeling, so we judge him as being an uncaring husband. Instead of opening that envelope of judgment, realizing that it's junk mail and not applicable to us (because we know better – he DOES love us – but he is human), we leave it on the table to stare us in the face. We do this all day with him, with her, with them, and by the evening, we can't see over the kitchen island full of junk, to enjoy the family that we love.

Do you get the picture by now?

There are things we take down from "hooks" in the morning and we wear them around temporarily, like a bathrobe. But wouldn't it be silly to still be wearing that robe when we arrive

for dinner at a restaurant that same evening? Or isn't it absurd to toss that robe where it doesn't belong, when the hook is right behind us?

Sometimes we just can't help the negative emotions and feelings that arise on any given day, like the ones listed above. Those are just three, but we all have things that we realize we're wearing before we leave the house. And when we look in the mirror of His Word and see ourselves against his reflection, we must take time to shed the bathrobe of anger, hang up the irritations, and put back the judgments, so that our hearts are clutter free, and we are fancy-free.

What did you wear all day today? What did you toss where it doesn't belong?

Hang it up, now. Before your stinky pile begins…

FRESH THYME - The Watcher – by Marcy Lytle

I sat in the car in the parking lot, not wanting to go in, because I was in a "mood." It was a Sunday morning and church was not yet started, so there I sat, wanting to go home instead of putting on a smile and sitting in a congregation of people that probably could care less if I showed up or not. I had retreated to my car to wait until everyone gathered, the music started, and then I could slip in, whenever I felt like it.

I was up on the hill behind the culdesac where people walked to enter the church.

There she came. The single mom with her two teen boys showed up, like they do every week, and they were smiling as they headed toward the front door. I knew her well, and I knew it wasn't easy to raise two boys alone. I had a husband to help me raise my kids. But there I sat…watching her show up alone.

Then she appeared. Another single lady walked up with a baby gift in her hand, one she was bringing to bless a young mother, of whom we have many in our congregation of believers. I knew this woman too, and I'm sure it wasn't easy for her to spend her hard-earned money to buy a gift, but she did, and she was swinging it from her arm. But there I sat…watching.

Next, all four showed up. A young family of four arrived, with two small babies in tow, and I knew them well, and how they struggled financially, experienced disappointment, and both worked hard to be good parents with all the struggles that two working parents have. I knew it was a real effort for them to get up after a long week and a sleepless night. But there I sat…watching them walk to the front door.

There they were. A couple arrived, both of whom I knew had physical issues and one was awaiting a diagnosis. They too were smiling, holding hands, and appeared to be happy to be there. Of course these two always looked happy, every Sunday, week after week. But there I still sat…watching them smile.

And then it happened.

I saw a friend drive up in the culdesac with her husband, who has a debilitating disease. They parked in the disabled parking space, and she went around to open his door and help him out. She walked with him, patiently awaiting his slow steps, as they moved towards the front door of the church building. I burst into tears.

All of a sudden, it was as if my car was filling up with water, a flood was occurring, and if I didn't open the door and go with these people into the church, I would drown. My door opened, and I felt the "swoosh" of the push of the water as I hurried around the curb, and made my way to join these people I knew and loved.

"I have to go in there with them, they're family," were the words reverberating through my head.

I couldn't get inside fast enough to take my place on my seat among those who had come to join with me and a couple hundred more people, to worship together.

We had all worked that week, experienced ups and downs of daily routines, had a few sleepless nights, perhaps struggled with our identity and purpose, and even toyed with doubt and fear…but here we were.

How could I sit watching these people arrive and not join them?

How could I wallow in self-pity any longer?

I recently read a quote by Oswald Chambers:

"No sin is worse than the sin of self-pity, because it obliterates God and puts self-interest upon the throne."

That Sunday morning I felt pitiful, and that pitifulness led me to my car to sit in solitude and watch. But the watching led me to observe, and that was a good thing. With my eyes I saw others streaming in to a building, expecting something. And yet there I was in my car, expecting nothing at all but another Sunday morning like all the others.

If you too at times feel disconnected, out of sorts, and want to hibernate away from the crowds of a church building, it's understandable. It happens, sometimes. But I hope as you sit, that you don't stay there too long, and that you also feel the warm water rise as you gaze with your eyes upon all of the friends and family that encircle you with their love and their presence in one big group, together worshiping the same God you all call Father.

Self-pity is one of those park benches where we find ourselves sometimes, because we're tired and weary. But it can also be a black hole where we hang out too long, unable to see anything around us. If we remember to watch and observe with our eyes, keep our hearts open and tuned to his voice, we might just see something that moves us back into the flow, this time with a thankful heart and love for all.

FRESH THYME - The Name – by Marcy Lytle

I wish they knew. I wish I could tell them and make them understand. I wish they could feel and experience and know His goodness, His love, and His incredible power and mercy. Do they, know and they just don't talk about it? Or do they just feel the pull and the power and try to respond, but they don't know what or who is pulling or empowering them?

I watched a talk show on TV and a soldier who had been shot five times in the line of duty was invited to the chair by the host, because he was told he would be unable to walk – yet two years of intense determination – and there he was, walking. I waited to hear if the young man was going to say that God helped him, or the prayers of others sustained him, but instead he just said he wanted to think positive and be a role model for others. That was inspiring to me, but I was sad to hear no mention of God.

I've listened to a well -known celebrity talk of his ability to overcome the day to day frustrations of a debilitating disease by determination and will, and how he's helped to raise thousands of dollars for research, and yet nowhere in any of his speeches do I hear the mention of God.

There have been huge giveaways on shows like *Oprah* and *Ellen*, where these generous women blessed their audiences with gifts galore, or presented a huge check to someone in need, and their acts of kindness brought a tear to my eye, but still…no mention of Jesus.

I've seen a celebrity like Angelina Jolie take time and effort to visit the needy, to take children into her own family who were outcasts, and she seems amazingly loving and caring toward others. However, during her interviews I never hear the mention of how Jesus prompted her to act, how her love for God stirred her compassion, and that He is her strength and inspiration to do good.

I'm intrigued by the giving hearts of people who don't profess to know Him, yet they do so many acts that are like Him. Do they realize that they are imitators of the One who is good, and that their acts of kindness were actually instigated by the greatest act of kindness of all, by the One who laid down his life for them?

God's name is used in all sorts of ways that are not good. His name is used in conjunction with damning others, he's cursed in anger, and he's credited with natural disasters, and lumped with all other names that are just words on a page.

And yet…when goodness, mercy, and healings are taking place…He receives no honorable mention. Instead, the strength and determination and positivity of the person is exalted and admired and applauded.

This hurts my heart. It scares me. And it makes me sad.

One day, every knee will bow and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. One day every tongue and tribe and nation will exalt His name (Romans 14:11). But I think it's our job, as the ones who bear his name, to lift high that name – Jesus – so that others will be drawn to him – by the love we have for each other.

I wish they knew. *I wish I could tell them and make them understand. I wish they could feel and experience and know His goodness, His love, and His incredible power and mercy. Do they know and they just don't talk about it? Or do they just feel the pull and the power and try to respond, but they don't know what or who is pulling or empowering them?*

FRESH THYME - The To-Do List by Lynn Cherry

Transitions can be so awkward.

As one year came to a close and a fresh new year began, I was stuck in the messy middle. I don't know about you, but I had unfinished business left behind in 2014 - things on my to-do list that didn't get crossed off – and my head was spinning just a bit!

We spent the days before Christmas helping my brother and his family move into a new home. Most of the heavy lifting was done before we got there, but we were still able to help clean up the rental house, unpack a few boxes and clear some of the chaos out of their new home. I was surrounded by the last of the boxes in my brother's old garage, and I had to decide what to take with me and what to drag out to the curb.

I started thinking,

What should I load up and carry with me into the New Year?

Is there anything that needs to be packed up and put on a shelf in the storage room for a while?

If these items on my to-do list were not important enough to accomplish last year, do I really need them on my list at all?

To be honest, I felt a little anxious about these questions and these decisions. What I really wanted to do was sit down in that dusty, leaf-blown garage and have a good cry.

Jesus met a young man a lot like me. He had a list of things to do and things to not do and he was really good at sticking to the plan. Jesus invited him to leave it all behind and follow Him. If he had, we may have learned his name. He could have been the 13th disciple - ready to step in and replace Judas before the book of Acts. But he declined when Jesus added another item to the list that he was not willing to cross off.

He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go. (Mark 10:22 MSG)

I saw myself in this young man, holding tight to both the things I'd done and the things I had yet to do, clinging to my list, vowing to make it happen this year but simultaneously fearing I wouldn't follow through. I felt like giving up before I'd even started.

Why try, when I couldn't make it happen last year?

Jesus and his disciples had a deep kingdom conversation about this man and his list. The disciples wondered,

If this guy couldn't cut it with all of his rule-following and all of his accomplishments, then who stands a chance?

Jesus was blunt in his reply to their wonderings,

*No chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it.(*Mark 10:27 MSG)

Jesus' words spoken to his followers thousands of years ago still speak to me. I don't stand a chance on my own. 40+ years of history prove my inability to cross it all off the list. But there's another half to Jesus' response,

Not a chance on my own, but every chance in the world IF…..

What an important word "if" is. It all turns on two letters, and I find hope in this tiny word. I discover where my power lies. "IF" means I get to choose.

Every chance in the word IF you let God….

"Let go and let God." That phrase doesn't sound cliché, today. This book, my Bible, helps me breathe again - helps me peel away the aching, clinging fingers of control - and I let go.

Are you ready to let go and let God do his work in your life this year?

Pray with me:

God, here is my list. You'll notice some items dutifully crossed off. Thank you for giving me the courage and strength to accomplish those goals. You'll also notice some glaring items boldly uncrossed, unfinished, unaccomplished. I give it all to you: crossed-off, uncrossed, and hasn't-yet-crossed-my-mind. I trust you with this year. Your will be done. Amen.

A BUNDLE OF

THYME

March 2015

TIPS

The Dressing – Spring Trends – by Marcy Lytle

Spring is arriving this month, and it's fun to go through our closets, take out the old to share and give away, and make room for a few new pieces to wear around town! I think it's also fun to see what's new out there and to decide if we want to try that new trend…or not. Even if you're not a trendsetter, maybe you can incorporate some of these details into your wardrobe, to add a bit of pizazz this season. Spring is in the air. Doesn't it make you want to skip and sing?

Here are a few ideas to stir your interest in a new spring wardrobe:

Off the shoulder. I laughed as I told some friends that my shoulders still look pretty good, so I might be able to pull off this trend! Seriously, these pretty feminine shirts from New York & Company are so nice for spring, because you can still wear your bra and have the straps covered, yet add this open shoulder look to your sleeves, to give your top a little "something" extra.

The Sheath. My mom was a great seamstress. I remember her sewing up a sheath for my sister back in the 60's! And here they are, back again, at a nice length, in a bold print. Yes, these hug your curves, but hey – they don't have to hug so tightly that it hurts! A sheath is simple, yet comfy, and the new length is so pretty! The one pictured is from New York & Company.

A Touch of Fringe. Look at this pretty top from H&M! It can be paired with a skirt or jeans, and it can be worn dressy or casual. If showing a peek of your stomach isn't your thing, just add a tank top underneath in a contracting color, so the fringe is still visible. You can also look for touches of fringe on purses or shoes this spring!

Black & White. What about a poncho in black and white, to wear on those cool days that we still have this time of year? H&M has a pretty one that will accent so many outfits, and this type of outerwear can be folded and carried in your purse, or draped across your car seat, to use whenever you feel those chilly winds still blow!

Sneakers. I'm loving these mustard sneakers from Zara. They're suede, and they will go with so many outfits, especially anything jean-related, whatever you wear that's navy, red, or white – lots of options! And every woman needs a cute pair of sneakers for shopping, long walks, or picnics this spring.

Shirt Dress. This has got to be the most versatile, comfortable, dress to own! And it comes in lots of colors for spring. H&M has a selection that is super affordable. I like the shorter length in the front and the longer in the back. You might want to own two of these!

Boho – Yes, it's still around. Look for it in sheer blouses with loose sleeves, and you'll want to own several pieces. This cute blouse from JCP has just the right length of sleeve, and when it's partially tucked, it dresses up any pair of jeans you own! You'll need a tank underneath this, but the blouse is so sheer you won't feel stuffy and hot – only comfy and cool!

Culottes. I'm not sure about this trend, or how it will look, but I dare you to try it! Culottes are back, with a high waist, a cute shirt (tucked or over with a belt) and pretty sandals. I think you can pull it off! Charlotte Russe has many options, all super affordable, and in pretty prints and colors.

Gingham is another trend, not pictured here, but it's a new, bold look in tops and skirts, and even dresses – look for it! I'm sure going to…

Look at your closet and pick through last year's spring wardrobe, tossing the things you never wear or pieces that are in need of too much repair, keeping only the items you love. Say you find a great pair of jeans, a comfy print t-shirt you love, and a skirt you'll never part with. Just hang them all together and then shop our trend list above, to see if you can make a pretty pair with something old…and something new!

Enjoy your new look this spring!

Seven 4 You – The Dressing Room – by Marcy Lytle

The dressing room for a girl trying on clothes is her sanctuary. Think about it. She's loaded her arms with potential new clothing which she is about to try on. No one else can see her because she's pulled the curtains to, or locked the door. And there's a mirror where she can see her reflection, twirl around if she wants to, and even talk to herself out loud – all in the privacy of her own space – with no one to interrupt.

I personally love trying on clothes. I can pile shirts, dresses and pants on my arms that I might not dare really purchase or wear, but I can try them on to see how they look. I'm able to have a few minutes to myself to enjoy the feel of new fabric, the colors of the new season, and the styles that are trending. It's like playing dress-up again!

However, there are some days for all of us when time in the dressing room just leaves us feeling depressed, frustrated, and annoyed because we don't look thin enough, our legs are too short, or our style is non-existent and we don't know what to wear! Since spring is right around the corner, here are seven tips for enjoying that dressing room experience when shopping for clothes:

Weight. If your weight bothers you, and it's because you've made unhealthy choices, that's one thing. But more often than not, you're just bothered because you don't fit the cultural image you see everywhere of being pencil thin and six feet tall. Learn to love your body, your size, and your shape. Accept the uniqueness of you.

Style. Maybe you have no confidence in what to choose, how to put things together, or don't even know what's trending. Take a friend with you who does, and let her help you pick out a few outfits to try on. If you like it and it suits you; then buy it. If you don't like it and it doesn't suit you, then maybe you really do have a style you like and you just are afraid to go with your own instincts!

Reflection: Mirrors in dressing rooms vary from store to store. Honestly, I've gone to more than one store in a given day and felt that I looked longer and leaner in some mirrors, and shorter and squattier in others. The reflection you see in the mirror is only half of what others see when they see you. If you wear your new clothes with confidence and love what covers your skin, you'll look beautiful, even if all you see is a few flaws in the mirror.

Size. Hollywood is not your standard. Some girls are size 0 naturally (when I was a teenager there was not a size 0 at all!), and some girls are a size 14 naturally or whatever, and we're all uniquely made and beautiful. Don't let the number game keep you from enjoying the hunt for a new wardrobe! Embrace your number as if it were a warm cuddly blanket on a cool spring morning, and wear it proudly.

Silhouette. Seeing yourself in a mirror sideways can stir up all sorts of emotion. Maybe your stomach pooches out because you ate too much last night, you're going through menopause, or you just feel bloated. Perhaps you think your butt looks big, or your chest is too flat. Learn to see yourself as a whole, not as the individual parts you carry. Learn to love your silhouette with all of its curves, bumps and surfaces – it's you!

Color. Before you waste your money and time on trying on colors that don't look good against your skin, determine what does look good. Discover your color palette that makes your eyes pop, your hair glisten, or your skin glow, and only bring in the dressing room clothes in those hues. You'll be so glad you did, when the day is done!

Skin. Too much skin showing and the outfit suddenly looks cheap. If you're trying to impress, you don't need to stoop to low necks, high skirts, and tight pants. If you struggle with all of the above, you might just give up and decide to accentuate the one body part you do love. But focusing your entire look on your legs, your cleavage, or your butt detracts from the beautiful woman God created you to be. At the other end of the spectrum, covering up every inch of your body so that you look like a mummy, or wearing such loose clothing that you resemble a flag blowing in the wind, isn't attractive, either. Your skin is pretty, your shape is feminine, and your outfit can combine the two into a knockout look that you can wear anywhere you go.

Do you enjoy your time in the dressing room, or do you avoid it like the plague? There's nothing wrong with enjoying the clothing we wear, shopping for good bargains, and trying on new styles. Part of our strength and dignity that we wear as a woman is clothing ourselves well and holding our heads high.

Are you headed to the dressing room yet? Did you know you can take *Him* in there with you? And if you do, and if you listen, I think he'll tell you that you are beautifully and wonderfully made! And I think if you believe it – you'll enjoy the purchases you make!

Selah's Style - Dirt Bike Camping – by Selah Irwin

Most of my fashion articles that I post have a lot to do with "girly" things but that is not all that I like! I love to dirt bike! It is one of my favorite hobbies.

Over Presidents' Day weekend we went dirt bike camping. I thought I would show you how I dressed and how I am still fashionable, even if I am going to be falling in puddles!

Here I am in my full gear! It all matches and is coordinated. I chose red, black, and white as my main colors. I do have a little splash of pink.

I could have chosen a plain colored shirt but a jersey seemed more appealing and it holds on my elbow pads well. My Fox chest protector is what provided the little pink detail!

My pants are very, very, very thick, so if I happen to have a fall, they protect my skin. Even though they are thick, I still have to wear knee pads!

Even my helmet and goggles are red white and black! It seriously ALL matches! Even down to the smallest thing like gloves.... You can still make outdoor fun fashionable!

Girls don't JUST like doing their nails and playing Barbies! Even though those things are fun, girls can enjoy getting dirty too! A lot of girls actually enjoy dirt biking! Even my mommy does it!

If you get the chance, you should try it!

The Fearless Kitchen – Comforting Casseroles – by Christina Vetter

Many of us find food to be a remedy for stressful situations, and I don't know if there is a dish more comforting than a delicious casserole hot out of the oven. Not only are they wonderfully convenient for week night dinners, casseroles are what we bring to loved ones when they need us the most. Whether paired with condolences for a loss, dinner relief for a new mom, or get well wishes after a surgery, there's something about a homemade meal bubbling away in a 9x13 baking dish that at least momentarily helps takes the load off our shoulders.

Unfortunately, we tend to overdo the many variations of chicken and rice, so this month I've decided to share some of my favorite "out of the box" casserole recipes. You won't find any cream of mushroom or similarly typical casserole secrets, but I promise you're not going to miss them. Another great thing about casseroles is their ability to be made ahead and frozen until needed, so don't be afraid to make plenty to keep on hand. At this very moment my deep freeze is full of them ready to be broken out if and when the situation calls for it. I hope you enjoy these recipes as much as I have. Let me know your thoughts in the "Comments" section below. Happy cooking and happy eating!

Buffalo Chicken Casserole **Difficulty:**

Makes one 9x13 dish
Recipe courtesy of *Cooking Light Magazine*

This recipe is so yummy. It's kind of a lasagna style assembly but the buffalo chicken flavors are off the chart. The original recipe calls for 5 Tbsp of Louisiana style hotsauce, but I like quite a bit of buffalo flavored spice, so I double it. Feel free to adjust to your heat tastebuds.

Ingredients:
12 oz whole wheat lasagna noodles
2 Tbsp oil
3 carrots, small diced
3 stalks celery, small diced
1 onion, small diced
1 Tbsp minced garlic
2 pounds boneless skinless chicken breast, cut into 1" cubes
1/3 C cornstarch
4 C low fat milk
1/8 tsp salt
5 Tbsp Louisiana style hotsauce (to taste)
Blue cheese crumbles to garnish (optional)

Directions:
-Preheat oven to 400 F.
-Cook lasagna noodles in boiling water 2 minutes shorter than package directions. Set aside.

-Heat oil in a large saute pan and cook carrots, celery, onion, and garlic until tender.
-Add chicken and cook thoroughly.
-Whisk cornstarch and milk together and add to chicken mixture.
-Bring to boil, stirring often until sauce is thick enough to coan a spoon (about 4 minutes). Add hotsauce and mix together.
-Place 1 C chicken mixture on bottom of 9x13. Top with 3 or 4 lasagna noodles. Repeat layering, ending with chicken mixture on top.
-Crumble desired amount of blue cheese across top and bake, covered about 30 minutes or until bubbling.
-Let stand for 10 minutes before serving.

Philly Cheese Steak Casserole **Difficulty:**

Makes a 9x13 casserole

This recipe is a great way to get some not-so typical casserole flavors in to the convenience of a 9x13. It's very easy to make and tastes fantastic! I use deer steaks because they're available in my freezer but beef is also perfectly fine to use.

Ingredients:
1 ½ pound steak, sliced thin
8 oz mushrooms, sliced
1 tsp salt
1/2 tsp black pepper
1 tsp coriander
8 oz provolone cheese slices
2 Tbsp butter
2 onions, sliced thin
2 green bell peppers, sliced thin
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 (16.3 oz) can refrigerated biscuit dough

Directions:
-Preheat oven to 350. Grease 9x13 dish.
-Cook steak, mushrooms, salt, pepper and coriander over medium heat until meat is cooked thoroughly and mushrooms have released liquid.
-Place meat mixture in bottom of 9x13 dish and arrange cheese slices over the top.
-Melt butter in same pan used for the meat and sweat onions, peppers, and garlic until soft. Spoon over cheese and spread.
-Separate biscuit dough into eight biscuits and flatten each in to four inch circles. Arrange over vegetables.
-Bake 30 minutes or until biscuits are golden brown.

King Ranch Chicken Casserole **Difficulty:**
Makes a 9x13 casserole
Recipe Courtesy of Eatingwell.com

This one is by far my favorite. The flavors are amazing, I can't seem to get enough of it. Boiling the chicken is an optional cooking method, but I find it works best to keep great moisture.

Ingredients:
2 pounds chicken breasts
1 Tbsp oil
8 oz mushrooms, small diced
1 medium onion, small diced
½ red bell pepper, small diced
½ green bell pepper, small diced
4 cloves of garlic, minced
4 tsp chili powder
½ C flour
3 C chicken broth
1 roma tomatoe, small diced
1 C fat free sour cream
1 (7oz) can green chiles, drained
Salt to taste
12 (6") corn tortillas, cut in half
1 C colby jack cheese
¼ C sliced black olives

Directions:
-Preheat oven to 375.
-Place chicken in a large pot and add water to cover by 1". Bring water to a boil and cook until chicken is cooked thoroughly. Remove from water and dice chicken once cool to touch. Reserve ½ C cooking water.
-In a large saute pan, heat oil over medium high heat and cook mushrooms and onions until liquid is gone and onions are soft.
-Add bell peppers, garlic, and chili powder and cook until veggies are soft.
-Add flour and ¼ C of chicken cooking liquid, and stirring frequently, cook about 30 seconds to a minute.
-Add chicken broth and chicken and cook until sauce is thickened.
-Remove from heat, and stir in tomatoes, sour cream, chiles, and salt.
-Spread 2 C chicken filling on bottom of 9x13 dish and top with 8 corn tortilla halves. Top with 2 C filling, and repeat ending with chicken filling.
-Sprinkle cheese and black olives on top.

-Bake covered for 20-25 minutes. Remove from oven and let stand for 10 minutes before serving.

Tried and True – Shopping Day – by Marcy Lytle

Some girls LOVE shopping for clothes and I happen to be one of them. However, shopping for clothes can be frustrating, if our "normal" sizes don't fit, if the mirror "makes" us look big, if our budget is never "enough." We can leave the store disappointed that we've bought nothing, or guilty that we've bought way too much. But shopping can actually be so fun, an adventure in creativity and fashion, and a challenge to find a bargain that's good and not just "cheap."

Here are a few things to consider:

Before you go…

Set your budget. If you have no money in the budget to spend, then don't shop today. Tell your friend no, reschedule after payday, or plan another activity. But if you've got some money set aside, then make the figure your goal before you go. Let's say it's $50.

Look at your closet and make notes. Have a plan when you shop. Do you have a skirt you love but nothing to go with? Is there a jacket you got on sale last season you've been dying to wear but it's an odd color? Take it with you! Maybe you have a cute outfit that just needs an accessory like a belt or a scarf. Write it down, note it on your phone, make a list…so that you have a plan.

Pick your store and print your coupons. It's helpful to sign up for emails from your favorite stores. Yes, your inbox will be fuller, but you'll know when sales or deals are happening. This helps! I have one favorite store that runs 40%off the entire store every so many weeks – so I wait for the sale before I go shopping there.

When you arrive…

You're at the store now, and it's time to have tunnel vision and head for the sale racks…first. If you look aimlessly at all things pretty, that top that's way over your budget will catch your eye and draw you like a magnet until you're stuck to it and won't let it go! Start with the sale racks, and end with the sale racks…period. **If it's not on sale, don't buy it.**

Remember your list? **Use it.** Start looking for the items you need, before the items you want. Once you've found them, if there's money left over, then skim the items that caught your eye.

Check for quality and size. Sometimes, items end up on the sale rack due to being sized incorrectly. If you normally wear an 8 and there's only a 6 on the rack – try it – it might just fit. Read the label. If you hate ironing and the shirt is 100% cotton, chances are you're not going to wear it.

Try it on. Maybe you like to just buy, take things home, and then return them. If you have the time, try your clothes on, in the dressing room, under good lighting, and check the fit. Sit down to check for comfort, put on your shoes to check for length, get a full view, and see if you're pleased before you spend your money.

Once you're home:

You've made some wise decisions, you've picked out items you need that go with something you already have, and now **you're ready to hang**. Place the item in your closet in the "new" section. This can be to the left of all of your other clothes, or perhaps on a different colored hanger.

Scan your closet to see what all might go with that new item, including scarves, shoes, and jewelry. **Put the whole outfit together** by hanging the necklace or scarf on the hanger, or placing the new top under the jacket, next to the skirt that matches.

Finally, look through your closet and **discard the same number of items you just bought,** for your give-away pile. You can use your sack that you just brought home, or a bag in the closet specifically for clothes you don't wear. If you bought 3 items, discard 3 items. And when that bag is full, donate it!

Shopping, to me, is like going on a scavenger hunt. But you definitely need a list, a place and perimeter in which to look, and a prize for all of your finds! The prize is satisfaction and peace, when you use the tips above, when you don't overspend, and when what you buy is what you'll wear.

Plan your shopping day, and enjoy…

TIPS – Reviews

Cinderella

Okay, hasn't this movie been made enough times already? One would think so, but this one is new and different, with awesome scenery, spectacular costumes, and awesome graphics – and includes Cate Blanchett as the mean stepmother. You know the story, but there are a few little differences in this version of Cinderella that make it worth seeing on the big screen. It's not a movie for little kids, it involves real people (not animation), and there are adult themes that small children will find boring. "Be kind and have courage" is the central theme of this movie and that is the undercurrent amid all the sorrow, the mistreatment, and the misfortune. Lily James plays Cinderella and does a great job of portraying the sweet girl who remembers who she truly is and never forgets the wisdom passed down from her parents. It's truly a magical, happy-ending fairytale, which is a great diversion from some of the other movies that accompany Cinderella in the movie theaters right now. – Marcy Lytle

Run All Night

Liam Neeson is once again in an action-packed thriller, and it's a good one – although it is rated R for gore and violence. In Run All Night, Nesson plays a father who is estranged from his son due to the father's lifestyle while his son was growing up – involved in the mob and multiple killings. The son is married with children, making a good life for himself, when he has to do something in self defense that sends him and his family into imminent danger. Neeson, feeling ultimately responsible for it all, shows up, stands up, and covers up, to protect his son and his family at all costs. Ed Harris plays Neeson's best friend/enemy, and these two seasoned actors provide a great entertaining nail-biter of a movie in true Neeson form. – Marcy Lytle

Sunset Boulevard

This is one of the classics, which are showing at our Cinemark in our town, every Wednesday night. I had not seen this movie, starring Gloria Swanson and William Holden. Swanson plays a has-been actress, walled up in her mansion, self-absorbed, awaiting a return to the silver screen. Holden plays a not-so-successful screenwriter who winds up at her door (thinking it was a deserted mansion) and ends up staying there, becoming her "slave" so to speak, entangled in her web of control as she tries to push her way back to stardom. He tries to get away several times, but her clutch becomes tighter, until the dramatic end – quite interesting and disturbing! This movie was in black and white, it had sort of a Hitchcock feel to it, and it's become a classic because it was nominated for so many awards back when it came out. Sunset Boulevard might be one you want to catch when you can, when you're in the mood for something old, something different, and something entertaining. – Marcy Lytle

The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel

What a delightful movie this is! It's set in India, and once again we're drawn into the lives of the characters who live in a "retirement" community inside a very beautiful hotel, run by a young man who's about to get married. It seems in this movie, an inspector is coming to visit to approve or disapprove of the "second" hotel expansion, and there is quite a mix-up that results

in near castrophe! This is NOT a movie about old people. It's about relationships between the older generation with the younger generation, and across cultural lines, as well as between men and women. It's hilarious, heartwarming, and a beautiful movie to watch. With a cast that includes Judi Dench, Maggie Smith, Richard Gere, Dev Patel, and many other seasoned actors, how could the movie be anything but entertaining? The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel includes a bit of everything, and that everything is done very well. Take a friend, go see it, and enjoy… - Marcy Lytle

Chappie

The previews looked mildly interesting, with a robot being given the ability to think and process like a human. I thought it might be entertaining to see, with Hugh Jackman and Sigourney Weaver, as well as Dev Patel in the cast. However, before the movie was halfway over, I found myself looking at my watch, and my phone, awaiting the end. The story could have been a good one, an endearing one, even a fun movie to watch. But it was so much less; in fact, it made my top 10 worst movies ever list. The robot gets kidnapped by a bunch of thugs and takes on their language and lingo, and calls the girl in the thug group "Mommy." The mommy girl has a super annoying voice, and the whole story just falls apart from there. The movie "looks" like it would be a movie kids would enjoy, but this movie is SO not for kids. It's super violent and full of language, and it's rated R for good reason. Spend your money elsewhere this weekend. Chappie is a movie that received an F by the movie critic I read, and I'm seconding that grade. – Marcy Lytle

Leviathan

What a movie. It's a modern tale of the story of Job….sort of. Leviathan is the story of a man who is being bullied out of his property and home, because the government wants it for their own use. The government is corrupt, to say the least. The poor man suffers incredible loss that is unbelievable and totally unjust, and parts of the book of Job are quoted to him, when he begins to ask, "Why," just like Job did after he lost everything. The scene of all of the corrupt men standing in the church while the priest exhorts love for Christ and others is a bone chilling one, as well as several scenes of waves lapping against rocks, and the haunting music at the end. This movie is a satire, there are scenes of violence and sex, and it's filmed in long, slow, poignant moments from beginning to end. A couple of people in the audience clapped at the movie's end, while the rest of the audience sat in silence…and that too was haunting. Marcy Lytle

The DUFF

I'll never understand Hollywood, but then again maybe I do. They can take a movie that's sweet and inviting like a glass of lemonade, and lace it with cyanide so that all who drink enjoy the taste, but kill over soon after swallowing. The DUFF is one of these "treats." It's a cool story of a girl who doesn't fit in at high school because she's not into fashion, makeup or herself, being called the "designated ugly fat friend" and allowing that label to define her. Of course, there's the jock guy she's known since childhood who told her this, but yet he's somehow also her friend; there's the mean beauty queen who's vindictive and vicious, and there's the other artsy

guy that the DUFF *thinks* she likes…and of course, the awesome yet odd single mother. And the setting is a public high school arena where pretty much all of the students are pawing the ground like bulls awaiting escape from their pens, in order to make out, touch and feel, and "bang" around. The girl suffers heartbreak and embarrassment, but then finds solace, acceptance, and "love" in the arms of the one who hurt her. There's a sweet story in there, just like the sugar stirred into the sour lemonade glass of water. But do we really want our teen sons and daughters drinking that sweetness when there's poison lurking in the aftertaste? – Marcy Lytle

McFarland, USA

What a movie! This movie is based on a true story about a coach (played by Kevin Costner) who moves to McFarland, CA to teach, solely because he lost his job at several prestigious schools because of his temper. He moves his family to a run-down Mexican American community, to work at a school where the majority of young men are pickers in the fields after school and on weekends, and who haven't got a future…or so it seems. If that seems like a familiar storyline of an inspiring movie, it is. But Costner (Coach White) and his family are not prepared for the strong sense of family they also find in this God-forsaken town, as Costner takes seven young men that can outrun their peers and embraces and encourages their potential by competing in cross country racing. Yes, the story pulls on your heartstrings, yes there's a few setbacks and near tragedies, and yes, there are unlikely heroes in the end. However, McFarland USA is rated PG, it's full of hope and inspiration, and it leaves you smiling as you leave the theater because of the rolling info at the end of the movie, you'll want to be sure to not miss. – Marcy Lytle

(You'll notice we haven't reviewed the movie 50 Shades of Grey, and that's because we're not viewing it for review. Besides, when there's another choice like McFarland USA in theaters to see, we'd rather swoon over self-sacrifice and victory of one man named White, than fantasize with needy women over any shade of Grey.)

The Last Five Years

I like Anna Kendrick. She's one of my favorite actresses…and boy can she sing, too! This movie is almost all music – the story of a five year marriage between a successful young writer (him) and a struggling young actress (her). The movie is shot in a unique way, in that she sings and tells the story from the end of their marriage backwards, and he sings and shares their story from the beginning of their relationship and forward. It's a poignant story of love and marriage gone awry when two people move at different paces, leaving the other one feeling neglected or "less than," and both stray in their own ways – leaving behind hurt that destroys. Sounds awful, and it is, but The Last Five Years is real, the music is beautiful, and the two star players are winners. – Marcy Lytle

Giant (1956)

This movie was among the classics showing at our theaters – and I thoroughly enjoyed it. It's a whopping 3 hours and 20 minutes long, but it's a long story to tell! Elizabeth Taylor, Rock

Hudson, and James Dean are the stars of Giant, which tells the Texas tale of a rich cattle rancher (Hudson) who takes a wife (Taylor) from the northeast and transplants her on southern, dusty soil, where a handyman (Dean) stirs up trouble. There is prejudice and injustice present in Texas' and the rancher's wife sees it and plans to stop it, with much resistance from her husband. Dean's character strikes oil and transforms from cowhand to millionaire overnight, and the mix of all of these stories makes for a great movie experience, as we watch some people change for the better…and some for the worse… (FYI, Dean died before this film was released). If you've got a rainy weekend anytime soon, I'd recommend pulling out the snacks and settling in for an extremely entertaining classic movie night. – Marcy Lytle

Kingsman: The Secret Service

Michael Caine, Samuel L Jackson, and Colin Firth are the three main actors in this - what I call a spoof on the Bond movies. And with these guys, it seemed like a winner. However, it was anything but. A young teen (Taron Egerton) is taken into a spy agency for intensive training, just as a global threat emerges from a tech genius (Jackson). There's a bit of dumb humor, lots of stylized violence, terrible language, a lame storyline, some nudity, and…the whole Kingsman movie seemed like watching a horribly messy video game. I loved Colin Firth in *The King's Speech*, but I was disappointed that he stooped to this bawdy humor. Some of the audience clapped at the end of the movie. That, I didn't understand. But I didn't like *Guardians of the Galaxy*, either. If you liked that movie, you might like this one. Maybe… - Marcy Lytle

Two Days, One Night

Okay, so the title describes a weekend, and that's how long the story in this movie takes place. Marion Cotillard, one of my favorite foreign actresses, stars in this film about a woman who suffers from depression, has just gone back to work, only to find out she's losing her job because the boss has to let her go, or not give all of the other employees their bonuses. There are about 16 employees that she visits one by one, over the weekend, to ask if they will forego their bonus so she can keep her job. The movie is shot with Cotillard going door to door, in the bleakest of neighborhoods, in the plainest of outfits, with nothing more. There was no music in the beginning of the film, and no music played as the credits rolled. Most viewers sat stunned as the movie ended, saying, "What did we just see?" Later, we realized that the repetitive knocking on doors, the different responses of people, and the almost droning on of this sad woman as she pleaded for her very life, did cause us to ask ourselves the question, "Would we give up a bonus so that a fellow employee could keep her job?" Perhaps that was the intent of Two Days, One Night, by the way it was shot and the slowness of the non-action. Cotillard is amazing. – Marcy Lytle

Black Sea

Greed is a killer. That's the main message in this film starring Jude Law. He and about a dozen other retired or let-go sea men are hired by a rich man to secretly submerge an old submarine, show up near a sunken treasure in enemy waters, to retrieve the gold and get rich. However, things go horribly wrong when each man has his own agenda and quickly realizes that the less men left to recover the gold, the more gold for each man. Black Sea is a thriller for sure, getting

more intense as the movie goes on. Law plays a man with a broken family, and since there's only one very young guy who comes on board with the other men, Law develops a soft spot for him, determined to save him at all costs. Not only does greed overtake the crew, but disaster after disaster occurs…until the end of the story…which you'll have to see for yourself. – Marcy Lytle

Black or White

Okay, I get it. Things aren't always black or white, they're gray. And this story is a play on those words, because it's about choosing where a little girl should land…with her black grandmother and loser biological father, or with her white grandfather who has raised her since she was born. Kevin Costner plays the grandfather, and Octavia Spencer (from *The Help*) plays the feisty grandmother. Child custody cases are never easy to watch, and this one is no exception. Costner and Spencer play their parts well, but the story in Black or White has holes, and I had too many questions that I felt needed an answer, when the credits rolled. Even though the movie tried its best to declare that it wasn't about being black or white…it seemed like it really was. Or maybe I was just still disturbed by the little girl losing her grandmother in the first scene of the movie, which set the tone for a sad, sad movie, one I wasn't prepared to see. – Marcy Lytle

Cake

She usually plays in comedies, and in not-so-good ones. However, Jennifer Aniston is amazing in her role in the movie Cake, where she portrays a woman who has suffered an accident and a great loss, and is trying to cope with life the best she can. She is in a support group for depression and addiction, when she learns one of the other group members has committed suicide (played by Anna Kendrick). Fascinated with, and hallucinating about, this young lady who leaves behind a devastated husband and child, Aniston slowly but surely moves towards the first steps of healing. These first steps take the entire length of movie, which also moves slowly, but then I guess that makes the story all the more real. In fact, it's a bit too real. If you're a diehard Aniston fan, you'll enjoy seeing her in this role. If not, you'll spend an evening watching a story that's sad beyond words. – Marcy Lytle

Spare Parts

What a great movie, based on a true story! Four Hispanic males in high school, the most unlikely of friends, come together to form a robotics team against all odds. They each have their own obstacles in their families, as well as the fact that they are illegal immigrants. One substitute teacher shows up and is won over by these four young guys, who then set out to build an underwater robot to compete against other students from prestigious high schools. Their robot is put together with whatever they have on hand, and they go up against students who have spent thousands on specialty parts.

The characters in this movie draw us into their lives, and when they show up for the competition, after so many setbacks, we are moved to tears by what unfolds. Emotions run high, relationships are tested and solidified, and a substitute teacher (played by George Lopez) finds

his true calling. Spare Parts is a movie worth seeing. It will make you feel good, inspire you, and make you want to stand up and cheer. Not many movies like that – so enjoy it! – Marcy Lytle

A Most Violent Year

Jessica Chastain and Oscar Isaac – two great actors – play husband and wife in this drama set in 1981 New York City, when crime was rampant. They own an oil company and have plans to progress, but theft and violence of their oil and against their drivers takes place, and this threatens all that they've worked for. Isaac and Chastain wear most of the color in this otherwise colorless film, and it's a bit slow going at first, but the drama and intensity does build as the story unfolds. (*I honestly grew tired of Isaac's character wearing the same double breasted coat in almost every scene.)* As a man of means and "integrity," he is against taking violence into his own hands, but his wife is feisty and has plans and moves of her own. The city law enforcement is corrupt itself, so the violence continues and the company *almost* folds….but it doesn't. A Most Violent Year is a good movie, very well done, and the way it was shot only enhances the mood and intrigue as we are drawn into the corruptness of the 80's in the oil business of New York City.- Marcy Lytle

All about Eve

This is an old classic movie from the 50's starring Bette Davis. Our Cinemark theater is showing classics this winter on certain nights of the week, and we opted to see this one. If you haven't seen it, it's a winner! Bette Davis plays a 40 year old actress, completely adored by a young woman who follows the actress' every move. At first, it seems very flattering to be so adored, but it is soon apparent that the young woman wants to ***be*** Margo (Bette Davis' character), and she will stop at nothing to achieve her goal. This movie was nominated for 14 Academy Awards, and you will see why, when you watch it. Bette Davis' performance alone makes All About Eve worth the time to invite some friends over, set out some snacks, and snuggle in for a movie night! – Marcy Lytle

Blackhat

It sounded like a good story, the one of a convicted criminal being released in order to help solve a major cybercrime that is having worldwide impact. Chris Hemsworth plays this guy, and the intrigue starts…but it falls flat…in my opinion. The movie is long – 2 ½ hours – and there's only so much one can take of looking at the big screen and seeing computer code scrolling on a computer screen, listening to lackluster characters mumble, and worst of all seeing Viola Davis in a role way beneath her showcase talents! My husband enjoyed the movie somewhat, as it does involve some action in the latter part. However, he and I both agreed that Blackhat lacked more than it possessed. And the music throughout the movie distracted me. It was repetitive and annoying, as it tried to add to the suspense of this no-success thriller. The last comment my husband made as we left, was "It was sort of like an episode of Scorpion and MacIver." Enough said. – Marcy Lytle

American Sniper

War wreaks havoc on the men/women who serve, and it tears apart the families left behind while they wait, and they wait… American Sniper is about one particular young man who had a gift and a passion – a gift to aim and hit a target successfully at a young age – and a passion to protect "his own." This movie is based on a true story of the Navy Seal Chris Kyle, who was married, with two children, and serve four tours of service for our country, becoming a legend for his kills. Bradley Cooper does a fantastic job of expressing the heavy burden these soldiers bear as they feel compelled to return, yet pulled by the wife and kids at home, to stay. I couldn't help but feel as though for the entire run of the movie that I was somehow in a jury stand, watching and hearing testimony of the pros/cons of abandoning life stateside to serve vs. staying and caring for the family you've created at home. Should young men/women remain single if they're going to enlist? Is it really worth it to defend a country by learning to kill so many who are our enemies? Should a mom with children be more understanding, when her husband leaves her for almost a year at a time, while she's left home alone, in worry and dread that she will get that fateful call? I don't know the answers, and the movie only presents the questions. – Marcy Lytle

Selma

I didn't really care to see this movie, since I assumed it was just another "I Have a Dream" remake of Martin Luther King's speech. But I went to see the movie because of a couple of great reviews I had read. And I was not disappointed! Selma does tell the story of Martin Luther King, but it's more focused on the man, his "call," his obedience to do what God told him to do, the heavy load he carried with a wife and kids, demonstrators being killed, threats being made on his life and on the lives of others, and his firm stand against all odds, including his confrontations with President Johnson. I was 7 years old when the events in this story took place, and of course I don't recall anything except hearing about MLK's assassination. However, this movie isn't about that; in fact, the killing of MLK isn't even part of the movie. It's about the faith of one man, who knew in his heart that he must speak up, stand up, and march for what was right. I found myself shaking my head at the sobering fact that these events happened in my lifetime, wondering if we've made any progress at all against racism, and being inspired with the proclamation of the Truth, as I felt tears well in my eyes at the end of the movie. And as I left the theater, the conversation I had with my friend who went with me was about how we wondered if there's a cause around us now, present day that we need to be aware of and join in the fight...or are we just as blind as our predecessors… - Marcy Lytle

A Night at the Museum – Secret of the Tomb

The museum displays are alive again, this time traveling to the British Museum of History to find out why a golden tablet is decaying, in order to keep the "magic" alive each night at the museum. I'm not really a fan of these movies, mostly because they're full of what I call corny

humor (which doesn't really amuse me), but there is a good amount of creativity that goes into the making of each installment of these movies, including A Night at the Museum – Secret of the Tomb. Add in the fact that this is a family movie, a clean one in fact, and that Robin Wilson (from *Pitch Perfect*) is the British version of Ben Stiller, and you've got yourself a fun family time. The movie was also bittersweet as we observed both Robin Williams and Mickey Rooney, two Hollywood icons, in their final roles. If you enjoyed the other two movies before this one, you'll enjoy this new one as well. Familiar characters, a new storyline, and a heartwarming relationship between Larry (Ben Stiller) and his son make it a movie with a little something for everyone… - Marcy Lytle

Taken 3

I liked it! Even though the "other" reviews weren't so favorable, and even though the movie is somewhat predictable, and even though Liam Neeson is getting old, Taken 3 is a great thriller of a movie with action, drama, and among the list of actors – Forest Whitaker! He plays the police officer on the hunt for Neeson's character, when a death occurs and Neeson is implicated. Neeson once again is the all-loving and protective dad, with a job that puts him on the run from the law and in pursuit of the one who dares to threaten his family. Yes, there are times in the movie when I thought, "That's crazy – how did he come out of that alive?" But there were other times when I watched the expressions on Neeson's face and realized that he is just the right face for those steely looks, he is the perfect voice that sends chills to one on the other end of the phone, and he's the protective father at all costs. It's a movie worth seeing, if you enjoyed the other *Taken* films, or if you just enjoy a good chase, a mysterious killer, and a young damsel daughter in distress. – Marcy Lytle

Annie

I had heard this wasn't like the "original," and it wasn't. But I loved it! The little girl who plays Annie is the same little girl from *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (If you haven't seen it, do! She was nominated for an Oscar). Quvenzhané Wallis is her name, and she's an expressive, talented young actress who portrays the character of Annie in this musical so well! Jamie Foxx plays Daddy Warbucks, only he's Mr. Stacks in this version, and Cameron Diaz plays Ms. Hannigan – the old hag who "cares" for the orphans. It's the same heartwarming story of a young girl hoping her parents will find her, only to be found by the most unlikely parents of all. Annie is an updated version of the original, and it's super entertaining and fun. It's nice to see a movie like this once in a while, if you're a kid, or even if you're not…. – Marcy Lytle

Foxcatcher

Steve Carrell is unrecognizable in this movie, as he is transformed into John Du Pont, a disturbed man who coaches a USA wrestling team, including gold medalist Mark Schulz, played by Channing Tatum. The movie is extremely slow getting started and it doesn't pick up the pace at all during the movie. Foxcatcher is a true story of an extremely wealthy man with mental issues and an unhealthy relationship with his mother. He preys on a young man with his own

self-esteem issues, and brings him into his home and life, to coach him as a wrestler, but to also *own* him as a friend. Mark Ruffalo plays this young man's older brother, an esteemed wrestler and coach, who also arrives at Foxcather, with wife and kids in tow. I assume the movie was super slow to emphasize the slow, calculated movements and looks of John Du Pont, but it was a hard movie to watch – even though the acting was superb. I wasn't expecting what happened at the end, but let me say this isn't a feel-good movie, an action film, or even an intriguing drama. It's boring, disturbing, and creepy. If you like that sort of thing, this movie's for you. – Marcy Lytle

Big Eyes

The previews of this movie tell a lot, but they don't tell it all. Amy Adams plays Margaret Keane, a real lady who is a real artist and still alive. When she was younger, she married a man Walter Keane (played by Christoph Waltz) who took all the credit for her paintings of children with "big eyes," and intimated and controlled her into not revealing that she was the true artist. This all took place back in the 1950's and Margaret believed him, when he told her that "lady art" wouldn't sell. However, time and the burden of the lie take their toll on Ms. Keane and she soon reveals the truth, hoping she will be believed in the courtroom. Big Eyes is entertaining and disturbing at the same time, as we are drawn into the unbelievable scenario of a wife who lives with a husband who claims to be an artist, yet she never sees him paint a thing. *How does that happen?* I wondered that as I left the theater, but I also wondered what happened to her daughter, who observed a mom who was hidden away and a stepdad who was crazy. I think you'll want to read the real story after you see this movie. – Marcy Lytle

The Imitation Game

Benedict Cumberbatch is one of my favorite actors, and he is superb in his role as Alan Turing, a super brain who secretly was able to build a machine during WWII to break the Enigma code. His character is spellbinding from the onset of the movie, as we are drawn into this exceptionally smart man's way of connecting (or not connecting) with others, because of his social ineptness. We see (from flashbacks) the sad experience he suffered as a young boy, losing his dearest friend, and how even the name he gives his machine he's inventing (Christopher) helps to keep the memory of that friend alive and with him, throughout his adult years. Keira Knightley plays another super brain that enters his life and the two of them pair nicely as a couple, and as co-workers. Cumberbatch's character in The Imitation Game is misunderstood, mistrusted, and misjudged many times, because of his differences from the "norm," yet several times throughout the movie we understand and nod our heads as we agree with the fact that being different can often result in amazing things that change the world. And sometimes being different can leave a person with problems too big to be solved, by even the smartest of brains. – Marcy Lytle

Into the Woods

If you're curious to hear your favorite actors sing, and you see how many of your favorite actors are cast in this movie, you'll want to see the film – like I did. And early in the movie, I was

delighted with the singing, the lyrics and the storyline. At one point it seemed like the movie was about to wrap up and be done, which would have made Into the Woods a good watch. But…it kept going. And going. And the story unraveled, much like life does, when we think everything is going well. Fairy tale endings and wishes aren't so much what we expect them to be, and disappointments wreak havoc on our homes and in our relationships. But this story, of tangled up fairy tales and wishes gone wild, went too far and sort of ruined the thrill and excitement of the first song. And by the end of the movie, even the songs became a grating noise of the same lyrics in just a few monotone notes that really got on my nerves. So, should you see it? Probably. But I don't think you'll buy it to place on your shelf along with your classics. – Marcy Lytle

Unbroken

"This is a true story" was on the screen at the beginning of the movie, which told the horrid tale of an Olympian athlete (Louis Zamperini – played by Jack O'Connell) who ended up being a prisoner in a Japanese war camp (after already suffering through weeks of barely surviving after his plane crashed in the ocean). I've seen many films about prisoners being tortured, but I think this might be the worst – it was hard to watch. But a promise made to God, and the words of a sibling who saw the gold in his little brother, kept this young man alive, strong, and a hero of sorts to his fellow prisoners. Unbroken is the title of the film, but it's also an adjective that describes the spirt of this runner who amazed the crowds as he came from behind to win the race, time and time again. It's that same spirit that keeps him alive as the most ruthless of all Japanese commanders tries to break his body and his will, without success… - Marcy Lytle

The Hobbit

I must confess I'm not a fan of these movies, but I went with my family and I was pleasantly surprised with this one. Or maybe it's that I purposed to like it! The story was easier to follow, and it was certainly full of action, as the "armies" fought for the gold and the mountain home. This movie is full of scenes of peril, so little ones might be frightened. The dwarves, the earth people, the elves, and all of their costumes, made for an exciting dramatic movie-going experience that went well with a large bag of popcorn. The Hobbit is a great holiday movie for the gang to see… - Marcy Lytle

Wild

I heard talk of Reese Witherspoon and Laura Dern (who plays Reese's mom) being up for an award nomination, so of course I wanted to see this movie. However, Wild might be one of my least favorite Reese movies. This film is based on the true story of Cheryl Strayed, who goes on a 1,100 mile solo hike to grieve, find herself, heal, and prove something – I'm not sure what. The scenery is pretty, but two hours of watching this woman carry a backpack way too heavy for her across desert land, all the while flashing back to memories of her husband, her sexual encounters outside her marriage, and her dying mother, were a bit too much. And it didn't appear that she learned much, grew any, or changed at all…by the end of her trek…when she

made her final statement (in the movie) about life. I guess it's supposed to be a profound statement to sum up her "adventures," but it wasn't worth waiting for. And I didn't leave the theater thinking what a strong, amazing woman she was, but rather what a long, arduous trek and a waste of time. – Marcy Lytle

Exodus: Gods and Kings

I did not like this movie, and I'm suggesting you save your big movie bucks and go see something else, unless you just want to sit through 2 ½ hours of the film to see the graphics, which were pretty great. It seemed to take forever to get to the juicy part of the story – the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea – as we watch Moses learn of his ancestry and receive God's word – and marry his wife. He and his wife had a little "saying" when they married and again at the end, which seemed cheesy and contrived, and didn't fit with the rest of the movie. That aside, Christian Bale played Moses and didn't bring the character to life at all. In fact, it took so long to get to the plagues I fell asleep, and awoke for the mighty sea scene, only to be disappointed again. I went to the movie with three other people, and we all left the theater saying, "What?" I always loved the story of Moses, and envisioned the passing through the sea as a glorious event, full of victory and rejoicing. There was none of that in Exodus: Gods and Kings. In fact, there was not much of anything to rejoice about. – Marcy Lytle

The Homesman

I saw the previews for this movie, starring Hilary Swank and Tommy Lee Jones (& Meryl Streep and James Spader), and I thought I was in for a great old west story of a sweet young single woman, willing to transport three women who had lost their minds, across the prairie back home to where they could get help. She enlists the help of a man about to be hanged, because she saves his life. However, I was so wrong. The actors are some of my favorites, so I did enjoy seeing them and watching them in their element. However, The Homesman is a dark film with characters that are – well – disturbed, in the most disturbing of ways. There are scenes that are hard to watch, and characters you'll want to take to heart, only to find yourselves appalled and aghast at the turn of events near the end. I'm giving this movie a thumbs up, only because of the actors, and because some do like a twisted story. But the combo of disturbing, with the old west, with literal craziness and eye-popping cringes, didn't make for a mix of a movie I'd want to see again. – Marcy Lytle

The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part I

Walking into the movie theater, I expected this latest installment of the *Hunger Games* series to be just as action-packed as the first and second movies were. I was surprised to find that it had much less action and much more character development. Exploring the psychosis behind the games, Mockingjay Part I exceeded my expectations in terms of emotional development of the characters. It made me feel a little crazy as I watched Katniss Everdeen (played by the fantastically talented Jennifer Lawrence) battle her inner demons, but thankfully there were bouts of comic relief from the beloved characters, Haymitch Abernathy (Woody Harrelson) and

Effie Trinket (Elizabeth Banks). District 13 is a completely different setting from what viewers of the *Hunger Games* are used to, with less glamour but much more harsh realism. Deserving of two thumbs up, this film left me with a hunger for more action but filled my emotional quota to the brim. – Kayley Ryan

The Theory of Everything

I went expecting to see great acting, but to be distraught over this true story of a renown atheist, Stephen Hawking. I did see great acting by Eddie Redmayne and Felicity Jones, but rather than the movie focusing on the atheism, it focused on the relationship between husband and wife, amid his debilitating disease and his quest for the theory of how time began. Hawking's wife, as portrayed in this movie, is a believer in God and this is evident throughout the movie. Hawking loves her, and even gives her "a moment" at one point in the movie, as his theories continue to develop when he acknowledges that God might exist. Redmayne's smile throughout the movie, surrounded in by his grimacing face, is captivating. Jones' emotions that show on her face, as she takes care of three children and her husband, is equally magnetizing. And the way The Theory of Everything wraps up left me with a glorious thought all my own, *Yes, one day the lame will walk again, but it won't be because of man's theories of how to turn back time.* – Marcy Lytle

Beyond the Lights

This movie is one of those movies that could have been thoroughly enjoyable except for…. Let me explain. Young cop catches a young starlet as she is about to jump from a balcony, because she's fed up with her life. That life is one created by her mother (Minnie Driver) who wants the young girl (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) to be everything she wasn't. Sound like a familiar storyline? The young man "savior" is portrayed as being a prince of integrity and honor, as he sees the girl for who she is without all the glamour and glitz, and loves her. This eventually changes her, and well…you can guess the rest of the story. The music was great, it's a romantic story on the big screen, and I loved the ending. But I always wonder why these young heroes who rescue the girls still sleep with them outside of marriage? And besides that, the beginning scenes of the movie might make you want to walk out. This is not a movie for teens or kids. If you want to see a great love story played out beautifully and don't mind shaking your head a few times at this PG-13 movie that should have been rated R, then Beyond the Lights might be something you'd like to see. – Marcy Lytle

Interstellar

I was told to see this movie in the IMAX but I didn't. It was still awesome. Matthew McConaughey plays a single dad of two kids who is chosen to make a space flight like no other – to save the planet. Time travel, amazing graphics, an emotional storyline, and a three-hour screen time, all make for a movie going experience unlike anything I've enjoyed before. If you sit and analyze it too long, you'll miss the point. But if you think, "Would I risk never seeing my

children again in order to ensure their future?" you'll engage in this man's angst, his fierce love, and his determination to "return" to his daughter, played (as an adult) by one of my favorite actresses, Jessica Chastain. And a big plus about Interstellar – it's not full of junk – so you can take the whole family. - Marcy Lytle

Whiplash

JK Simmons and Miles Teller give an outstanding performance as teacher and student. Teller is a drummer in an elite music school, run by a ruthless instructor who pushes the musicians way too far, past any reasonable limit – especially Teller. Whiplash is full of drumming, which is spellbinding to watch. But this movie is also full of language and abuse, which is hard to watch. When we think the instructor can't do any more harm, he does. And when we think the student can't take any more abuse, he does. The emotion these two actors display is amazing, and the connection they make is disturbing. Whiplash is the name of a piece of music, not a jerk of the neck, in case you are wondering. – Marcy Lytle

Nightcrawler

What a great thriller of a movie, with a storyline and twist I've not seen before. Jake Gyllenhaal plays a driven man (to put it lightly) who won't stop at anything to get a news story, as he roams the city at night looking for crimes he hears about on the police radio. Gyllenhaal's face, his skinny frame (he lost weight for the movie) the way he wears his hair, and his eyes, all contribute to making him a scary man indeed, as he pushes the limits until he goes too far. He finds a connection with a news veteran (played by Rene Russo) who's almost as scary as he is. Gyllenhaal also hires a young naïve man that he takes advantage of, and this young actor is perfect in playing this part. There's a lot of language in Nightcrawler. (R-rated). But if you like thrillers, you'll like this one. It's a tiny bit slow at the beginning…but keep watching. You'll be thinking, "Oh my, did he really do that?" – Marcy Lytle

Birdman

Celebrities and their demons. That's what this movie is about, and it's told and filmed in a very unique and unusual way. Michael Keaton plays an old actor who was a once famous actor in films, but he's now trying to make a comeback by appearing and directing on Broadway. However, his motivation is to rid himself of the voices and images in his head that tell him how washed up he is, and that he will never amount to anything. Adding to those voices, are a daughter just out of rehab, an ex-wife, and a cast of actors with their own problems. There's no musical score per se in this movie – but there is the beat of drums throughout the movie…and many metaphors that are pretty obvious but well written into the story. Birdman is full of language and mature themes, but the characters in the story have fallen to the lowest of the low in the Hollywood life…and it's not a pretty picture. – Marcy Lytle

St Vincent

I hadn't really noticed this movie until I heard a couple of the actors talk about it on television. Naomi Watts, Bill Murray, and Melissa McCarthy play in this comedy/drama about a divorced mom who has no option but to leave her 12 year old son in the care of an old "crusty" man without a nice bone in his body. However, it turns out that the little boy has the uncanny ability to see beneath the crust of this man to the real person he used to be, the one who deserves a certain kind of recognition. I've never seen a movie combine comedy with such a serious theme in a movie, and do it so well. All of the characters are flawed greatly, due to life's hardships, and this somehow makes them totally relatable and loveable in St. Vincent, a movie worth seeing – with a little boy actor who will win your heart. – Marcy Lytle

FURY

It's World War II, the Americans are in their tanks fighting the Germans, and Brad Pitt plays the leader of a group of men on one particular tank, when a boy of a man, a clerk typist, shows up to report for duty and join Pitt's troop. This young man is the focus of the movie's story line, as Brad Pitt trains and pushes this scared young man to learn to fight and kill. The group of five men on the tank fight and bond, and curse and quote scripture, as they move against the enemy, ending up at a "crossroads." It's bloody, there's lots of language, and it's hard to watch. Fury is the name of the tank, and it describes the passionate anger these men feel towards the enemy as they fight together to the finish. The "jury" is still out on the "fury." I just can't say if I enjoyed it, because I didn't. But I can say it was a good war movie, because it was. – Marcy Lytle

The Judge

Robert Downey, Jr. and Robert Duvall play father and son in this moving drama about family relationships. Don't go late or sleepy, because this movie is long! Downey is a successful defense attorney, and Duvall is a reputable judge, but the two are estranged because of an event that happened when Downey was a teenager. However, when Downey visits his hometown for a funeral, father and son are thrown together when son has to defend his own father in the courtroom. Adding to the drama are Downey's two brothers, his young daughter, and an old flame back in the hometown Downey's character swore off years ago. Duvall is exceptional in his role, as always, and The Judge has a bit of mystery to it, as well as tender moments that might make you cry. The father and son relationship is believable, sad, raw and real… - Marcy Lytle

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible No Good, Very Bad Day

This movie stars Steve Carrell and Jennifer Garner as a married couple with four children, one being Alexander, who is turning 12. If your kids have read the book of the same title, you know the story. From the beginning until the end of the movie, it's nonstop mishaps for each person in the family, until they are all out of sorts and blaming one another. However, they each one begin to realize the real meaning and value in life, and one by one, attitudes change and the family thrives. Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day is amusing (lots of laughter in the theater), entertaining, and clean…so how can that result in anything but a wonderful, great, totally good, very good theater experience for the whole family? – Marcy Lytle

Gone Girl

I went in, knowing there were scenes that would be hard to watch. And there were. I also went in, knowing this was supposed to be a great thriller. And it was. The music in the background of this missing person mystery added to the suspense of the story, starring Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike. Pike plays a grown woman, still under the control of her parents, who meets and marries a man who loves her. However, after a few years of marital "bliss," the marriage falls apart, and Pike's character goes missing. From all appearances and "clues," her husband is suspect. To tell any more of the story would ruin it for you. Let's just say the story is riveting, the acting is amazing, and the nasty scenes were unnecessary. Gone Girl ended with some questions still lingering in my mind, and I desperately want to see a sequel that will answer all of them. – Marcy Lytle

The Good Lie

Reese Witherspoon didn't even appear until well into the movie, because she's not really the star. This movie was inspired by the true story of the "lost boys" of Sudan, refugees who came to America more than a decade ago. The Good Lie follows the lives of several brothers and their one sister, as they were orphaned because of war, and ended up in a refugee camp…and finally in America. Reese Witherspoon plays an initially disinterested employment worker, but later a very involved friend to these young people. The actors who play these young people are captivating in their enthusiasm for life, their gratefulness for kindness, and their humility and honor for others – maybe because they were refugees themselves. You'll want to watch the movie closely, and try not to take a bathroom break, because you'll learn why the movie has the title it does – and you'll leave saying it was a "good movie." - Marcy Lytle

HOME

Practical Parenting - Failing is Not Fun – by Georganne Schuch

Much of our society has placed a stigma on failing, when, in fact, failing is a lesson, or series of lessons, on the way to success. Thomas Edison performed thousands of experiments leading up to the invention of the light bulb. Not one of those experiments was a failure. Each one merely proved that some particular way didn't work. He eventually succeeded, obviously, but many of his experiments provided invaluable information for other inventions and theories.

Certainly, failing is not fun. It can be demoralizing, depressing, and downright frustrating. But it is rarely without teachable moments. Failing a test, for example, proves that not studying makes a difference, or at least not studying the right way.

Spelling seems to be my children's nemesis subject. They hate words that can't be spelled phonetically, which is like 90 percent of the English language. So, we employ a variety of ways to study their weekly spelling list. Just reading through the words each day is not enough to get the words to stick in their brains. They also write them, spell them out loud, use them in sentences, look up their definitions, alphabetize them, and any other trick we might come up with to help them recognize the word and remember its spelling. If they still fail the test, which isn't often if they apply a little effort to the above tactics, then they add the words to a review list that they continue to work on for the next week. While the different methods of studying help the most, the thought of having to review missed words for another week or two encourages them to put forth the most effort. Failure has consequences.

The same can be said in everyday life:

- I encourage my children to work hard to succeed.
- I prefer to avoid mistakes because they are often inconvenient and expensive.
- I fret far too often over the wasted time and money to redo something that did not turn out quite like it should have.
- I then consider the valuable lessons I have learned over the years from my own failures, and there have been many.
- Rather than beat anyone up over something, we do a postmortem and figure out how and why something went wrong.
- We apply what we learn and take a stab at it again.

I remember when my oldest daughter was just learning to make chocolate chip cookies. We had baked together for years, and she knew the recipe quite well. She asked to make the cookies by herself. They looked good out of the oven, but our first bite choked us. We spit the cookies out and looked at each other horrified. *What went wrong?* We went over the recipe, and she was sure she added all the ingredients correctly. Still, the cookies were inedible. A few days later as she was getting ingredients out for a different recipe, she pulled the baking soda out of the freezer (you know the box you put in there to absorb odors?). I corrected her and told her to use the box in the pantry, and then the light bulb came on. If this was the box she had used for the cookies, the awful taste was finally explained. *Lesson learned and not soon forgotten*. Not only did she learn where the baking soda for baking was kept, we have a funny memory that we still laugh over together. She now makes outstanding chocolate chip cookies and almost any other baked item we could want.

Now, **we see failure as a step on the ladder to succeeding.** Failure shows us where not to put our foot next time as we step across a marshy ground of unclear choices. While succeeding the first time is great, learning to continue trying is better. As parents, we would do well to encourage our children to try on their own a little more often. Let them stretch beyond their comfort zone. Even if they fail, they are closer to succeeding than when they were standing on the sidelines.

Consequences are a natural teaching tool of failure. They often teach far more than all the coaching in the world.

- Fired from your first job? Then show up on time at the next one.
- Didn't get a scholarship for which you applied? Then, bring up your grades, polish your application letter, and try for another one.
- Didn't get a high score in the music competition? Practice more next time.
- Feeling left out of a class project? Step up and make a better contribution to get noticed.

Obviously, there are more examples of failing and trying again. And sometimes all the trying in the world won't bring success. Most people aren't going to invent something like the light bulb, you know. But raising our children to dream big and try hard will serve them well throughout their life.

Because **the only failure is not trying again**.

Life as We Know It - Iron Sharpens Iron – by Erica Simmons

Proverbs 27:17

As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. (ESV)

This article marks six months since I started writing my "Life as We Know It" column. As I reflect there is one thing that stands out: *Life as We Know It* moments have not been events or choices that have changed my life, they have been revelations from God that are so profound that I cannot continue to live life as I have. One such moment happened over the MLK weekend.

The boys had plans to celebrate a friend's birthday. Two friends showed up at the house, as the father of the birthday boy was going to take them and pick them up from "teen night" at a western club. They stayed until the club closed, and after getting home, they brushed their teeth and were heading to bed when I heard Jerimiah call out for one their friends. I did not know this boy was planning to spend the night, as I had not talked with his parents. He being a great kid, I simply asked my boys if his parents knew he was staying overnight and they said yes, so we all said our good nights went to bed. (Here is where the prayer I mentioned in last month's article came in handy.)

The next morning I am waking the boys up to get the day started, when I hear a conversation going on over the speaker phone. I could not hear the conversation clearly, but I did pick up that something was not quite right. Upon asking the boys, it turns out their friend's parents not only did not know he was spending the night with us, they did not know where he was *at all*, the entire night. Their friend had walked out of his home away from his parents the night before *without permission.*

I had to call and talk with his parents and profusely apologize for letting them go all night not know where their son was. I assured them that I would take care of things on my end with my boys for lying to me about the situation.

When I talked with the boys, they told me the friend left his home because he felt unsafe. There was a disagreement about an issue that escalated. They were just trying to keep their friend safe. No parent can be angry with their child for showing care and support to a friend who in going through a hard time. **The tone of the conversation changed, but the message remained the same**. I explained to them there are always three sides to any story; each party involved, and the truth. They not only robbed me the chance to show their friend that there are adults that care, they also took away an opportunity for trust between them and me to be deepened. In fact, not telling me had the opposite effect.

Afterwards, I felt there was more to be done in this situation, so I called a friend to discuss, and got some great advice. And being the typical mother that I am, I called the boys in for round two.

It was during this conversation that my *Life as We Know It* moment began to sprout. I was laying down the law to them and two things I said to them caused a resonation in my spirit.

- I first said, "Don't plant a seed you are not willing to have reaped. "
- My second comment was, "God is in it all or not in it at all" (passed to me from my friend who received this nugget from another woman of faith.)

  You see, I have been struggling for 6-plus years with a recurring sin and I was in the midst of a relapse. This sin had caused so much pain in the past, but I often rationalized with myself whenever I fell into it again. The pain I had already

reaped from this had faded away much like the physical pain we may experience, when we recall that it was bad but often forget how bad (especially when we want to justify our decision to do something we really want to do). In the conversation with my boys, God was ever so gently reminding me the cost that was not paid by just me but by my dear children as well.

It was while I was spending some time thinking about what God did that this article sprang to life. You see, my *Life as We Know It* moment was this:

God not only blessed me with my children because I was the one to equip them to service for Him, but my children also equip me to be a better servant to Him as well.

The Word says in James 1:2-3 to consider it joy when we have various trials and temptations. Who temps and tries a parent more than our children? They force us to take long hard looks at ourselves in the midst of the many, many things they get into, in this growing up process. We don't always handle these situations right the first time around, but one thing no Christian parent can deny, nothing EVER drives us to our knees more often or more quickly than our beloved children. We know and understand it is not a fight with them; we have to surrender it all to God. It is when we surrender to God that we are strengthened in our faith (have our iron sharpened) and when we get off our knees we are able to impart into them His Godliness (their iron is sharpened), not our frustration.

The seed I planted was about to be reaped.

Flash forward two and a half weeks. You see, I did not heed God's warning and once again slipped into my sinful behavior. This time it was an attack of the enemy on one of my boys that got my attention. (God is ever so faithful, as this situation could have been so much worse than it was.) Within 20 minutes of the enemy's move, I was made aware of it. I invited prayer warriors in on the situation, and I myself drew closer to the Lord. This attack happened on a Wednesday, and I was able to send out a praise report on Saturday morning to my prayer warriors that the victory was ours. The re-telling of this story is made simple, but the two and a half days that passed were not. There was the temptation to preach at my son, to try to fix the situation for myself and to use my logic to out-logic him. And there were moments I temporarily slipped into *one of those modes*, but time after time God drew me to **2 Corinthians 10-3-5:**

For though we walk in the world, we do not fight according to this world's rules of warfare. The weapons of the war we're fighting are not of this world but are powered by God and effective at tearing down the strongholds erected against His truth. We are demolishing arguments and ideas, every high-and-mighty philosophy that pits itself against the knowledge of the one true God. We are taking prisoners of every thought, every emotion, and subduing them into obedience to the Anointed One.

The last part of that passage was for me, to take prisoner the emotions (the fear, guilt, anger and frustration) that tried to rise up time and time again, they had no Godly purpose in this situation. I battle with truth (truth about my own struggle with sin that I know was the root and doorway to this attack), but the word of God shone his truth and light into both of our "darknesses."

Our breakthrough came on Friday night when my son was finally willing to open up to me about the thoughts behind his actions, what he based his decision upon, and I was able to counter those deceptions with the truth as well.

In the end, iron sharpened iron.

I Don't Do Teens – Pretty & Pure – by Marcy Lytle

I was so excited when I had a girl, partly because girls' clothes are just so darn fun to buy! And up until my daughter was about four years old, I had the privilege of buying whatever I wanted her to wear, and she wore it! In fact, she jumped up and down with joy when I arrived home with my bags, anxious to see what I bought her.

But then it happened. She actually had an opinion about what she wanted to wear. This happened early on, and it was no longer about mom and what she wanted. She had her own style and her own thoughts, and they weren't so much like what I would have picked out. Bummer…

I had a choice to make. I could keep forcing my style and interests on her, or I could give her free rein as she shopped, to pick out her own clothes. Or there was a third choice. I could guide her, and still let her have choices, but all under my wisdom umbrella that was always open above her.

Teenage daughters will test us, try us, and keep us up at night, with their assertiveness in the area of clothes and what to wear…

As a parent, we want to encourage creativity and style, yet train our daughters in dignity and honor of their bodies, their message, and their comfort.

Their Bodies. Our girls have raging hormones, and their bodies are changing, and this happens at all different ages. I remember having a chubby" middle" (tummy) in the 8th grade and all of a sudden the next summer actually seeing my waist emerge. My daughter was so tiny she had trouble fitting into the teen sizes when she was a teenager, because the little kids' sizes fit her better. The sooner we train our daughters to love their bodies in all of the forms and shapes that emerge, the sooner they will lay at least this one area of angst aside, in favor of caring *about* others and not *what* others think of their looks. However, if all they hear from us moms is complaining and griping about our own bodies, our daughters will follow suit and try to use clothes to create an image to cover up who they really are.

Their Message. Our girls send a message to boys by the way they dress. And that message will reveal our daughters own view of themselves; whether or not they are secure in who they are. If our daughters copy celebrities in the way they dress because they think if they show more skin the boys will look and like, then we've missed the mark with them. We must make sure the message our girls hears and receives about who they are is one that speaks to their innermost being – about who they are in Christ. Once they are sure of His love, His acceptance, and His approval, they won't be searching for it by wearing revealing clothes. It's likely that our daughters will approach us at some point with a request for short shorts, a skimpy bathing suit, or even just show up with way too much skin showing right before they're ready to leave the house. Instead of yelling, pointing the finger, and marching her upstairs to change, we can take time to ask and listen to the real reason for what she's doing. It might surprise us to find out that she's fearful and just needs reassurance that she is beautiful in His sight.

Their Comfort. Comfort is just not synonymous with fashion, is it? High heels hurt our toes, but we wear them. Tight jeans rub our bellies, but we pull ourselves into them. And it's hard to remember to keep our legs together and not to bend over too far when we wear short dresses, but we still buy them for our girls. Fashion conscious, teen girls – yikes. I was one of them, and I still love fashion. However, fashion at the expense of comfort teaches our girls that what we look like on the outside is more important than feeling good, being comfortable in our own skin, and enjoying ourselves when we step out in public. If our daughters feel they MUST be in pain to look good and MUST spend hours on their hair and makeup at all costs, we need to help them learn to rest. We must tell our daughters that they are pretty, pure, perfect, and pleasing to Him, whether they don heels, have their face painted just right or their jeans too tight. There's absolutely nothing wrong with looking nice, but if it's attached to how we feel about ourselves ,and we can never relax in comfort and ease of our own skin, we will grow up to be uptight, just right, and a plastic doll that's unreal.

Our teen girls live in a world where they are bombarded daily with images of "perfect" girls their age who can sing, dance, have a million followers on twitter, and own their own home by age 17. It's up to us to tether them to the ground (His word) when they start to float around in a cloud of fantasy and fashion, just so they can be accepted and fit in to the world around them.

It's not easy. And if we're up there floating with them, it's doubly hard.

Take note of your own appearance. Do you know that you are pretty and pure, because of Jesus? And does that satisfy your cravings for acceptance and love? If not, seek help and pray for these things because your Father wants you to feel secure in him, so that the outward appearance you portray is a reflection of the confidence that makes you walk with your head held high, in clothes that fit you, compliment you, and feel good on you.

It's only then that you can pass this same sentiment on to your daughters, as they mature and avoid the pitfalls of the fashion industry that markets to their outward appearance, instead of that beauty inside.

Simple Solutions – Tackle a Few Extras – by Georganne Scuch

The efficiency of multi-tasking may be debatable, but not always without merit. While driving and texting at the same time might be a huge no-no, cleaning while cooking makes sense if you want to leave the kitchen before midnight. So, to help simplify the ballgame known as life, let's talk about multi-tasking that makes sense.

1. **Meal prep allows for all kinds of multi-tasking.** While the rice is cooking and the stir-fry is steaming, go ahead and wash those dishes from lunch, or even breakfast. You know you will need that sink space for dinner dishes, so let's clear it up now. If you have a little time after that, you might think ahead even more and see what you can do for breakfast tomorrow. The main draw of cereal and pop tarts is the ease at which you can quickly have something on the table while everyone is dashing around looking for socks and shoes. Oatmeal makes a quick hot breakfast. Make it tonight and heat it up tomorrow morning. It's not as gross as it sounds. More of a yogurt and fruit person? Cut up the fruit and portion it into small jars. Then, plop the yogurt on in the morning, and you're ready. If smoothies are your *thang*, they also can be made ahead and refrigerated overnight, or you can put all the ingredients together into a bowl or plastic bag ready to throw in the blender.
2. **During dinner cleanup, pack tomorrow's lunch.** I highly recommend portioning out dinner into a lunch container at the same time you're serving the meal. This keeps the locusts, better known as kids, from eating every last crumb and leaving you without a lunch. Also, consider adding one small kitchen chore a couple of times a week to your regular meal cleanup. I know my kitchen help (kids again) routinely forgets to wipe down the stove, among other appliances, so I try to spot clean those poor, misfortunate surfaces while I'm waiting for the table to be cleared or the water to warm up for washing the pots and pans.
3. **I**n a house full of girls, **everyone has to take a number for the bathroom**…except my husband. He gets in when he wants; no questions asked. So, while I'm cooling my heels waiting for my turn, I might straighten up the entry hall that seems to catch 10 dozen pairs of shoes, 15 coats, a bushel of grocery bags, and whatever else happened to be in someone's hand when they passed through the front door. Of course, part of my cleanup involves calling all the owners of those multitudes of shoes and coats to claim their property. This generally means that the person impeding my bathroom time has to come out to get her stuff. Then, I dart in, whether it's my turn or not, while they're busy putting all their stuff away. Parenting has its privileges.
4. **It never hurts to mix up a batch of cookies, muffins, or some other snack while you're waiting for *somebody*** to finish dressing like they're going to a coronation ball. The dough/batter is then ready for baking during the next meal prep time. I always make sure that I dirty the most dishes when it's not my turn to help with dinner clean up. Again, the privilege of parenthood. Occasionally, someone catches on to my sneaky habit, and I coolly agree to never make snacks again, thus saving them the hard labor of washing an extra bowl. They usually re-think this arrangement pretty quickly and do the dishes with slightly less grumbling.

Now, to be honest, I don’t always make use of every spare minute. I’m lazy by nature, but when I work up the extra energy to tackle a few of these extras, boy does life run more smoothly. Like I tell my girls, it has to be done sooner or later, and sooner means I don’t have to bother with it later. Except for meals. It seems like the children want to eat every single day, so it’s best to keep on top of that, anyway.

A Night to Remember - Great Value – by Marcy Lytle

We are of great value to God, so much that he sent his only son to die on the cross for our sins. God values us! Easter is coming, and it's a time we stop to recognize the great sacrifice Jesus gave when he died on the cross for us, and the great miracle of his resurrection that promises us eternal life. How valuable we are to him, that he gave his all for us!

Preparation: *Gather the following items for the study: a favorite photograph, an autographed item if you have it (if not, find something with a name brand printed on it), a birth certificate or other certificate of authenticity, a valued item in your home (either money-wise or sentimental value), a piece of nice jewelry (or a trophy) and a stuffed animal. Place each item on a table and cover each item with a napkin or cloth. Either you can gather all of these items yourself, or assign each person to bring one of the mentioned items to the table.*

As you read the study, uncover one item at a time and discuss.

Read Matthew 13: 44, 45 The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

What is of great value to you?
Is there anything you'd like to have, that you'd be willing to sell all your possessions in order to get it?
Do you know that you are of great value to Christ?

Read Matthew 6:26 and 33. All God has he gives to you. You are of great value to him.

Let's look at some of the things our family values:

Does this item have any personal value to you? *(Uncover the photograph and tell why it is of great value to the family).* A photograph captures a moment in time or a picture of a person that you always want to remember. Did you know that you were made in the image of God and you are of great value to him?

This item is signed or autographed by the creator of the item. (*Show the autograph*). Some people buy clothes that have a certain name on them, and they are willing to pay a higher price just because of the name. Your name is written in God's heart. If you are a believer in Jesus, you have his name stamped in your heart and you have the authority behind his name, and all the benefits that go with knowing your awesome Savior.

This item has a certificate of authenticity (A document verifying that the object you have is real.) (*Show the birth certificate or marriage certificate*). You have a document of all documents, the Bible, the inspired word of God that has lasted throughout history, complete documentation and verification of God's authenticity. Is God real to you?

We had to have the resources (money) to purchase this item. (*Show the item of value and share if it was a gift, if you saved up, if you inherited it, etc.*) Jesus was the perfect sacrifice and he gave his life for us. God gave his son to die for us. Wow, he must have thought we were pretty valuable. Is there anything or anyone you would give your life for? Would you give your life to buy one of these items you value so much?

Does this item have a place of prominence in our home, or is it hidden away? (Uncover the jewelry or trophy). Is your life in Christ on display for all to see, or is it something you're ashamed of? We have a place in Christ, right beside him, seated by him. Sometimes we hide our items of great value, because we don't want them to be stolen. No one can steal from you or take away the place you have in Christ.

Will this item increase or decrease in value? (Show a garage sale item, discuss how much you paid for it, how much it will bring in a garage sale, i.e. stuffed animals only bring about 25 cents). Some items increase in value the older they get. Others decrease. A new car decreases in value the minute you drive it off the lot. However, if you keep a car until it's 50 years old or older, it increases in value again. Isn't that odd? Did you know that your life in Christ never decreases in value? You are promised that if you lose your life for His sake, you will gain riches eternal. You are of eternal value to God.

Can you afford the cost of something you really want right now? (*Let each one discuss what they would buy if they had $1,000,000.00).*

There are some things you may never be able to afford. You may never make enough money to buy everything you want and desire. However, the cost of your salvation was paid for by Jesus on the cross. He paid the supreme sacrifice. Otherwise, we would have had to pay for our sins, by eternal death. Instead, he paid for our sins, and we get eternal life.

Pray together as a family, thanking Jesus for valuing us so much that he gave his life for us. And offer up praise together as you value the gifts that God has given your family.

The Family Practice – Playing Together – by Rachel Toalson

I am coming back to life.

When we started this New Year, one of the most important goals we named for our family was playing together more.

We've gotten pretty good at cleaning together (most days), and we've gotten pretty good at finding our *thankfuls* and talking about what we learned and the ways we grew this day. And we've gotten pretty good at knowing and managing and honoring one another's emotions.

But somewhere along the way, we forgot what it looked like to play together.

And so these last few months we've sat around a table at Family Time and put together puzzles and learned to play pick-up sticks and tried to be the first to spot a pattern in cards.

We have, on the sunny, somewhat-warmer days, played chase outside, boys on their scooters, Daddy on his roller blades and Mama on foot; and we have visited the neighborhood park to climb and swing and slide; and we have played 2,000 rounds of "I Spy" in our backyard.

We have closed ourselves indoors and played hide-and-seek and Tickle Monster and Dance Party.

Our home has been filled with so much giggling the walls are still shaking.

Sometimes, as parents, we have a hard time freeing ourselves from our adult roles so we can crawl on the floor to mimic a snake for that game of charades with our kids. And we can worry about our not-really-there art skills in that game of Telestrations, or we can just feel too silly to pretend like an oversized zombie who likes to chase and tickle little children, because it just doesn't feel natural anymore to be silly.

We're out of practice.

We spend so much of our time being serious, enforcing boundaries, setting limits, that sometimes we forget how to let our hair down and dance.

We forget just what play can do.

It is the family that plays together, building towers from blocks, constructing airplanes out of Legos without instructions, busting a move in the middle of a song, that can laugh its way back into connection.

Our world doesn't leave a whole lot of time for play in its margins, because there are basketball games and homework pages to be done and piano lessons on top of all the day in, day out responsibilities, but…

What are we missing when we trade play for all this?

Play can bring us back to life.

Sometimes it can feel like we're walking dead, when we are stretched too thin and bare between six boys and deadlines looming and eight loads of laundry piled in the hallway.

Sometimes we have to be re-taught how to really live, by the children who only know how to play.

They see play everywhere:

Play that splashes water from the sink while doing dishes, because he's made the sprayer a hungry sea monster.

Play that flings vinegar and water and peppermint oil onto an already-soaked table when he's tasked with wiping it down, because it's all a great water painting.

Play that smears the food he just swept up onto a used-to-be-white ceiling, because the broom just turned into a person walking upside down.

They see play and we see water spilled and cleaner sprayed where it shouldn't be, and food staining a ceiling.

When did we stop seeing the splendor of play?

And how do we turn our minds around?

Maybe we start with watching our children, seeing the way they play, remembering.

"When we stop playing we start dying," says Stuart Brown in his book, *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul.*

So let us choose to live.

1. When kids ask us to play, let's sit and play with them, even though our to-do list is miles long and even if we can't really spare the time, and even if it's only for five minutes. Our kids will appreciate the effort. And we will, too.

2. Book a whole month of Saturdays (or half of them) as Family Fun Days, where you play. Go to the zoo, or to a children's museum, or a park. Just play. After the month, commit to one Saturday (or other day) every other month. Once you get a taste of Family Fun Days, you'll want to know, like your children, when the next one will be.

3. Eat dinner together and then break out the puzzles or board games or cards and spend some time playing a game you can all do together. It might be mass chaos the first time you do it, but the more they practice, the better they'll get. Play can teach us patience, too.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - What if I Cut Them Off? By Marcy Lytle

I have these two appendages that feel attached to me, just like my arms and my legs, but they don't feel like they belong – they're called fear and guilt.

I wake up daily, thankful for my wonderful life with my super great husband, my beautiful kids and grandkids, and yes – we have our own problems – we all do – but life is really good.

And then I remember my friends who are suffering with spouses who are ill, or the loss of a loved one, or who struggle daily with a special need in their lives or their family, and I start to fear, "What if that happens to me?" and that first appendage appears – <u>fear.</u>

You're right. It's a selfish, self-absorbed thought. But I somehow fear that I too will be the target of some tremendous trial like that, one that God intends for me to "mature" me and "make me strong" as I climb my way out of a deep pit of despair. I've had my own trials of the financial kind, and even health issues with family, and my extended family has suffered divorce and death. And during each trial I feel as though I always floundered, leaning heavily on the faith of others, rather than standing on my own two feet of faith. I mostly panicked and then pressed through to sleep in peace, after much crying and seeking and…silence.

And so this thought that God is waiting to send some tsunami or earthquake to shatter my foundation haunts me. ***I know God is good, but his goodness sometimes leads us into the shadow of death, right?***

Or is it that I observe these faithful ones as they make their way through grief, past despair, and into life, and I somewhat envy them?

What is it really like to know God in the middle of the worst suffering on earth?

He must be faithful, because I see my friends thrive…at the least the ones who continue to believe.

That second appendage, <u>guilt,</u> is one I try to shake off regularly, but it emerges again, each time bigger and more prominent. I don't give enough, I spend too much time having "fun," am I really serving God the way he wants me to, and so on and so on… Those little annoying pangs that whisper, "You don't measure up, and you never will."

Did this appendage attach itself to me as a kid, growing up in a legalistic environment?

I once was told that I knew church before I knew God.

Is that my problem?

Sometimes I fantasize about what a day would be like to live with these two appendages of guilt and fear cut off, thrown out, destroyed to never be seen again.

I think I'd wake up and enjoy the day I'd been given, pray for my friends, and then rejoice in his goodness over all of us, as he leads us beside still waters, and on to that table spread in the presence of our enemies. And I wouldn't even be aware of the enemies because my focus

would be on the delicious fare spread out before me in the company of the One who gives us all good things. Fear would be lurking, but it would be far off from me, because I would realize the nearness of the Faithful One who rebukes fear and sends it away.

I think I'd go about my day, living, breathing and being the perfect child he created me to be – skipping, singing, soaring – in freedom from guilt and shame – because of the realization that he took all of that from me on the cross. So if I'm wearing fear as a tumor-like appendage, it's only because I've picked it up and attached to myself with the glue of self-pity and self-awareness. I would be in His presence all day long, listening to his voice and following in his footsteps, guilt-free and fancy free.

But then…when I retire at night and the darkness settles in and the light of day is gone, those two appendages that I'd laid aside might just try to climb into bed with me and grab hold of a weak area, a tired mind, a wounded heart, and suck me dry once again.

Today those appendages of fear and guilt are attached, but I'm determined to cut them off, with his help. I don't feel they belong on me, because they weigh me down and cause me to lose sight of the truth.

The truth is that there are tribulations and trials in this world but the Overcomer is with me. That's not some pat cliché statement, but one loaded with hope and good for my future and the future of those I love. I am not alone and will never be alone, and though fear may surface, it doesn't have to consume me.

The truth is that God knows my heart is to love him and to serve him, and if I'm not doing those two things well, he will gently guide me and lead me into more intimacy with him so that I don't fear Him, so that I feel no shame when I do this, or don't do that. He's a loving Father, he is. And when guilt starts to emerge from under my thin skin, I can quickly rub on the ointment of grace and mercy he freely doles out every morning for me, and the guilt has to go.

As I write this, tears are flowing down my face. It's so easy to allow the truth to be obscured, much in the way the clouds have obscured the sun lately, for the past week where I live. I heard others comment that they missed the sun, and that the clouds made them feel sad. But I had seen the forecast and knew the sun was returning, and it is – it's here – I see it out my window. The sky is clear, the clouds are gone, and the cold temperatures are rising for a warmer day ahead.

Clouds are temporary. Rain is necessary. But neither of those two things – the clouds of fear and the downpour of guilt – can ever eliminate the surety of the sun behind them.

Fear and guilt are the two little monsters I fight daily, but they're getting smaller as He gets bigger in my heart as I learn more about his character and love for me.

What appendages feel uncomfortable attached to your skin? It could be that they don't belong there at all, and that you have the power to lay them aside, cast them off, and walk freely.

Will you join me?

Under the Influence - Just Say No – by Marcy Lytle

The day I quit comparing is the day I walked free to be me…

I've always compared myself with others.

It started in middle school when my friends tried out for cheerleader and made it, and I didn't. I saw being a cheerleader as being something of value, something worth achieving, and when they made and it and I didn't – a little part of my confidence waned – because I saw myself as "less than."

In high school, the comparison was with my weight. Was I as thin as her? I wonder what *she* weighs? The guys won't like me if I'm overweight like *that* girl. And once I set the standard for my weight and my size, I spent a good part of my thoughts concerning myself with the numbers.

When I started college, it was all about grade point average. What if others found out my GPA? Would they think I was smart, or smarter than others? I got married, and it was my house. It had to be as nice as the houses I visited, as big, as neat, as decorated, and all of those other "as ___." Comparing what I had, how I looked, and how what I had looked, consumed my time, my energy, and my thoughts about who I was as a person, as a woman, as a wife.

I began to think about how much of our lives are spent in responding to comparisons.

Our neighbor gets a new car and we think we've got to have one. She redecorates her house, so all of a sudden ours looks drab and outdated. Our spare time is spent trying to look fit for the next gathering of friends or a reunion of old friends (who also are comparing their bodies and faces to the image they'd like to be.) A good amount of our productive hours are spent trying to be as good as, better than, or like someone else.

Proverbs 8:11 says that wisdom is more precious than rubies and nothing we desire compares with her. So a wise woman will seek wisdom above all else, comparing herself to the only standard that matters – Jesus. In fact, the only comparison that is wise is to compare all of the deeds God has done in our lives, comparing how more magnificent each one is above the one before. (Psalm 40:5).

II Corinthians 10 says we judge by appearances, and that when we measure ourselves by ourselves and compare ourselves with ourselves – we are NOT wise at all.

Just think with me for a minute what a day might look like if we chose not to compare ourselves among ourselves:

We'd wake up and dress to suit our own taste, not to look better than *her.* We might skip the scale because we're not comparing our numbers. Next, our breakfast, lunch and dinner would be so enjoyable as we make right and healthy choices because they're good for us, not because we're afraid of messing up our diet. As we work during the day, we would actually focus on the job at hand and enjoy our accomplishments, apart from comparison to the lady *over there*. We would place our arms around our husbands, thankful for the gift that he is, instead of wishing he'd work out a bit more like *her husband* does. Our kids would be free to be

who God made them to be, and not some copycat or trophy that we've aspired them to be. If a friend called and shares her good news over her new house, we would rejoice with her, because we would be happy and content in the home in which we live.

Get the picture?

Once we leave the comparisons among ourselves behind, we can then begin to see and note God's great power and mercies that he extends toward us every day. We can look to the heavens and observe the sun, feel the wind on our faces, and the power in our legs as we walk, comparing only the deeds of our Father who freely lavishes all good gifts upon us.

And we will find out that nothing compares in this life to his goodness, his power, his love, and his works in our lives – in OUR lives – not in the lives of others.

This sort of change in our thinking won't come easy, let me tell you. It takes a long time to break old habits, especially habits of thought. However, when we begin to recognize how much of our actions are prompted by comparison, that's the first huge step towards freedom.

Don't you think the women you admire the most are the ones who could care less what others think when they abandon all in worship, the women who aren't "pretty" by cultural standards but they are beautiful in spirit, and the ladies who show up at the table to listen, serve, and bless others because they are so full that they can't contain their joy all for themselves?

I suppose that's a comparison I'm making, here at the end of my story. But it's a comparison of the kind of beauty that isn't vain, but rather the beauty that reflects from the woman who walks in strength and dignity, clothed and provided for by her heavenly Father.

Choosing not to compare with others lightens the load of every day, because we end up laying down burdens we were never meant to carry, and picking up the ones he sets on our shoulders – ones that are light and easy – as we walk with Him.

Run free with me, won't you?

Be yourself and who God created you to be, and quit aspiring to be like that other woman *over there*. Aspire to be like Him, compare His deeds until you can't compare any more, and see if you don't find precious gold.

Healthy Habits – 5 Steps to a Clean Mouth – by Georganne Schuch

Dentist. That word gives a lot of people the heebie-jeebies. Thankfully, I grew up going to a small-town dentist who was kind and funny and never made me feel an ounce of fear. He was married to my high school government teacher and the dad of a school friend. Such is life in Mayberry USA.

Thanks, in part, to Dr. J., I have always been conscientious of my oral health habits. I've always brushed my teeth. I floss religiously. But, as we know, all the prevention in the world doesn't guarantee perfection. Several years ago, two different dentists diagnosed me with severe gingivitis. I insisted that I brushed, flossed, and swished with mouthwash daily. I kind of think they doubted me because every six months I still got the remedial brushing video.

So, after a deep cleaning or scaling (or whatever they call it), I decided their way obviously wasn't working, which might have been their plan all along. Anyone ever consider that dentists stand to lose a lot if you actually improve your oral health? Maybe it's all a conspiracy. Move over JFK.

I decided to chunk conventional oral health habits for something alternative, the politically correct way of saying off-the-wall. Instead of toothpaste with chemicals, I made my own. Instead of mouthwash with alcohol and chemicals, I made my own. I also heard of this really weird thing called oil-pulling, and I thought, "Why not?" So, I did that, too. For four months I did it my way. I didn't figure it could get much worse, and it certainly was cheaper.

I went to the dentist after that trial period, and the verdict was unequivocally positive. I had only two small pockets of bacteria, whereas I'd had 30 or so previously. I even had a lot fewer "borderline" areas. Pretty impressive, as far as I'm concerned.

So, here is what I do:

First, I started using soft toothbrushes. The hard ones, and even the medium ones, erode the gum-line, especially if you get a little heavy-handed with them. This is a case where more is not better.

Second, I made my own toothpaste. There are quite a few recipes on the Internet, but I wanted to stay pretty basic here. I mix coconut oil and baking soda in a 1:2 ratio; in other words, 1 tbsp. oil to 2 tbsp. baking soda. I choose coconut oil because it has natural anti-bacterial properties. To this mixture, I add 2-3 drops Thieves Oil, and about 10 drops peppermint oil. Thieves Oil is the brand name of a Young Living's germ fighter blend. It is named for a blend of essential oils purportedly used by thieves in the Middle Ages to protect themselves from germs while they looted the bodies of the dead. Gives you a warm, cuddly feeling, huh? Peppermint is more than just for taste. It is also a natural anti-bacterial oil. I mix all of this together and store in a glass half-pint jar. It takes less than 5 minutes to make, is almost free, and lasts for about two weeks. Seriously, easy.

Note: In the summer, I use a little more baking soda, and in the winter I use a little more coconut oil. Coconut oil turns solid at room temperature in the winter, but stays very soft, or even melted, in the summer. I want to keep my mixture on the soft side, but not liquid-y. That's why I adjust the ratio slightly depending on the season.

Third, I floss. I'll admit that the fine art of flossing escaped me for a while. I used it primarily to make sure there wasn't any leftover food between my teeth. Gross! Then, I realized there is really a correct way to do it to better clean along the gum-line. Look it up. I'm sure there is a YouTube video for that.

Fourth, I rinse with homemade mouthwash twice a day. This is even easier than the toothpaste! I pour about 4 oz. distilled water into a pint jar, add 2 tsp. baking soda, 2 drops Thieves oil, and about 15-20 drops peppermint oil. The strength is a personal preference, but I warn you, you might feel like a fire-breathing dragon if you use too much.

Finally, my really over-the-top weirdness ritual is oil-pulling. I use coconut oil, since my primary motivation is to fight bacteria. Others report good results with Extra Virgin Olive Oil for plaque. I don't do this daily, but I usually do it weekly. I take about a teaspoon or so of oil and swish it around my mouth for 15 minutes. This is a personal preference again, and something you might have to work up to. First, I did 5 minutes, then 10. I tried to go to 20 minutes, the most recommended, but I just couldn't. 15 works for me. Anyway, I swish this oil around in my mouth and then spit it in the trash can. Don't swallow it! It's full of all that bacteria and yucky stuff you were getting off your teeth. Rinse your mouth with warm water, then brush. That's it!

By the way, oil-pulling is also touted as a natural detoxifier. That's the kind of side-effect I like.

All in all, this experiment in improving my oral health has been very successful. I can easily save $100 annually on mouthwash and toothpaste for a family of seven. That might not sound like much, but it adds up.

I am not a dentist or trained dental professional. Therefore, I am not prescribing any method which will miraculously fix any dental problem. I'm simply sharing my anecdotal, real-life experience. If you have oral health problems, do your own research and make your own choices.

Beauty for Ashes – Where is My Freedom? – Pam Charro

In Isaiah 61:1, Jesus' coming is foretold.

"The Lord…has sent me ... to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners."

Jesus reads these same words about himself in Luke 4.

Yet, so many people are ***still waiting*** for their freedom from various types of bondage.

Why is this true?

Is something wrong with our faith?

If you are like me, you have heard all kinds of answers to these questions. Probably one of my least favorites is, "Because you have so little faith." Or how about, "You just need to read some psalms and really pray and meditate over them." It has never helped me when I have been open and vulnerable about a struggle and been asked, "So how is your relationship with God?" Talk about adding insult to injury! Even well-meaning people can sound so cruel sometimes.

Having a problem that takes a long time to go away is not at all evidence that something is wrong in a person's walk with God!

Struggles are normal for every Christian (yes, even the most spiritual person you know has them), since none of us here on earth has perfect faith, yet. The truth is, God does not always bring about freedom immediately or in the way we might expect. Many different factors are involved: He knows that timing is everything; we are complex beings, and we can only take so much of his mindset at a time.

Other people are affected by our problems as well, and God is working to bring about the most impact at the right time.

And (possibly most important), while we are immersed in our struggle, God is looking at the bigger picture of not just our release, but our faith and attachment in our relationship with him. We need to see who God is for us in this imperfect and sometimes painful life, and being set free right away would rob us of the opportunity to cling to him while we are waiting for the situation to improve. We would not mature in our faith.

So if you are waiting for more freedom, just know that you have a lot of great company, all of us! We are all climbing the same hills and needing more enlightenment and comfort on our journey.

And **it will** be so worth the trip as we finally acquire our freedom…

A Moment in THYME – Enough – by Debra Brown

Have you had a real conversation with the Lord recently?

I can't explain why I hold back, why I sometimes avoid facing Him. My intellect knows that Jesus loves to spend time with me. Yet, I let walls go up. When He breaks through my reserve, it's wonderful! And I determine never to "hold back" again. But I do.

I stopped journaling.

Why? I don't know.

- ✓ Too Busy
- ✓ Too tired
- ✓ Need down time
- ✓ Shame
- ✓ Afraid of what He'll say

Why do I avoid you, Lord?

Shhhhh.

Just rest.

Let me just hold you awhile.

Stop your doing.

Stop your battling with yourself, and just be with me.

Shut out the noise of the world and let your soul be stilled.

Rest, Debra.

Breathe deeply of my peace.

The noise of the room fades as I lay my head on His chest and let His arms enfold me. My tears began to flow as the stress of life melts away and I allow myself to be stilled.

A gentle ticking of a clock behind me soothes my weariness. It is as if I am hearing Jesus' heart beating – for me.

Sure.

Steady.

Never missing a beat.

Shhhhhhh.

Just be with me.

I am enough.

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road - What is Love? – by Lynn Cherry

What is love? Romance, and desire?

What does it look like? A soft sweet kiss, a lingering embrace?

What does it feel like? A warm sensation like melted chocolate?

I'm afraid that when we think love, we think a little too FLUFFY.

Don't get me wrong. I enjoy fluffy love - snuggling on the sofa, kissing my husband in the firelight. Fluffy love is lovely.

But fluffy love is not enough. And sometimes love doesn't feel lovely at all.

We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters..... let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. 1 John 3:16,18

Love Gives - OUCH! God so loved the world that he gave. Jesus gave up his life for us. The kind of love that changes our world makes huge sacrifices. The Bible calls it “real love.” I don't always want to love like that. I risk my easy existence and give up my cozy comfort when I give and love like God loves.

Love Acts - We say "I love..." such a broad spectrum of things. I love puppies. I love pizza. I love people too. But it's not enough to **say** love, especially when it comes to our spouse. I'm not suggesting we stop expressing love with words or speech but we’ve got to back it up with ACTION! I can say I love my husband, but do I demonstrate that love by respecting him as a provider, caring for our home and managing our resources well? If faith without works is dead, is love without action really love at all?

Love Operates in Truth – The truth of our lives is not always pretty. Sometimes operating in truth means confronting a destructive habit or shining light on a blind spot and that can be really uncomfortable. When I reflect on more than 20 years of marriage, I think some of the greatest acts of love we have expressed are the ones that hurt the most. It's far from fluffy for the confronter or the confronted. Regardless of how it feels, loving in truth is vital because truth always brings freedom.

Fluffy love is wonderful and I'm grateful for it. But generous, active, truth-speaking love is what rescued my marriage.

Have you experienced hard, strong love that didn't feel like love in the moment? How did it rescue you?

Date Night Fun - All about Those Stars – by Marcy Lytle

My husband purchased a telescope recently and planned to take me stargazing, only the night turned cloudy. However, we parked atop a hill and tried to look through the scope at the downtown area a short distance across the city. He had a great eye and steady hand, but I had trouble seeing anything at all! However, I loved the thought, and we are looking forward to another night soon of locating the Big Dipper and perhaps catching a falling star!

This month, how fun it will be to set our date nights revolving around stars of all kinds! Here's how it can be done:

Stargaze. You knew this would be the first suggestion, didn't you? Academy, or your local sporting goods store, most likely has a telescope for sale, if you don't already have one. A kid's size will do, for date night. Pick a clear night, drive to a spot away from city lights, set up the tripod and look together. The Old Farmers Almanac publishes free printable sky maps that you can take with you! After stargazing, stop for coffee and pastries as you converse about what you saw, and plan your next time out.

Starstruck. Who are your favorite old-time celebrities? Pick one or two and peruse Netflix to see if you can find an old movie where they "star." Plan your evening at home around this movie. For example, if you love Bette Davis, I'd recommend the movie *All about Eve*, where she shines in the film. Invite another couple over, have everyone dress in black and white, and plan your food around the theatre. Set up a hot dog bar with toppings, include a big tub of popcorn and old-fashioned sodas or vintage candies, and serve it all on black and white paper plates.

Star Genius. Plan an evening where you both work your brains. See which one of you can "outshine" the other by your smarts! Plan your "normal" date with dinner out at a restaurant you've been to before, and perhaps a walk near a familiar coffee shop, before you end up with your lattes. However, before the night begins, print out a set of questions, like the ones we've made for you here. Each one of you fills it out with some of the answers before you leave, and then you chart the distances, costs, etc. as the night progresses to see who wins! The winner gets to pick next weekend's movie choice.

Stars and Stripes. Plan a date around the American Flag, by visiting your local bookstore and grabbing this book from the shelf, 100 American Flags. Look at each page together, because it's full of a great collection of photos! Eat American comfort food at your local diner, savoring each bite. And end the evening making this beautiful Stars and Stripes Forever Dessert together, and enjoy it as you end the evening. It's so delicious!

Star Favorites. Think about your four-star picks for places around town. What is your four-star park, dessert place, fast food drive-thru, overlook, music venue, coffee house, etc. Make a list of at least five of your four-star faves and plan your date around them. As you arrive at each place; stop and share why you picked that place. Perhaps you pick your faves this date night, and let him pick his five faves next month. This makes for a good time, and great conversation! End the night whispering in his ear your four-star faves about him!

Who knew date nights all about those stars could be so fun? It's always wise to look up to the heavens when it comes to spending time with the one we love, whether it's looking at the stars that appear in the night sky, or observing the beauty of the moon as it illuminates the path where we walk, holding hands.

Isaiah 40:26

*Lift up your eyes and **look** to the **heavens**: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing*.

After 30 Years – Are You Still Talking? – by Marcy Lytle

Communication.

That's a big one, when couples get married.

Long conversations on the phone, into the wee hours of the morning, happen often when we're dating. We get to know each other, our likes and dislikes; we ask questions about childhood, and go deeper into theological questions about life and God. We run to the phone when he calls, and retreat to our bedrooms, shut the door, and converse back and forth with our new love. We can't seem to get enough of this man!

And then comes marriage, a mortgage, kids, work, and obligations. Our minds are full, our hands are busy, our bodies are tired, and we realize it's been weeks, months, or perhaps even years since we've had a good talk with our husbands. In fact, he doesn't talk. He sits with remote in hand, falls asleep, and snores. And snores. We have so much to say, but we're too tired to talk when our head hits the pillow, so we stuff it all in until another day. Only that day never comes…

Communication.

That's still a big one when couples stay married for decades.

However, it's no longer long conversations on the phone. We already know each other's likes and what we've done in our past, and theology has transformed into experience, so what's there to talk about? And how do we rekindle that enjoyable evening of talking…and listening…and being inspired by one another?

Here are a few things I've learned, noted, and realized about communication, besides the fact that it takes work, purpose, and honor. But it's so worth the effort!

I've learned not to start a serious conversation late at night, when he's tired. If I choose to do this anyway, it never turns out well. Tired talks end up in misunderstandings and sleeping in the other room. So don't do it. Somehow, tired ears distort what's said and that's not a good thing. Learn to let things go in order to get a good night's rest. And often in the morning, a whole new perspective might arise that will enable you to converse without accusation and condemnation. Which brings me to my next point…

I've learned that accusation is not communication. Accusation is like throwing darts at a dartboard. We want them to stick on the target and stay there, but what really happens is that our husbands (the target) take the darts and hurl them back at us. We both end up full of holes and no one wins the game. If you learn anything after decades of marriage, it's never to start a conversation with, "You are _____, You make me ____."

I've learned to *ask* him what he's thinking, because most of the time he won't think to verbalize it. I've learned so much by asking this question. Sometimes, I've been surprised that he was actually thinking about something that concerned me, or his thoughts were on something at work that was concerning him. And by asking, I then knew how to pray for him.

And many times his answer was, “Nothing,” and strangely that brought me peace, because my mind was full to overflowing. If his mind was at peace, then I gleaned from that.

I’ve learned to tell him what I’m thinking, and not make him guess. God knows our thoughts before we think them, but our husbands do not. And how can they? If I’m tired and don’t want to be bothered, I warn him ahead of time to stay away until I cool down. And he knows to do so, if he wants a happy evening. If I’m lonely or I need a break, I tell him about it (without accusation), and he’s happy to plan a night or day away with me. But if I sit around and hope he’s noticing my whining, my looks, and my pitiful face, I’ll be disappointed.

I’ve learned that when I talk, he likes to problem solve, so I have to remind him or fill him in, if I’m just in the mood to talk and I don’t want a solution, or to at least wait until I’m finished with my story. Guys like solutions, and they really do want to help us out. But as we well know, we often don’t want help. We just want ears to listen, hands to hold, and nod in agreement of understanding. Tell him up front that’s you’re just talking, unless you really want to hear his solution. And if you do, you’ve matured way beyond your years, and you’ve become wise, as well! Our husbands often carry wisdom that is for us, if we will only stop talking and listen.

I’ve learned that he likes to narrate and comment during shows, which drives me crazy. But that’s the way he is. He also likes to tell me stories from the newspaper, or share with me commentary he’s heard on the radio. I might not care to hear it, but I have to make myself stop and listen, because that’s the way HE communicates. It’s not all about him listening to me… And he feels so validated and affirmed when I listen, which is what I feel too, when he listens!

Finally, what in the world do couples talk about, after decades of life together?

- Give thanks for all of the blessings you’ve experienced (including kids and their kids!)
- Share wisdom and inspiration received from the Word and music.
- Talk about the needs of others and then communicate to God together, about those needs.
- Continue dreaming ahead about the future together, goals, and plans for yourselves.
- Converse over a cup of coffee about the things you’ve come to appreciate about each other.

Communication.

That’s a big one, always…

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems: 89 Pounds, and Proud of It – by Kayley Ryan

We first picked “Blue” from a batch of newborn Golden Retriever puppies when my dad lifted the little blue-collared guy up in the air and asked him, “Are you the one?” Blue’s response was perfect: he licked my dad’s nose in adoration.

Placing our order shortly afterwards, we decided his name would be Neo, which means “new” in Greek and “gift” in Tswana (a Southern African language,). And since we’re Matrix fans, Neo meant, quite simply, “the one.”

When we took Neo home after spring break, he was only a few months old. Already though, he had started to develop a personality.

Having no chew toys to speak of (since our last dog, Resa, wasn’t really into chewing things up), we tossed a blue rubber ball in the air to see how Neo would respond. What ensued was so hilarious that I had to get out a camera. Neo, somehow thinking he had hands just like us, attempted to catch the rolling ball with his paws. Each lunging step to catch the ball only made it harder to catch and only made him lose his balance. I was still getting good footage on my camera, but my dad generously pulled Neo into a hug and comforted him.

That was almost two years ago. Now, Neo is a massive, playful golden retriever of 89 pounds. And though he’s fourteen in dog years, he is almost just as clumsy as when we first got him.

His average day is just like any other dog’s: eat, sleep, poop, play, sleep.

But his antics to garner attention never get old. **We used to tell friends that “he’s sweet, but not the sharpest knife in the drawer.”**

Now, I begin to wonder if this dog is just playacting running into walls and burying his head in the sofa and holding down one paw with another while chewing on it. Come to think of it, every adorable or self-deprecating act of Neo’s ends with one of three predictable outcomes: petting from a human, playing with a human, or praise from a human.

If you’re around Neo for the first time, you might be taken aback at some of his unconventional actions:

- He’ll bury his head in your feet
- Rest his chin on the sofa, even if you’re not sitting on the sofa, until you pet him
- Stretch out every limb until his chest is puffed out in an act of bravado
- Stick his rear end in the air while his forepaws and head are on the floor
- Chew on his paws, and if you help him, his tail
- Walk right between your legs, even if he has to squeeze through
- Stiff arm you while you’re scratching his stomach and whip his head around indignantly when you stop scratching his stomach
- Rub his cream-colored fur onto our forest green sofa any chance he can get
- Chew on what he deems suitable: socks, hair bands, a head wrap, plant leaves, my college notes from last week, and his five limbs

- Play with you when he should be collapsing of exhaustion but only walk or jog with you for a tenth of a mile before he lies down on the sidewalk and refuses to move further

I remember one specific occasion when Neo played so hard that he broke off a toenail. Swimming back and forth to fetch his water bottle from the pond, our little golden either didn't understand or didn't care that he was limping every time he returned to us on the shore. My dad carefully clipped the distorted nail, my mom comforted Neo, and I—once again—snapped pictures.

But I do exaggerate some, for Neo has grown out of much of his young clumsiness and has even learned some sophisticated games such as hide-and-go-seek (though he'll run right by you again and again before realizing you're there), sneak (a chasing game in which Neo stealthily steps up to you and then suddenly breaks into a run), and catch-the-Frisbee.

He is rather an amazing dog, despite how much I make fun of him. And his loyalty is touching: he doesn't even eat if we leave the house for longer than a day.

Plopping a rather generous portion of dog food in his bowl inside and filling his water bowl to the brim outside (if you're curious as to why his water is outside but his food inside, it's because Neo drinks water by allowing his fur and face to absorb it, then tracks it on our wooden floor), we left our dog for one-and-a-half days this past weekend while I visited Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. When we returned, Neo was muddy, disoriented, and fasting—but happy to see us.

As silly as my dog is, he deserves more praise and playtime than I give him. After all, he has a PhD in Cuteness & How to Get a Human to Pet You. And more than that, he serves an incredible purpose: to bring joy and fun to all around him. I can honestly say that he is one of the best decisions we've ever made.

Moving Forward – I Get To - by Pam Charro

Should.

I have recently come to realize how much I detest that word. I lived under the bondage of it for many years in both my pre-kingdom life and my Christian walk, and I refuse to spend the rest of my life under its heavy weight.

Don't get me wrong.

I know that there are good *shoulds* and I have to at least acknowledge them. I think what bothers me is that I have often put a period on the end of my *shoulds.* I'm not even necessarily sure why this word has so much control over me, or that anything is to really be gained, I just know that I *should* this or that. So, I let it steal my joy, either by trying to ignore it and feeling guilty, or by doing it but not feeling good about it.

It's hard to stay motivated for very long by something I feel I "should" do but am not excited about.

I am attempting to think of that word much less frequently, because I would like to replace it with the phrase, *get to.* I have decided that if I can't say that I *get to* do something, then maybe it needs to have less power over me.

A good example is I *get to* go to the gym and work out today. I might not always feel like doing it, but I am empowered to make a positive change that will have long-term benefits. I will feel stronger and healthier and look better and probably make lots of friends in the process. I will have the opportunity to be a good example to my kids and probably to other people as well. That sounds like a *get to* to me.

Another example is I *get to* help out with the kids at church this Sunday. It requires energy that I don't always feel I have and I miss the sermon. BUT ... I *get to* give a part of myself to shaping a child's view of God and his kingdom, and have fun with them at the same time. I *get to* give in a way that is so needed and valued, and I may even get to watch those children choose Jesus when they are old enough, knowing that I played at least a small part in that choice. Another great *get to*!

Life is full of so many choices and opportunities. I am hoping that I can value those choices; instead of feeling burdened by them, because there is so much that I *get to* do.

Bush Bean Blessings - Every Nook and Cranny by Tammy Morrison

Spring cleaning...

There's nothing like it!

Just reading those words evokes images and emotions, right? Either you just groaned at the thought of the process, or you whooped in excitement, eager to get your hands dirty and to apply that elbow grease.

We all know that spring cleaning is the process of a thoroughly concentrated effort to sanitize a place...to make every nook and cranny sparkle. If you haven't learned yet, I love to break down words: so let's look at the definitions of *nook* and *cranny*.

A *nook* just happens to be a hidden or secluded spot.
A *cranny* happens to be a small, obscure opening.

Hence, a common term we use when deep cleaning is to ensure we get to "every nook and cranny." Paints quite the picture, doesn't it?

Now, not only am I eager to get to spring cleaning just for the sake of a deep, thorough, spotless undertaking, I have another, even more motivating purpose: my husband and I just listed our house for sale. What an exciting time! Surprisingly enough, our realtor thinks our house looks great and that we don't need to do a thing to make it more appealing. Funny thing is, I don't feel completely comfortable with hyper-attentive eyes peering in on my world, without a complete overhaul! I, more than anyone, am aware of the deficiencies and areas that need tending to and am quite prickly about walkthroughs until I get some things cleaned up and put in order.

Preparing to sell a house is no easy task, particularly one that only goes through a routine pick-up, put-away, wipe-down, and go-on-our-happy-way, okay-it's-done cleaning process. Prepping the house to put on the market (at least for us) requires a hard look at what's what and what needs to be done for it to be ready for public viewing.

It also got me to thinking. **As concerned as I am with ensuring that every nook and cranny of my home is ready for presentation, I should be just as mindful when it comes to my spirituality.**

What do the nooks and crannies of my heart look like?

Am I harboring some hidden muck that hinders me from reaching my full potential?

- I know that we are made righteous through the righteousness of Christ.
- I'm well aware that His mercies are new every morning and that His love covers a multitude of sins.
- I am confident that I have been made worthy because of His worthiness.
- I know that His grace...His unmerited favor...cleanses me from a life of everlasting damnation.

But here's the deal: just as I must periodically clean my home, I must also clean my "house" (or rather allow Jesus to clean it for me).

You see, it's pretty simple, after all: **In the same way our homes get cluttered with stuff and need picking up, so it is with our spiritual lives. There's no avoiding it.** We need Jesus to deep clean us every now and then. Contrary to popular opinion perspective that seems to have lambasted our society in recent times, it's okay to repent and to admit that we've fallen short of the Glory of God. Yes. Yes. Yes. A million times, YES! We ***are*** covered by His grace, but think about these things that you would never do:

Take a shower just once
Brush your teeth just once
Wash your car one time
Fix your hair once
Do your dishes one time
Clean your house once
Change the oil on your vehicle one time only
Clip your toenails or fingernails only once (yikes)

Okay…I'm pretty sure you get the picture.

Why *wouldn't* you want to call on the greatest Helper of all? He **is** the Great Redeemer. He **is** Salvation. Who *wouldn't* want to receive His cleansing and direction?

Here's some food for thought:

"Therefore, [there is] now no condemnation (no adjudging guilty of wrong) for those who are in Christ Jesus, *who live [and] walk not after the dictates of the flesh, but after the dictates of the Spirit,"* Romans 8:1 (AMP).

The key words here are "live" and "walk," which imply a recursive cycle. It's not simply a one-stop-shop and that's it. Life happens. Choices are made time and time again, whether inadvertently, subconsciously, or purposefully, and these affect our journey. We become cluttered and in need of cleaning…again, and again, and again.

How nice would it be if I didn't have to thoroughly clean my house to prepare it for the real estate market. Imagine if it looked just the same as it did when we bought it years ago and that nothing was out of place and everything was the same. Kind of creepy, isn't it? And definitely NOT normal.

You know why?

Because LIFE happened in this place!

We lived in this home!

And hundreds, if not thousands, of times we've cleaned it. And you know what? It's okay. It didn't hurt a thing that we did it one more time.

When life happens (and boy, does it ever), it is inevitable that things need cleaning up: physically AND spiritually. We can either embrace it or avoid it. The choice is ours.

So here's my takeaway for you:

Own the cleaning!

Get some help, if you need it!

It's not a sign of weakness. It's not a sign of a lack of faith. It's an indicator that you're willing (read that word again) to obtain a spick and span, gleaming, neat-as-a-new-pin once again atmosphere. Where do you think the phrase "as good as new" came from? And what a wonderful feeling...

A heart made new and a pristine home - ready for presentation.

Saddle Up - Breaking Free – by Melissa Critz

Brrrrr!!!

Heavy winter coat and gloves were a must in Texas this past January! Riding time for either horse was few and far between. Being that I only have a round pen and no covered arena, the mud and 30 degree temps were winning the battle of being outdoors. I usually go out at least three times a day to feed, pick hooves, fill a trough after pull off the faucet cover for potential freezes, and don blankets if needed. Not much else could be done by this cowgirl, as my fingertips could not handle these cold temps.

The horses were enjoying this forced time off and truly loved the frigid weather. I saw them pouncing around out back just like the deer that frolicked in the same pasture. With little exercise time, I knew there was some stored-up energy in those equines as well. I discovered this just this, one Monday morning.

My Mondays are spent at the local grocery store once I get my two high school kids working on their school work. I am not fond of grocery shopping, so I plan for one shop per week. I had quite a load this particular day and was aiming at getting unloaded and unpacked before the lunch hour, when I could get back to schooling with my two younger children.

Focused and determined, I drove up to the front gate of our property. Domingo was grazing right next to the entrance. I knew he might try to escape, so I opened the gate with the remote in the Suburban and drove in slowly. My plan was to jump out, once the car was past the gate opening, and shoo Domingo away. However, he had other plans! I got in just far enough, and Domingo found his opening.

Whoosh!
He was gone!

I started to get out, but realized the gate was shutting on my vehicle, so I had to move it forward still more. (I still received scratches result on the back panel of the car.) I hurried up to the house in order to rush to a halter and hastily coax my two kids to unload as much as they could, while I went to search for Domingo.

In the meantime, Elijah realizes that his “brother” has escaped and is running panic-stricken all across the front pasture. I had to time my leaving just right so that I wouldn’t have another horse on the loose. Seeing my chance, I gunned the car through the opening and hit the remote button as soon as I was through. Phew! Still only one escapee!

I only had to drive down the ranch road for a few seconds, as Domingo had found the group of horses that he and Elijah “talk” to from across the way, quite often. Domingo was in heaven! He was free! He was kicking up his heels and galloping up and down the fence line with ears perked and head held high! Honestly, it was hard to be upset with him.

Remembering back in 2014, when he had foundered and I didn’t know if he would recover fully, I was happy to see him be a horse – definitely fully recovered - truly a miracle to me.

It took about five tries, but finally Domingo stopped running and stood still for me. The halter was latched on and his freedom of the wide world was ended.

Elijah was none too happy to have Domingo back on the five acres. I knew that Domingo really would rather be at home. Horses know where they are fed and they choose food over all else – they live to eat. But for a moment, Domingo certainly enjoyed something different, something new, something freeing.

My *saddle partner* was working with me on this thought.

We can get in ruts and be stuck in the same ole, same ole. It can be terrifying to look to the other side of the fence as it's out of our comfort zone, but…

Might there be a bit of freedom over there?

Could we experience a change of perspective?

What about a time of refreshment?

Even though Domingo committed a no-no by leaving the property and was quite frightened, he did experience something new, fresh, and exciting. He came home more rejuvenated, and passed that on to Elijah as both horses galloped over the property with much enthusiasm upon Domingo's return.

Being refreshed is needed. Being in a state of freedom from the humdrum of life is paramount.

How can you break free, even for a moment?

- Refresh your spirit-man with a time of worship of our Lord. Read Psalm 145 and worship Him.
- Take mini-breaks by closing off the world and just spend some time talking with Him – sharing your feelings.
- Grab a journal and pour your thoughts into it. Break free from thoughts that hold you captive and give them to Him.
- Find time to get away from the mundane, even if it's just sitting outside and soaking in the sun.
- On a broader note, make plans to get away and enjoy a vacation – big or small.

Refresh yourself in Him. Break free. Enjoy being on the other side of the fence. When you come home, you will then be ready to tackle life again, and you just might spread the freedom bug to others around you, as well!

Real Stories – It's Okay to Forgive Yourself – by Pedro Barrera

When my father passed away, it caught my family by surprise.

He had recently had knee surgery, but other than that, he didn't have any severe health problems. Because of my medical background, I knew that he could have had a clot that had caused his death, but when they performed an autopsy they found the cause of death to be a heart attack. Attending His vigil and funeral were difficult for me, emotionally. My wife, Misty, was due any day with our 4th child, and we had to travel over 300 miles to South Texas. I felt a lot of pain and sadness at the loss of this great man. The entire time, I tried to remain strong for my family. And each time I felt like I was going to break down in tears, my 2 year old son would ask me to pick him up, and holding him gave me great strength. When the feeling passed, he would squirm out of my arms and get back to playing with his toys or sitting next to Misty.

A few weeks after my father's passing, my wife asked me, "What's wrong?"

She explained that I was treating our newborn differently than I had the other kids. She said that when I got home from work I would just walk by our daughter without saying anything, and that I rarely held her or played with her. I had no idea that I had been doing these things. I figured that I was just tired from the new job. A few more days passed, and I began to notice what my wife had been talking about and wondered what was happening. When she mentioned it again, I was finally able to put it into words.

"I felt guilty about my father's death."

We had found out that he died from a massive heart attack, and there was evidence of many previous smaller ones. I felt that since I was there for his preoperative visit, my medical background should have helped me ask the right questions when his EKG was abnormal. Moreover, I recalled that one of my aunts had said that my father couldn't wait to hold his Kayla (my newborn). But my dad died just before she was born, so he never had the opportunity to hold her. I told my wife that I thought I was punishing myself – that if he didn't get to hold Kayla and play with her – neither should I. She then told me that she thought I was depressed and I needed either to fix myself or go to someone who could help.

I decided to fix myself.

I made myself stop and play with my daughter each time I saw her. Slowly, (with my wife's wonderful wisdom), I began to realize how if I trusted God, then I must believe that if it was his plan for my father to still be alive, He would have caused me to speak up. *It wasn't my fault.* I realized then that in listening to my wife, I was allowing God to heal me.

Although I felt "fixed," each anniversary of my father's death my mood changed. For the first couple of years the changes lasted about three months. Even the smallest thing bothered me. I got frustrated with the kids if they didn't put their clothes away or because I couldn't find my shoes. My wife had talked to the kids about it, because they got in trouble for something that normally wasn't a problem. One day, one of my kids said, "Dad, I know you're just yelling because it's when Welo[1] died."

What a crushing blow.

[1] short for abuelo, grandfather in Spanish

Not only was I still carrying some guilt around, but now even my children could tell. **I had come to the realization that it wasn't my fault, so why was I still having this problem?**

As the years passed, the duration of my mood swings gradually lessened, and I was able to limit them to a couple of days. During days that I felt myself changing, I tried instead to go out and pray. Sometimes I felt more at peace, other times it just allowed me to speak to my dad and cry.

About seven years after my dad's passing, I was taking a diaconate formation class on burnout and forgiveness. I wasn't sure how these two topics related, but when we were shown the stages of burnout in ministry, they seemed so familiar. When the instructor said, "You may recognize these steps because they are the same as depression," I felt a flood of emotions overwhelm me. I began to feel anxious, nervous, sad, and a bit afraid. I took a deep breath, and I felt my wife's hand gently grasp mine. Words were not needed. During this class we were asked to periodically share our feelings with our spouses and then with another couple. When it was time to share with my spouse, I couldn't talk, but she knew. When it was time to share with another couple, I figured that I would be quiet. When one of my brother candidates then spoke of his experience, it was different from mine, but sounded so familiar. Through his witness I felt the courage to share what I had just felt.

Sharing my story made me feel as though a bit more of a weight had been lifted.

As the instructor began to talk about forgiveness, I began to think more and more about my father's death. Finally one of the candidate wives spoke up,

"How do we deal with forgiveness when we are the person we need to forgive?"

I had been wondering the same thing, but just wasn't sure how to ask the question. The instructor said that there wasn't an easy answer. I finally stood up to speak. God had been tugging at me all along, but I didn't know why. I told the class about my experience and how my wife had helped me. The words she had spoken to me almost seven years ago still rang in my head, "If you believe in God and trust in His will, then you must trust that if your dad was supposed to live, He would have made you speak up and stop the surgery." I did trust God. I knew that He is all powerful and merciful. God had reached out to me through my wife and had helped me through the difficulty and guilt that I felt. And yet, seven years later, I was still struggling to find peace.

A couple of days went by and I still felt like something was wrong.

What had I missed?

Misty had helped me deal with the guilt that I felt. The class had opened up the reality that I had gone through a depression and come out of it after my father's death. Forgiveness…? What did that have to do with my guilt? I no longer believed that I was the cause of my father's death, or that I could have stopped his death from occurring. I remembered back when he had first passed away. I whispered to my kids as they slept, "I'm sorry." I had spoken the words to my father as well.

Who was I missing?

I finally realized what God had been telling me all along. I still needed to say those words to myself. It seemed odd, but I did it anyway.

“Pete, I forgive you.”

I answered myself, "You’re forgiven.”

A peace came over me.

A few weeks later the anniversary of my father’s passing arrived. I did not feel the stress or anxiety build up. As I walked into work that morning, I realized that I did feel sad. I missed my father, as anyone who has lost a loved one knows, but I didn’t feel anger or guilt. For the first time in seven years I just missed him.

And that felt okay.

BIO

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FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - The Tunnel – by Marcy Lytle

There's a nice train in a park we frequent in my city, and of course the thrill of the ride is going through the dark tunnel, holding up your hands in the dark, and screaming…until you emerge from the tunnel to the light, on the other side. Thankfully, that tunnel is short in distance, and going in – all of the riders on the train know the darkness is temporary. But what if that tunnel ended up being surprisingly long and the thrill of hands up and voices loud waned after a while, and there was nothing but darkness for hours, days, months, or even years? What would the people in the train look like, as they emerged into the light?

I thought about this very thing recently, when I thought about all of us and our problems. We meet someone for the first time and we have no idea where they are, on the train ride of life. Maybe they just emerged from a long period of darkness and their eyes haven't quite adjusted to the light, therefore their walk is a little shaky and wobbly. Others may have been in and out of tunnels all of their lives, hands up, enjoying the ride, and they are full of life, adventure and hope because they've never been stuck in that darkness for very long.

When we start out as children, many of us have an enjoyable life, the sun is shining, the train ride is all fun and games, but then something happens that sends us plunging into darkness. Our parents divorce; or perhaps, one dies. **We encounter disappointment through one of life's hardships, and that fun ride in the sunshine becomes a scary ride in the darkness.** We feel alone, afraid, and aware of the inability to see even our hands in front of our faces, because all light is gone.

Let's go back to the train ride in the park. Do you remember your first ride on a train that goes through a tunnel? If you're sitting by your parent or a "big person" and you're a little kid, you might feel a little bit anxious at the tunnel up ahead. However, the person next to you puts his/her arm around you and assures you that the tunnel will be fun, short, and that you can scream as loud as you want once you're inside. You're also surrounded by a train full of people going on this adventure together, ones who have traveled through the tunnel before and experienced the thrill of the darkness giving way to the light. So in you go, through your first tunnel, and you emerge with hands up, a smile on your face, because you made it! It really was fun, just like everyone said!

That's a picture of the kind of ride we can have if have "connections" with the BIG person upstairs, the one who sits next to us to hold us along the way, and the Father who whispers sweet assurances in our ears.

But that's not the case in so many people's lives. And we have no idea who's been on their train with them, if they were riding the train alone, or even if their train had a conductor. Maybe it's a runaway train or one that's been broken down – right in the middle of the tunnel! Perhaps they had to get out of the train and start walking in the darkness, toward the light. Or maybe they just stumbled and fell, got up and walked again, until they finally caught a glimpse of the light.

The point is that we have no idea.

Imagine the shock and pain on the eyes when these folks finally emerge.

Think about the memories they might have from being alone and afraid for so long.

Can you realize the fear that might grip them, if you try to get them to ride again?

We Christians use words like “darkness” and “light” when we refer to being in sin, away from God’s love, without hope until His love shines and eliminates the darkness. And we often expect those who emerge from that darkness to walk a straight line in the light, once they’ve been “saved.”

I realized recently that the tunnel experience affects all people differently, and that walking in the light isn’t always so easy at first…depending on the length and atmosphere in the tunnel.

I grew up in a church all of my life and was surrounded with others who prayed for me, supported me, encouraged me, and rode with me through every train ride I’ve been on. And I’ve taken some turns and gone through some tunnels, but I had Him beside me, others around me, and I emerged every time on track…into the light…straight on the path again. I was weary, a bit shaken up, but never derailed or abandoned.

However, I have lots of friends who rode trains with different passengers, or even alone, and they were derailed, or the tunnels they experienced were longer than the length of track in the sunshine. I can’t imagine that ride.

And I cannot peer into their tunnel.

But I can be there on the other side to welcome them into the light, hop on the train with them, encourage them to put their hands down and let the screaming subside, and to ensure and encourage them that they won’t be alone when a tunnel appears again. And I can ride with them in the light, pointing out the warmth of the sun(son)shine.

If we could all see inside the tunnel from which these people emerge, we wouldn’t be so quick to push them off the track.

But we can’t.

So we stand on the side of the track as they emerge, and we wait for them. When they step off the train, we walk beside them. And when they get on again, we sit next to them, so that the tunnels that show up on the next track are ones that are not too dark, not too scary, and not experienced alone.

FRESH THYME - Sounds of the Spirit – by Marcy Lytle

I had a grandfather who lived to be 100 years old. He even drove his car well into his 90's. However, in his last few years, he ended up in a nursing home, with very little to say except…he knew the Bible and could quote any verse in that incredible memory of his. He lost his ability to remember much else, but Psalm 100 was one of his favorite verses, and he would quote it often.

On any given Sunday morning, my grandfather could be found strolling the halls of the nursing home, peeking his head into each room, declaring,

"This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." And he did just that.

You see, his body and mind were failing due to age, but his spirit was intact, and the words that were planted there were still strong, fruitful, and deliciously ripe and ready to be shared with all of his friends in the place where he now lived.

Just recently, I attended a funeral of another man, now decades after the passing of my own grandfather. This man was John Hurley, the father-in-law of one of my best friends, and grandfather to several (now grown) kids. We had the privilege of attending his memorial service.

At the service, I learned that this man, who suffered great loss in his later years (the loss of his sweet wife, the loss of his leg, and the loss of his memory) also retained that which was planted in his spirit. Several shared stories were heard of how this man often said, "Circle up!" as he joined hands with his family to pray as they all went their separate ways, after being together for a family holiday or visit. This attitude of prayer and one of thanksgiving to God never left Mr. Hurley, even when everything else failed him. In fact, many of his nursing home attendants showed up at the memorial service, because Mr. Hurley had touched their lives so deeply!

I sat thinking about this man, one who left a legacy of love for his family, and realized that **the most important thing in life is to feed, water, and deposit seed into our spirits.** We have a body that is certain to decay as we approach old age. We can try every new product available to stay young, but our bodies are going to eventually die. We can learn, read, and obtain all of the knowledge about this earth, the sky above us, and how all of it works together through mankind's wisdom, but that too will be lost, as our minds get old and our brains slow down.

- The only thing that will remain intact, unshakable, unstoppable, and irreversible is what we deposit in our spirits.
- If we practice forgiveness, love, and mercy the sounds of our spirit will echo these sentiments as we age.
- If we offer worship, thanksgiving, and praise, the sounds of our spirit will elevate the atmosphere wherever we live in our last years.
- If we believe the Word, his goodness, his character and that his ways are best and true, the sounds of our spirit will enable us to endure with peace, joy, and laughter, even in the middle of pain.

We spend a lot of time in my life focusing on things that are not eternal. Yes, we have to work, eat, clean the house, and of course spend time with those we love. But while we're doing all of those things, we must position our spirits to be fed, nourished, and strengthened daily, if are to emit sounds worth hearing, to those around us – when we grow old.

My grandfather, Charles Blevins, and my friend's father-in-law, John Hurley, are just two examples of those who finished their race with a super high hurdle over the finish line, landing strong, being escorted above to their final award. There are countless other stories of men and women who finish the race with nothing but a sigh and a groan.

What are we doing to make our spirits stronger as we grow older and wiser? We must focus on the part of us that lasts forever, because that's a legacy worth leaving to our kids that will sustain them more than houses, land, books of knowledge, and trophies of success.

What sounds come from your spirit, now?

It's worth thinking about, today…

FRESH THYME – Passion – by Marcy Lytle

Everyone, at least I think most everyone, has a passion for something.

My son and my brother are passionate about sports (who wins and who loses), and all aspects of the game. It doesn't take long to converse with either one of them to figure this out.

My friend is passionate about essential oils. She sells them, she promotes them, she uses them, and she shares her knowledge with others, to bless them. If you're her friend on Facebook, you'll know that oils are her passion.

My nieces and my daughter are passionate about their kids, being a good mom, staying at home to be present, planning fun activities for their kids, and loving all things "mom related." Just visit their houses, and you'll immediately see evidence of this great passion.

A couple of our writers are passionate about books. They love to read, they love to acquire knowledge, and books are something they love to discuss and talk over with a friend, because books take up space on their shelves…and in their minds and hearts.

It can be quite overwhelming if in a day's time we visit several people who are passionate about something and we hear, see, experience, and witness their passions big and bold, in our faces. In fact, this can sometimes be a cause of stress when we arrive home to dirty dishes in the sink, a pile of mail to be sorted through, a daughter who needs a new backpack, a broken faucet that needs to be repaired, and a long list of other to-do's that consume us. *Literally, they consume us.*

And we wonder to ourselves,

Passion? I don't have time to be passionate about a thing, except making it through today!

Or maybe you are passionate about something, but you've hidden it away for now, because there's no time to develop it, no one would be interested in hearing about it, there are no resources to make it happen, and you're too tired anyway – if all things *were* in place for your passion.

What's a passionate girl, in a busy world, to do?

First of all, don't panic. Passions are placed in our hearts by God and he is in control of the timing, the provision, the energy, and the place for our passions to flourish.

Secondly, rest. Your passion doesn't have to match her passion, it doesn't look like his activity, and it doesn't run like their passion does. Your passion is a gift, a thought, a heartbeat, and a burst of fresh air that yes – you might not be able to breathe right now – but you will.

Thirdly, trust. I firmly believe God enables us to release our passions. But sometimes, they're placed in our hearts to burn, to plant deeper, to develop, or just to stew…until his timing. He's

not worried that you're in a place of passion-less space and time, because he owns all time and space. He's got a plan. You can lean on him, not on your own understanding.

Finally, hope. It's easy to lose hope when others around us are experiencing and thriving in that which drives them, and we're stuck on a merry-go-round of family, kids, and life. However, hope keeps passion alive. So don't lose hope. And place your hope in God, the author and finisher of those passions he placed in your heart.

Is she calling you now to share her latest venture, her success story again, and how heaven and earth have moved to make a way for her passion? Rejoice with her.

And rejoice when the conversation is over, knowing that your passion is bubbling and will surface in due time…

FRESH THYME - Because He Said So – by Marcy Lytle

I see FB posts and sayings from time to time that include the phrase, “prayer works,” and people click and comment as to whether or not they agree that prayer works. I believe prayer works, but it’s not due to some formula or well-spoken petition that we’ve learned and recited to God. It doesn’t work because we are so good, and therefore God owes us to answer a few prayers now and then. **Prayer doesn’t work because a certain number of people are praying, or because some have extreme faith to move mountains, although that helps.**

Prayer works because it’s something Jesus told us to do, and obedience works.

A long time ago, I asked God about prayer. I asked him the same questions many people ask, like:

How do you choose which prayers to answer?

Do you spin a roulette wheel, and if it lands on my name, I get the prize?

What am I missing here, Lord?

I asked a whole string of questions like that, trying to figure out how to move the hand of God (in my favor, I might add.) Was I missing part of The Lord’s Prayer, and therefore that missing piece created an incomplete pass to heaven? Was my desperation and the deafening silence all part of the discipline of my loving Father, to ignore my pleas and turn a deaf ear?

So I asked God, “Why did you tell us to pray?”

I mean after all, God knows everything. So why do we need to bring our requests to him, remind him of our needs, and implore him to save the lost, beg him for money, and ask him for direction?

God’s answer was loud and clear to me when I asked him that specific question above about prayer.

“Because I said so.”

As a child, that’s the worst reply to receive from a parent, or so we think. We ask why we can’t stay out after midnight, why we can’t have another candy bar, and why dad won’t let us date until we’re 16. And then comes that proverbial answer, “Because I said so,” to which we have to turn away and make a choice. Are we going to rest in the knowledge that Dad knows best, or are we going to keep badgering him until he caves in, and we get what we want?

There are many commandments in the bible, and it’s not really up to us to understand the why’s of those directives that Jesus gave to each one who follows him.

He said to love our neighbor as ourselves. *Why?* That seems impossible to do.

He said to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and all of our strength. *Why?* Our love is divided between work, family, friends, and pleasure, so why would he require that kind of devotion?

If you're a parent reading this, you know that there are some things you cannot explain to your children because they are too young to comprehend the answer to their question. So you tell them to trust you, obey you, and do it all because you told them to do it. And oh, how it pleases you when they do, and how it hurts your heart when they don't.

However, we want to figure out this prayer thing and how it "works."

I cannot explain how much freer I felt once God told me to pray because he said to do so, and much lighter I feel when I pray out of obedience, instead of out of my cry for help.

Yes, faith is necessary in order to please God.

Yes, the prayer of the righteous is super effective.

Yes, God hears every prayer and is concerned over all of our needs.

And yes....prayer works.

But what does it *work?*

It works out trust and obedience in our hearts, it works out a steadfast walk with the Lord even in the times when he is silent, it works out praise for who He is instead of what he will answer or give, and it works out selflessness in our walk with Christ, as we begin to move from prayers full of petition to prayers full of praise and thanksgiving.

Prayer works.

And we must continue to pray.

Because He said so.

A BUNDLE OF

THYME

April 2015

TIPS

The Dressing – 7 Pieces 7 Ways – by Marcy Lytle

I love to look at magazines, especially fashion ones, and I love it when they picture how to put pieces of an outfit together in different ways for different looks. It's fun to have a few staple items in your wardrobe, and then mix/match them to fit whatever place you're going on a particular day. Once you have a few colors, a few options, and it's all laid out on your bed – you can often see outfits you never thought about trying before!

To start with, it's nice to have a white blouse, a nice pair of crop jeans, a dressy piece (mine is a black jumpsuit), a couple pairs of shoes, then two accessories like a belt and a scarf. If your background is black and white, then your colors can be anything on the color wheel! For our examples, we've chosen yellow as our added color to our black and white pieces.

Here you go….

1. The black jumpsuit with the white blouse worn over it and left open like a cardigan, the belt cinched around the waist, and the black pumps (a classic shoe for every closet!)
2. The crop jeans, white blouse left untucked, colorful scarf draped long around the neck, and black pumps. This outfit is great for shopping or a lunch date for two!
3. The crop jeans, white blouse tucked in, with the scarf as a belt, and the fun yellow shoes to finish off the outfit. Pretty outfit for date night or just because…
4. The black jumpsuit with the blouse worn underneath, scarf around the waist, and yellow shoes. Chic yet polished, ready for work. Then ditch the blouse if you're going out for the evening!
5. The crop jeans, white blouse worn loose and free, and the scarf tied around the handle of your bag. Step into your yellow shoes and you're good to go anywhere at all!
6. The black jumpsuit, no shirt underneath. Wear the scarf as a belt, tying it in the back in the knot, instead of in the front. Step into either pair of shoes for a pretty, fun, evening look!
7. The crop jeans, white blouse tucked in, sleeves rolled up to ¾ length, scarf doubled around neck twice instead of just once so that it's short and smart, just right for weekend fun.

If you just add a tank top in a pretty light blue hue, you can make several more outfits with the above pieces, as well! Keep your color scheme to black and white, with a pop of a couple colors, then mix/match any pieces you love! Try wearing scarves different lengths and in different places, and play with button up shirts wearing them open or shut, sleeves up or down, and tucked or left loose. And finally, shop for good shoes that go with lots of items you already have in your closet – and of course they must be comfortable too!

(Our white blouse is from H&M, the jumpsuit from Marshalls, the crop jeans from New York & Company, the belt from Target, the scarf was a gift – and the shoes are from Ross!)

Seven 4 You - Sipping Thyme – by Marcy Lytle

Of course, I see thyme related things, signs, and articles everywhere since this herb is part of the title of this magazine. And one such place is in drink recipes. Have you tried thyme in your drinks? I'm sure you've cooked with it, but it's so much more versatile than I ever realized. Thyme is also one of my favorite herbs, not only because of its flavor, but because it's so easy to pull off the stem, and it's quite fun to do, too!

Below are seven thyme drink recipes you might want to try out this month, as you start enjoying your more spring-like meals, perhaps even eating outdoors when the weather is warm enough. Enjoy!

Citrus Thyme Iced Tea (recipe courtesy of Lipton Tea0

4 cups boiling water

2 family size tea bags

1 tsp fresh thyme

1 cup orange juice

¾ cup water

2 T lemon juice

2 T lime juice

Pour 4 cups boiling water over Lipton® Iced Tea Brew Family Size Tea Bags and thyme. Brew 5 minutes. Remove Tea Bags and thyme. Stir in remaining ingredients and chill until ready to serve. Serve in ice-filled glasses and sweeten as desired.

Ginger Thyme Tea (food.com)

1 lemon, juice of, plus half of the lemon rind sliced

½ cinnamon stick

3 sprigs fresh thyme chopped

3 cm fresh ginger, grated

3 tsp honey

3– 4 cups boiling water

In your favorite teapot combine the lemon juice, rind, cinnamon, thyme, ginger and honey. Pour in the boiling water, cover, and let stand 5 minutes. Pour into a jug and place in fridge to chill.

Herbal Soda (recipe courtesy of Martha Stewart)

½ cup sugar

¾ oz fresh herbs –thyme, basil, lemon verbena, mint

1 tsp lemon juice

Ice for serving

Club soda

Put sugar and 1 cup water in med saucepan over med heat, bring to simmer, stirring til sugar dissolves. Remove from heat and add herbs, cover and cool completely. Pour syrup through a fine sieve into a small bowl, discarding herbs. Stir in lemon juice, refrigerate. Fill glasses with ice, 2-4 T syrup, and top with club soda and stir.

Thyme & Raspberry Lemonade (adapted from Amanda's Fresh Raspberry Lemonade)

7 medium lemons

1 cup fresh mashed raspberries

1 cup sugar

6 sprigs of thyme

Reserve ¼ cup of sugar and set aside. Pour rest of sugar into a medium saucepan and add one cup of water. Stir and bring to a boil, dissolving sugar. Turn off heat and cool.

Pour the ¼ cup of sugar over the mashed raspberries and let sit for 10 minutes. While waiting, cut six lemons in half and extract the juice, cut the seventh lemon into slices and set aside.

Pour the lemon juice into a 2 qt pitcher, push the berries through a strainer with the back of a spoon and pour the berry juice into the pitcher with the lemon juice. Pour in the sugart water and top off with water. Stir and add the sliced lemons, and refrigerate.

Cucumber Lime Water (from Gourmandize)

1 liter spring water

6 thin slices of cucumber

A sprig of thyme

Couple lemon slices

Place cucumber and lemon to the jug of filtered water. Let sit in the fridge for a couple of hours for the flavors to infuse. Enjoy! (Gourmandize)

Honey Thyme Tea (Daphne Oz)

1 cup water

3 sprigs fresh thyme

2 T raw honey

Bring water to a boil. Add thyme and step in water for 10 minutes. Pour through a Strainer to remove thyme, stir in honey and serve.

Citrus Thyme Punch (My Diary of Us)

3/4cup freshly squeezed citrus (2 grapefruit, 2 navel oranges, 4 blood oranges)

½ cup thyme simple syrup (4 sprigs thyme, ½ cup agave nectar and ½ cup water brought to a boil, cooled and strained)

4 cups water

Sparkling water

Combine citrus juice, thyme simple syrup and water in a pitcher, refrigerate. When ready to serve pour over ice and top with soda water or sparkling water.

Selah's Style – Springin' It – by Selah Irwin

Spring has sprung!

So, I decided to head to my local Target store to see what is in style for the season.

There are many colors that I enjoy putting on, but these seem to be the most popular for this spring.

I saw a lot of peach, pink, yellow and green. It was quite hard to put all the colors together and into a fashion, but here is how I pulled it off.

I layered the tank tops to add extra color and sparkle. Even though it is not Valentine's Day, I loved the heart pants that tie all the colors together, so couldn't resist! The head band is actually a scarf, but I thought it looked cute this way.

Of course sundresses are out! Every little girl wants to wear a dress in spring! Flowers bloom in the spring, so I decided a dress with flowers is a smart decision! I thought my sun hat and purse made the outfit look presentable for spring.

Jumpers are not really my thing, but they seem to be very popular this year. This one goes with the flower theme. I added the jean jacket because I thought it might be a cute accessory. The hat just looks plain adorable!

As much as we want to start wearing all the warm weather clothes, it does still happen to rain! You have to be prepared so, why not look cute? Turn that frown upside down and wear matching rain boots and a jacket to cheer up any rainy day that comes your way!

Happy Easter, and smile on!

Peace out

The Fearless Kitchen - Brunch 101- by Christina Vetter

Not only is spring weather rolling in with full force this month, Sunday the 5th brings one of my favorite holidays: Easter. Whether your celebration is consumed with hiding and finding plastic eggs, dyeing eggs to all sorts of colors and patterns, or simply enjoying your family's company, chances are you're going to be making a special meal for the occasion. Many people would love to host an elegant Easter brunch after church, but find the thought alone to be overwhelming. ***Brunch sounds so fancy, so snooty, so out of reach for many home cooks, but it doesn't have to be.*** That's why this month I'm sharing some brunch tips that won't require an Executive Chef's certification to prepare. Just make sure your table covers a couple basics.

First on the menu is the drink department. While iced tea and lemonade are always a crowd pleaser, if you want to take your meal up a notch, have some specialty drinks to offer as well. Mimosas (orange juice and champagne mixed together to taste) are a brunch staple and many people love them, but if cocktails aren't your thing, serve some **Ginger Fizz (recipe below).** These are elegant and a great non-alcoholic option for the whole family. Fresh, hot coffee is always a great thing to have standing by as well.

For the meal, remember brunch is a mixture of breakfast and lunch, so make sure you have a couple elements of each. While biscuits and gravy or breakfast tacos are some of the greatest breakfast items out there, opt for something a little less heavy and a little more upscale. Since you'll be having more than one food to munch on, a quiche or strata (see **Bacon-Cheese Quiche recipe below**) is a nice and light option that will allow room to taste each of the other dishes. Similarly, on the lunch side, try to keep it light as well. A nice pesto and bow-tie pasta, chicken salad with mixed greens, and even finger sandwiches are all good options. Another possibility for the lunch side of the meal is an arrangement of finger foods and appetizers. **Spinach and Cheese Swirls (recipe below)** are a great choice as well as any other warm hors d'oeuvres. Whatever you choose, just make sure the main courses have a couple of both breakfast and lunch flavors and have both hot and cold items.

Lastly, and some say most importantly, do not have a beautiful spread of food without offering something sweet to finish the meal. **Madeline cookies (recipe below)** are a beautiful dessert to offer if you have a Madeline pan. If not, just carry the same theme from the meal over to dessert: keep it light and elegant. Glazed lemon cookies, fruit with whipped cream, or even coffee and dark chocolate biscotti are all excellent options as well.

I hope these tips and recipes can help you create a beautiful and elegant brunch for your Resurrection Sunday celebration or your spring gathering this season!

Bacon-Cheese Quiche **Difficulty:**

Serves 8

Recipe courtesy of *Martha Stewart Living*

Ingredients:

All-purpose flour, for rolling

1 homemade or store-bought single-crust pie dough

1 tablespoon unsalted butter

2 cups medium diced yellow onion (from 1 large onion)

Coarse salt and ground pepper

6 large eggs

3/4 cup heavy cream

3/4 pound bacon, cooked and crumbled

1 cup shredded Gruyere cheese (4 ounces)

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Lightly flour a rolling pin and work surface and roll out dough to a 12-inch round. Place in a 9-inch pie plate, fold overhang under, and crimp edge. Place a sheet of parchment paper over dough and fill with pie weights or dried beans. Bake until edge is dry and light golden, about 20 minutes. Remove parchment and weights.
2. Meanwhile, in a large skillet, melt butter over medium-high. Add onion, season with salt and pepper, and cook until light golden, 8 to 10 minutes. In a medium bowl, whisk together eggs and cream. Add onion, bacon, and cheese and season with 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon pepper. Whisk to combine, pour into crust, and bake until center of quiche is just set, 40 to 45 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Ginger Fizz **Difficulty:**

Serves 8

This recipe originally came from Bon Appetit Magazine, however it called for Prosecco sparkling wine instead of ginger-ale. Being pregnant, I substituted the wine for ginger ale. I personally like the ginger-ale better, not to mention this recipe is now fit for the entire family. Serve these in champagne flutes, they are beautiful and taste great!

Ingredients:

One 3” piece ginger, peeled and thinly sliced
½ C sugar
Ginger ale chilled
1 orange or Clementine, very thinly sliced

Directions.
-Bring ginger, sugar, and ½ C water to a boil in a small sauce pan.
-Simmer for 5 minutes. Allow to cool, and strain syrup into a small bowl. Discard ginger.
-Pour ¼ oz ginger syrup into each glass. Gently mix in ginger ale to taste.
-Float a thin slice of orange in each glass. Serve immediately

Madeleine Cookies **Difficulty:**

Makes 12 cookies
Recipe courtesy of *Bon Appetit*

Madeleine cookies are simple to make and taste delicious. What more convincing is needed? The freshness of the lemon flavor matched with wispy powdered sugar topping is just divine. These are best served warm, but if you don't have a chance to serve them right out of the oven, they are equally delicious at room temperature.

Ingredients:
¾ C flour
1 tsp baking powder
½ tsp salt
2 large eggs
1/3 C sugar
1 Tbsp light brown sugar
1 Tbsp honey
2 tsp grated lemon zest
6 Tbsp melted butter
Powdered sugar as needed

Directions:
-Preheat oven to 400 F.
-Whisk flour, baking powder, and salt together in a small bowl.
- Whisk eggs, both sugars, honey, and lemon zest in a medium bowl until smooth.
-Add dry ingredients to wet until just incorporated, then whisk in melted butter.
- Lightly grease Madeleine pan with butter or oil and dust with flour, tapping out any excess.
-Fill each shell of pan about 2/3 full, and bake until edges are golden brown and centers are puffed and lightly spring back when gently pressed, about 8-10 minutes.
-Tap pan against counter to release cookies and dust with powdered sugar. Serve immediately if able.

Spinach-Cheese Swirls **Difficulty:**

Makes 20 pieces
Recipe courtesy of Pepperidge Farm

These are a great addition to any spread. They're flaky and wonderfully cheesy. YUM!

Ingredients:
½ of a 17.3 oz pkg puff pastry sheets (1 sheet)
1 egg
1 Tbsp water
½ C shredded muenster or Monterey Jack cheese
¼ C grated parmesan cheese
1 green onion, chopped
1/8 tsp garlic powder
1 pkg (10 oz) frozen chopped spinach, thawed and drained well

Directions:
-Thaw pastry sheet at room temperature for 40 minutes, or until easy to handle.
-Preheat oven to 400F. Lightly grease two baking sheets.
-Stir egg and water together in a small bowl. In a separate bowl, stir together muenster cheese, parmesan cheese, onion, and garlic powder.
-Unfold pastry sheet on lightly floured surface. Remove parchment paper. Brush with egg wash. Top with cheese mixture and spinach.
-Starting at short side closest to you, roll up like a jelly roll. Cut into 20 (1/2") slices. Lay slices flat on baking sheet and brush with egg wash.
-Bake 15 minutes or until golden brown. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Tried and True – Daily Bread – by Marcy Lytle

Reading the Word is essential to staying away from depression, keeping ourselves from believing lies, and falling into the pit of despair when circumstances are less than ideal. However, as busy moms, working women, and ladies who rarely have time for leisure, soaking in that goodness of the truth is as elusive as finding time for a long hat bath, without interruption. Sometimes, if we can fit one in, we might show up at a Bible Study once a week if a kid's not sick, our home is not a wreck, or we can find something to wear!

But reading the Word daily? *Are you kidding?*

Since the Word is like bread, and it's life giving and all sustaining, here are a few suggestions on how to digest it daily, so that we're not running on fumes by the end of each evening as we fall over into our beds at midnight. We've broken it down into seven ideas, so that you can pick and choose what fits your family the best for each day of the week.

Sunday: **Family devo time**. Gather your entire family together for devo time before bed. This may seem impossible to do, but it's worth the effort. Even if there's no time for a full lesson, assign one person to find a verse and bring it to share, before you pray together and hit the hay. (see our column "A Night to Remember" for at least one devo idea for the month!)

Monday: **Page a Day Calendar.** This is a great thing to set up in the middle of the kitchen table, where everyone can see it each day. If you're the first one in the kitchen (which you most likely are); tear off the page and read the verse of the day. Meditate on it for one minute, like a warm gulp of water when you rise, and feel it go down deep.

Tuesday: **Sing Praise.** When you're driving in the car, turn off the radio, have the kids put away their phones and earbuds, and sing a few praise songs together. Pick one that comes to mind, one that is full of scripture that is familiar to all. This will sink into the ears and hearts of each one of you!

Wednesday: **Refrigerator Talk.** This really cute set of scripture magnets is super affordable, and there's one for each month of the year. This way, whenever we step to the fridge, we see this verse that we can read over and over again, every day of the month, until we put up the next magnet. By end of the year, our refrigerator will have a nice montage of the truth about who God is and how much he loves us!

Thursday: **Phone a Friend**. Remember that option on the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* When you're stuck and you have that one day a week you really need a boost, text or call a friend. Find one person that can do the same back to you, and you're set. Make sure it's not a person who feels they have to then talk on the phone for an hour!

Friday: **Music to Your Ears.** While you're cleaning, taking a break at work, or even while making dinner, put music on to fill the house and fill your ears. Once again, ask everyone else to put aside their electronic devices, games, phones, etc. and fill the house with worship music full of scriptures. Chris Tomlin is a favorite here in the city where I live, because he's from Austin. His songs lift the spirit as the words echo the greatness of God.

Saturday: **Speak it.** This day is usually packed full of errands, games, grocery buying, visiting family, etc. Maybe all you have time to do is speak a verse out loud so that you hear it, you say it, and you attach your faith to it. Ask God to bring to mind one verse from the other days this week, or a totally different one, and speak it out loud over your home, your kids, your husband, and over your own heart. Then choose to believe it.

There you have them: simple, yet effective, ways to stay healthy in the Word. It only takes putting these things into practice on a daily basis, and before long, you'll be yearning and looking forward to the morning so that you can see what's set before you at His table, while he dines with you and passes the Bread…

HOME

Practical Parenting – Let Them Find It – by Georganne Schuch

“The sun will come out tomorrow, so you gotta hang on 'til tomorrow, come what may.”

That's a good thought for spring. In Texas, you can always count on the sun coming out soon, especially the closer you get to June. By August, you might begin to hate it, but the sun shines, nevertheless.

Annie is referring to her “hard knock life” full of frustrations and seemingly insurmountable challenges. But her sunny disposition shines in stark contrast to the gloomy attitudes of her acquaintances. Her example shows us that if we allow our emotions to rule us, the dark times might overshadow the bright spots. And yet the purpose of the dark times is to make the bright spots all the more enjoyable.

Perhaps the best gift we parents can give our children is not more toys, electronics, play dates, educational opportunities, or enrichment activities. **Perhaps the best gift we can give them is the chance to let them experience bad days.** Days where nothing goes right for no other reason than life happens. And rather than manufacture a bright spot, let them find it for themselves.

I am the guiltiest of the guilty in trying to smooth out my children's lives. Let's patch up that hole, so she doesn't trip. Let's go around this hill, so she doesn't get tired. Let's grade this bumpy stretch, so she doesn't get discouraged. And I've found that this produces a tendency in my children to want everything to be easy all the time. Their attitude is that if something is too hard, maybe it's not worth the effort. That was never my intention, of course. Like any parent, I just wanted them to avoid my mistakes, only I created a whole new set of problems.

*So, now I put forth the challenge to **them.***

This is the problem.

*What are **you** going to do about it?*

*How are **you** going to tackle it?*

For instance, we live in a small town with little employment opportunity for teens. So, rather than my young teen driving 30 minutes or more to find a part-time job, I suggested several opportunities that she can do on her own. A nearby town has a flea mart with tables for rent. What can she and her sisters sell at the flea mart a few times a month? She has seven years piano experience. Can she teach beginning piano? How can she get students?

I have also drawn back from interceding for them in conflict, except in prayer, of course. Got a problem in class or with a friend? Who should **you** talk to? What should **you** say? My daughter recently felt that she wasn't getting recognition for her efforts in a class. Since I'm not in her class, I couldn't give her good feedback on why this was happening, but I gave her suggestions on how to approach the subject with her teachers, as well as what I thought might be happening based on my own experience. Then, I left it with her. Her choice. Did she want to improve, or did she want to keep the status quo? I'm happy (and relieved) to report that she met the challenge head-on. She talked to her teachers and took their feedback, which was similar to mine, and put it into practice. She immediately saw some improvement in her own work, as well as how it was received in the class.

By encouraging my children to rise to the challenge, rather than give in, they seem to feel less frustration and more optimism about not only problems, but also about life, in general. They seem less prone to complain and more willing to look on the bright side. It's not perfect yet, but then I can hardly expect of them what I have not yet attained, I suppose.

Life is filled with challenges, and just like *Annie,* we would all do better to remember that the sun will shine soon.

"*Tomorrow is only a day away*," after all.

I Don't Do Teens - How Do They Bend? – by Marcy Lytle

Some trees grow straight as an arrow, with uniform branches on every side. These are the ones that get picked for Christmas, to be decorated for all to see. Some trees have a super large trunk, with long branches that almost touch the ground, allowing even small children to jump up and rest or swing their legs on a hot summer day. And there are other trees that bear so much fruit, they scream "Pick me" because their limbs are full and heavy. What about the trees that just look pretty in their own season, offering beauty in their changing colors?

Our children are no different than these trees, and by the time they hit the teenage years, they're pretty much bent in some direction. If we take the time to observe the way they're bent, or the way they're growing, we can gently and sweetly encourage that bent…or redirect it…whichever path we need to take.

As an example, we can see some things in our kids when they are toddlers. Some enjoy sitting to draw and create for hours, while others want to be up punching things and running up walls. Obviously, we cannot allow either child to succumb to all of their impulses by drawing on every piece of furniture, or climbing up every high building, because that would certainly have a horrible outcome. Kids left to just "be themselves" in every way, are not any more adjusted to adulthood than those kids who are steered and prodded to be what their parents want them to be. There has to be a balance, or our kids will break…or bend too far…and lose their footing, uproot, and fall over.

By the time our kids are teens, we can ask ourselves a few questions:

What interests do they have? (Are these healthy or not?) – Perhaps they love to read, love to create, or love music. Rather than squelching these passions by prohibiting all behavior that isn't "godly" we can provide outlets for them to thrive, to steady themselves with the truth of the Word, but to share their passion in places where others are blessed. Maybe they can begin playing their music in a coffee shop. Perhaps they can volunteer to read to children at public libraries, or create in the kitchen with new recipes for the family to enjoy. We can give them places to thrive.

What are they good at doing? Maybe we see that our daughter is great at keeping her room organized and neat, and our son excels in communication skills. Perhaps neither of them realizes these strengths. We can point them out, commend them for their strengths, and look for ways to bless them when they do a good job. And we can certainly pray for God to use their strengths to bless others.

Whom do they admire? Most young teens idolize a singer, an actor, an athlete, or some other "well known" celebrity they hear or see on social media. Who is it, and why do they admire them? We can communicate and talk with our kids about the things they admire in others, and pick out the good. It's then up to us to steer them towards that good, in light of God's word in their lives. If they are more attracted to the fame, the glitz, and the glamour of being a "big shot," we can discuss what a big shot looks like as a Christian – serving one another. And we can talk

about how fame doesn't last, but giving to others is eternal. In other words, we can talk to our teens!

How do they like to spend their free time? Given a day off, what do our teens do? Are they outside in the park, at the malls shopping, or moping on their bed, bored and listless? These activities are sometimes mimicked by watching us in our free time. We can make sure our teens know that it's okay to rest and not be busy all the time, and it's okay and healthy to take time off to have fun. And we might notice that sometimes our teens, although they may never ask, just need time to hang with us and be themselves, spill their guts, and be a kid again.

When are they most attentive and reliable? Does your son perk up about 11pm and get another burst of energy? Is your daughter up before 6am, with list in hand, ready to start her day? As our teens mature, we can talk with them about how they learn, what time of day is their best time for achievement, if they like to be communicated by text or face-to-face, etc. (A lot of moms are so thankful for texting these days, because their sons will actually communicate with them!) Some of these observations can help us as we suggest summer jobs or part-time jobs where they might thrive and enjoy working.

How do they learn best? My husband is super visual. Give him pictures to go with your talks, and he'll retain what you've said forever. I learn through hearing well, and I catch underlying meanings, phrases and the way the tone of voice is used, and I catch on through what's said into my ears, with or without visuals. Our kids are no different. If your teen opens the paper manual with his new electronic device and reads it cover to cover, take notice. If she tosses the manual and goes on line to watch a Youtube video, observe this. The way our kids learn can help us when we teach them to drive, talk to them about dating, or help them look for colleges.

All trees are not the same, and how our world would be so boring if they were. A neighborhood lined with a variation of color, low and high limbs, straight and bent trunks, makes for a beautiful place to live.

It's no different with our teens. If we provide the *son*shine, we water often, and we trim, prune, and direct their limbs, we can end up with a gorgeous addition to the landscape. But if we leave the tree alone, kick it when it's tender, chop it down when it blocks our view, or yank on its limbs when we're just too tired to care, we will end up with a scraggly bush of a tree, good for nothing but taking up space and ruining the landscape.

How are your teens bent? How can you encourage that bend, or redirect that hanging limb? It's never too late to help them dig their roots deeper, lean in towards the Son, and put on new leaves as the seasons change….

Life as We Know It – The Legacy – by Erica Simmons

Legacy

Every month I tell myself I am going to have this article done on time. I feel guilty when I don't, and this month was no different. This month's reason was my dad had a health crisis which became critical the morning the article was due. Even as I write this, he is still fighting, the outcome unclear, and I once again need an extension. The funny thing is the story was made possible because of the experience of going home.

For the first time in over a decade, all of my brothers and sisters were home at the same time. It was a time of rallying around my dad, possibly for the last time, as his body began to fail him. A lifetime of living by his rules regardless of the outcome was finally taking its toll on his body, and as I later reflected, on his children.

My Earthly Legacy

There are seven of us, and as I think of each one of my siblings, I am always shocked by how different we each are, yet there are things we all have in common. We all bear the burden of our father's legacy. Legacy, as defined by dictionalry.com, is something handed down from the past from an ancestor. A legacy can be mental, physical or spiritual.

Mentally, my dad was one tough guy. He was raised in a world where his word was all that was needed to make a deal. He believed in honesty and hard work. He was a great provider and took care of his family. He had a toughness about him that got him through some hard times throughout his life. When I was 4 or 5 years old, he suffered an injury at work. A machine he used at work cut off his four fingers on his left hand. This was before the medical advancement that can now salvage severed limbs. In order to have the skin graft to take, the doctors sewed his hand into his side for six weeks. He was warned that moving the wrong way could kill him. The strength it took to have such control for six weeks like that, I see in hindsight that it was tremendous. Throughout this life he overcame cancer, heart surgeries, and multiple diabetic related limb amputations. I have not only used this legacy to endure and get through my own life trials and challenges – but I have witnessed it in my siblings – as life is an equal opportunity challenger to us all.

My dad's physical legacy of diabetes, heart issues, and high blood pressure, has plagued him most of his life, most of which were handed down to him from his predecessors. My dad's current health issues are a direct result of his diabetes and his poor diet, despite the many warnings to change. Diabetes has slowly taken down my siblings from oldest to youngest over the past 5-10 years. I'm guessing that my brother (who is two years older than I) is next in line if he does not change the way he takes care of his body. I too have to make some choices in order to avoid not only allowing that legacy to become mine, but also that of my children.

We have all sinned and come short of His glory (Romans 3:23)

My dad was no different than any other man that was born with a sinful nature, and he had his struggles. Sadly, his biggest one has become his spiritual legacy, one that each of his children at one time or another have taken part in.

As we celebrated my aunt's birthday, I looked around at three generations and my heart broke at what was represented spiritually in our family. My siblings and I had unknowingly continued a legacy that had suddenly become glaring and obvious to me as I looked around the room at the fruit of his legacy in our lives – fruit that is also being born by my nieces and nephews. My own children have skimmed the surface, yet have not fully been immersed with this legacy. I had become fearful that they too would inherit this curse, as I have failed to fully overcome it myself. My heart was heavy and all I wanted was to leave; but our God, who is ever faithful, delivered yet another *life as I know it* moment.

You see, **my earthly father's legacy (while being a part of my inheritance), is not one that I have to accept**. I can carry on in me and plant in my children the wonderful parts of the legacy my earthly father offers me. I can reject the parts that bring death, even if I have previously partaken in them. I have a choice. No part of my dad's legacy is automatically manifested in my life.

Our Heavenly Legacy

Today I invoke heaven and earth as a witness against you that I have set life and death, blessing and curse, before you. Therefore choose life so that you and your descendants may live! (Deuteronomy 30:19 NET)

God in His greatness also gave us a legacy. One that only got better with the death of our Savior on the cross, because then it became personal. We have before us our earthly legacy and our heavenly legacy, and we choose DAILY which one we inherit.

It is this earthly legacy that I referenced in my last article, my struggle with choosing daily to take up my heavenly legacy and create a legacy for my children that is in line with my heavenly Father's. With faith, I CAN choose my Heavenly Father's legacy and walk away from my earthly father's legacy.

When walking away from a legacy that is so rampant in our family and making the conscious choice to take up our heavenly legacy, it can cause familial stress. It is not pleasant, as I found out when I had to explain to my brother (who I shared so much of my childhood with), why I wouldn't let Jerimiah spend time with his daughter. I will gladly endure difficult discussion to protect the heart of my children, as this life is not about the days on earth, but our days in eternity. This became all the more important to me as I looked at my children and desired for them to have a better choice than turning their back on one, to choose the other.

I see in so many of the families in our church where earthly legacy is a foundation, not a hindrance, to help the next generation embrace their heavenly legacy. As a parent, this is what we should strive to create. It is not easy when you are the first generation in your earthly family

to create such a foundation. There are times when I have such fear for my children and their futures that I worry about the impact of not only my earthly legacy, but their dad's as well.

Thank God, I don't have to labor to give them their futures, I simply have to have faith and stand on God's word. I rebuke the enemy when he attacks, knowing the victory is already mine.

Today I choose life, for myself and for my future generations.

Simple Solutions – 5 Reasons to Procrastinate – by Georganne Schuch

Procrastination. The ugly word that multi-taskers and efficiency gurus hate. Sure, procrastinating on doing the laundry may find you in a panic when a clean shirt can't be found five minutes before you have to walk out the door. Or procrastinating on dinner plans leaves everyone hungry at 6 p.m. because the main ingredient is still in the freezer. *Not that I have ever done that…*

All procrastinating is not bad, however. Considering approximately 5,489 pieces of information fly at you every day, do you really need to remember it all and do it all at that very moment? Of course, not. If I'm taking a trip in a month, why do I need to constantly obsess over the plans today? Sure, a few details may need to be secured in advance, but not *everything*. So, I put that off, procrastinate until it's time to get ready, because packing now will leave me with a limited wardrobe until it's time for the trip. And that isn't going to be helpful.

Email? Totally procrastinate. While I would like to keep my email inbox under 30 emails, that *ain't happenin'.* I have blog subscriptions I like to read but can't keep up with every day. So, they pile up for a few weeks until I have extra time while waiting for one of my children at some event. Perfect. I can knock out three, four, or even five at a time. I delete the ones that are of only mild interest and file the ones I might like to refer to later. That's procrastination on another level. Leave it to me to make this a multi-step process.

All right, so procrastination is really just strategic planning. I'm a closet planner. In a glass closet, I guess, because it's not a well-kept secret. I drive my husband crazy planning things that don't really need to be planned, but with five kids it's a survival skill. However, I am a procrastinator, as well. **While I thought procrastination was a huge character flaw that must be contained, I finally realized it was also a necessary survival skill.** If I didn't procrastinate on things that could wait, I'd lose my mind and send everyone else running for cover when I get on a getting-things-done binge.

So, I legitimized procrastination. Here is my survival-level technique for not getting things done:

1. If it doesn't affect me or my personal subjects at this very minute, let it go. *Everyone might be making summer plans, but I'm just trying to live through today. I'll think about summer when it gets here.*

2. If the sky won't fall when it's not done today, put it off. *Tickets might go on sale today, but if the sale lasts a week, I can wait to make sure our schedule will work.*

3. If someone is asking a question that really has no meaning or consequence and will require a 20-minute discussion just to understand the real question, ignore it. *If I cut my hair, should I leave my bangs long or do something else with them? Who cares? I have to get dinner on the table!*

4. If it has a deadline more than a week away, move it down the to-do list and forget about it until the reminder comes up again. *Child's birthday next month? I've got three weeks before I have to plan something. Get thee to the end of the line.*

5. If it's not my problem, let someone else deal with it. *Your problem is not my problem. Bless your heart.*

The trick to procrastination is knowing what can wait and what should be done immediately. That takes a lot of practice and a lot of apologies for miscalculating. Basically, it boils down to, if it needs to be done, do it. Dishes and laundry? No discussion. If it can wait without causing a rift in the space-time continuum, then put it off for a day or two. It might just dissipate on its own, leaving you with less

things to deal with.

A Night to Remember – Try Adding Color – by Marcy Lytle

The colors of spring are beautiful, aren't they? I think one reason the colors make us stop and look is because they come after the bleak grays of winter, and that makes them so much more appealing and beautiful!

Sometimes, our lives seem sort of dull and gray, just like the landscape of winter, when nothing that exciting is going on, we're bored easily, or we just feel like our lives aren't as exciting as *their* lives, over there!

Just like color adds so much to our food, our paintings, our landscape, and our clothing, so does color in our lives in other ways add so much to make us smile, play happily, and serve joyfully, every day!

Preparation: *You'll need simple pages from a coloring book for each person participating and crayons, vanilla ice cream ready to be served (with sprinkles or M&M's available), the TV remote, a room with the door shut and lights off, and one person wearing a solid color top (with a colorful scarf hidden under their chair). This devo would be great around a kitchen or dining table. Finally, have a camera available for photos.*

Hand out the page and crayons to each person. Why do we learn to color? It's because the black and white outlines are nice, but the color adds life to the picture! (*Ask each one to start coloring their picture and share*.) Look at all of our pictures, colored differently, yet so beautiful! Having God in our hearts is just like these pages. When we invite Jesus to come and be our Savior and Friend, **he colors our heart with kindness, love, and compassion for others** – so that when others are around us – they exclaim at HIS beauty on our faces!

Next, let's look at the television. When it's off, the screen is dark, there's nothing to see or hear, and the TV is really just a box taking up space in our room. (*Ask someone to point the remote to turn on the TV*). Wow, just one click and the power turns on this immense color that we can all watch and see, and be entertained! Did you know that the power of the Holy Spirit lights up our darkness, as well? When we feel unnoticed, just taking up space in the room, we can invite the Holy Spirit to come and empower us with joy and faith, so that **all of a sudden we're illuminated and bright!**

One person at our table is wearing a solid colored tshirt – nothing wrong with that. But what if…to that shirt we added a colorful scarf? (*Ask the person to reveal the scarf and drape around her neck).* Pretty cool, right? Just one added accessory can brighten up an outfit that's plain and boring! Sometimes all we need is a little boost from time spent with God in his Word. And all it takes is one verse that stands out to us, that speaks to our heart, that encourages us, and **we're ready to go conquer the world in His strength and beauty!**

(*Serve the ice cream in bowls.)* Plain vanilla ice cream is delicious – it really is. But there are times when we want toppings that are colorful, playful, and oh so fun to eat! (*Pass around the candies for sprinkling*.) Now look at our bowls! The sweet vanilla ice cream has now been upgraded to a party in our mouths! Did you know that even on your sweetest day, **the Lord's love can make you sweeter**? Just ask him to show you ways to top off others with compliments, acts of kindness, or just a hug! Those are the toppings that add pizzazz to someone's normal day, to make it special and photo-worthy! (*Snap shots of each other enjoying your ice cream*.)

Finally, let's all get up and open the door over there that's shut tight. (*Open the door and reveal the dark room*.) There are some beautiful places that are never seen until the light shines. (*Turn on the light)*. See how pretty this room is? But the colorful beauty would never be seen if the door remained shut, and the lights remained off. We banish the darkness in others by sharing the light of Jesus with them. Tell friends that they are loved, show them the love of Christ by serving them, and by all means pray for those who live in a dark place**. There's nothing more breathtaking than sitting in the dark, turning on the light, and seeing the beauty around you!**

Does your life ever feel sort of boring, sort of plain, nothing exciting going on? Sometimes food can be boring, pictures can be plain or clothes can be drab. It only takes a little "color" to brighten up your day, or the day of someone else.

Pray together as a family for the love of God to color your world.

The Family Practice – Teach Them to Notice – by Rachel Toalson

The winter months can feel so long, especially when there are five boys cooped up in a house with a newborn baby. So many days dawn rainy and cold and say what every parent of boys (and probably girls) dreads: No outdoor time today.

My boys have spent weeks staring out the window, wondering when it will stop raining so they can go out and play. Their mama has spent weeks wondering the same, since boys need wild and free if a parent hopes to stay sane.

But now, spring has returned and warmer weather has come around, and my boys don't even ask before they run out the door to play with all the other kids in the cul-de-sac, because they already know the answer is, "Yes!"

Playing outside, connecting with nature, is necessary and important for children, because their playing connects them to the earth. It grounds them and calms them and keeps them open to seeing God in his many different forms.

Creation can teach the children about God.

And their daddy and I decided, long ago, that we wanted our boys to enjoy playing outside and connecting with this nature that is our connection with God, because we both grew up on acres of undeveloped land, and we had forts in old trees and bicycles to ride down old deserted country roads and corn fields to play a hide-and-seek game in.

Our boys don't have wide-open spaces, because we live in a neighborhood with small trees and neighbors close enough to talk to from our front porches, and there's just not a whole lot of great outdoors to be had out here.

Our perspectives had to change.

Because maybe it doesn't take a wide-open space where ours is the only house around for miles to appreciate nature and what it has to offer. Maybe it only takes a bit of green and a not-even-taller-than-me tree and a patch of dirt for boys to stick their hands in and try to dig clean through to the earth's mantle.

Sometimes connecting with the earth looks like lying in a tiny backyard, staring up at the night sky full of winking stars, even though there aren't nearly as many as there would be if some of these city lights were blown out.

Sometimes it looks like planting and tending a small container garden just to feel the wonder and miracle of a plant growing from a seed and blooming into food.

Sometimes it looks like watching from a deck chair the bird that keeps flying back to that homemade birdhouse with another piece of straw in its beak.

Just because we don't have wide-open spaces doesn't mean we can't teach our children to love the rhythms of the earth.

We just have to teach them to notice. (Or they have to teach us.)

When we notice the beauty of creation, when we breathe the fresh scent of spring grass, when we listen to the sounds of nature in birds and trees and insects, we begin to see and hear and feel God.

“From the beginning, creation, in its magnificence, enlightens us to His nature,” Paul says (Romans 1:20). “Creation itself makes His undying power and divine identity clear, even though they are invisible.”

Nature whispers what we sometimes forget, “Mighty. Creative. Sovereign.”

Our kids will hear this melody of creation, too. And that’s worth getting them outside.

How to get kids outside:

1. **Find a stretch of “nature” and go on a family “nature walk.”** Take bags for the children, and let them collect treasures—rocks, pretty leaves, flowers, tall grass they’ve never seen before. Search for the signs of spring. Breathe deep. Walk slowly. Notice. The children are good at leading.

2. **Roll down a hill.** Remember doing this as a kid? We would stretch out on the smallest patch of dirt and grass and roll all the way down, even if it was barely a hill. My boys recently discovered this past time at our neighborhood park, where a small hill sits at the entrance. They didn’t even play on the elaborate playground equipment; they just wanted to roll and roll and roll. For an hour. If you want to make it more meaningful, have children close their eyes and try to feel the earth’s heartbeat.

3. **Bring nature inside.** There are all kinds of crafts families can do with bits of nature—tree bark, twigs, grass, rocks. On a nature rock, where children are gathering treasures, gather some of your own. Use them in a craft you can display in your home. Bringing nature indoors helps us connect to nature’s seasonal rhythms and makes a house feel much more peaceful.

YOU

Under the Influence - Humble Pie – by Marcy Lytle

When someone eats “humble pie,” as the saying goes, it means they are apologizing for a serious error. There is also some suggestion that there was actually a humble pie full of “inferior food” that was fed to “inferior people.” Either meaning doesn’t sound so good, does it?

Being a mom (especially a stay-at-home mom) these days can feel like at times that we’ve made a serious “error” in our world. There is so much pressure on moms to dress up, show up, bulk up, and buck up by working a full-time job so that they can have a big home and all that they “want,” and look fabulous while doing it. So choosing to stay home, even when money is tight, to raise our kids, feels like a decision that’s somehow seen as self-debasing to our worth as a woman.

There are very many articles written for working moms, with hints on how to get your kids to bed early, how to juggle every ball you’ve been thrown, and how to still have dinner on the table and time for your husband too! But in my opinion, there are not enough articles written to applaud the moms who stay at home against all odds, because they want to be the ones raising their children, not a daycare full of strangers.

So rather than choosing to stay at home being a case of eating humble pie, I’d like to tell you so many reasons that you can stay at home, hold your head high, feel like a million dollars, and enjoy yourself as a mom, free of guilt and shame in today’s society because you’re not “out there” earning your keep…

Let’s look at the things I listed above:

Dress Up – I hear moms who stay at home say they “dress up” in sweats every day, they don’t know what’s in style, and why should they – their kids keep their mom clothes sticky and stained. If you’re a stay-at-home mom, the face you wear in front of your kids speaks more volumes than any outfit you can acquire or wear. They see your love, and they learn to admire and adore the flour in your hair, the marker on your foot, and the stains on your shirt. And if you still feel frumpy and “less than,” wear your pretty clothes, even if you’re just going grocery shopping, and enjoy!

Show Up – If moms work outside the home, they have to be on time, put in so many hours, and then arrive at practice and lessons…on time. Stay-at-home moms show up in a different way, all day, every hour, by being present, available, and awake. You show up in your kids’ rooms when they’re hiding behind the bed with a cookie in hand, you show up on the sofa beside them to watch a movie even though you have loads of laundry to fold, and you show up behind the stove when you’d really rather be sitting by candlelight at the restaurant across town.

Bulk Up – There are some women who work full time jobs outside the home so that they can also afford the “luxuries” of life like a trainer, a gym membership, and a nanny to care for their kids while they work on their definition in their arms, legs, and stomachs. But stay-at-home moms are bulking up too. You lift, squat, scrub, and bend multiple times a day and you’re stronger than an ox, because you’re working out constantly all day, and night, and the next day, and the next night… Your “definition” is definitely visible!

Buck Up – This phrase means “grin and bear it.” I know there are many women who work outside the home who don’t want to, but they have to. They buck up and do it. And many stay-at-home moms don’t really want to be there either, because it’s hard work. Being a mom is hard. Period. But there’s something to be said for grinning while we bear it. That includes giving thanks for our kids, our home, and our families whether we’re at home, or behind a desk, at work.

I’m a huge fan of moms who stay home, because I figure, why have kids if you’re not there to raise them? But I totally understand it when moms have to leave their kids and work outside the home. I had to do that too, for a while. Neither job is easy.

For the sake of this article, on this day, I’m applauding you moms who choose to stay home. Television shows, women in the news, and celebrities with kids in tow with a nanny behind do enough to entice moms into the work place so that they can be all and have it all. But I don’t think there is near enough applause or recognition for the moms who stay home and eat “humble pie,” according to our culture’s standards. It’s NOT a serious error to leave your career, cut back on your budget, and show up in the kitchen to make *apple* pie.

Being a mom is a high calling, and it takes a strong woman to lay everything else aside in favor of her children, the greatest gifts in the world. And there’s no error at all involved in choosing to stay home. In fact, staying home is a privilege and an honor, and she is not inferior to her counterpart who wears a suit and shows up in heels. She is beautiful, wonderful, and deserves the highest praise for a job well done!

Don’t eat humble pie and apologize or feel like you’ve missed out on life because you’re staying at home. Instead, serve up all of that domestic goodness you’ve learned to taste and enjoy, and realize that you are a woman highly favored for choosing to be present in the lives of your children.

Strengthening Your Core – Is Worry a Sin? – by Marcy Lytle

It seems like we don't hear much about "sin" anymore – you know – violating God's word. In fact, the lines of what sin is have blurred since I was a kid, back when the lines were way too wide and black. For instance, sin was a huge net that included a bunch of "Don't do this or don't wear that," and the net got so heavy, it broke a lot of our backs! I'm glad that net has lightened now, in the light of walking free from some of those unbearable rules.

However, now the line is so thin it can barely be seen; in fact, the line has been crossed so many times it's actually pretty much been erased! We have become a society of people who do what "makes us happy" or what "feels good" at the moment, and we call that true freedom. We want God to be a part of our lives in his grace and goodness, but we don't really want his discipline for those things that are still sin, in His Book.

Just recently, I read this on my page-a-day calendar and I was stunned at what it said:

…*When you try to figure out the future, you are grasping at things that are Mine. This, like all forms of worry, is an act of rebellion; doubting My promises to care for you*. (Jesus Calling Calendar).

I stopped what I was doing and read it again, because I had just been awake about an hour in the night worrying about just that very thing – the future. I was thinking about tomorrow, the next month, this summer, years from now, and all that is attached to those times regarding money, health, etc. and I let that fear (that attaches itself to worry like a sticker on a sock) rob me from much needed rest. **But I never considered that the worry was a sin.**

I had questioned God about his lack of provision for some.

I wondered about the "what if's" ahead.

I cried at the dismal outlook in a few areas.

I feared the worst.

All of that questioning, wondering, crying and fearing – was it really sin?

I Peter 5:7 says to cast all of our anxieties on him because he cares for us.

Matthew 6 instructs us not to worry about any of our needs in life because He knows them.

In an article by John MacArthur he writes,

"Christians who worry believe God can redeem them, break the shackles of Satan, take them from hell to heaven, put them into His kingdom, and give them eternal life, but just don't think He can get them through the next couple of days. That is pretty ridiculous, isn't it?"

For me, I think the real root of the problem is that I just don't like God's ways. I don't like that he tells me to thank him for my "daily" bread. I want to thank him for the bread that will be there for me years from now.

I can justify my worries by looking at those around me who are suffering illnesses, experiencing losses, and by observing past times in my own life when I wondered just where God was. In looking at those circumstances, I somehow say in my heart,

See God, you didn't come through for them.

See God, you were silent when I cried out last time.

See God, life is hard and it's scary, so it stands to reason that I would be afraid.

So, back to my original question.

Is worrying a sin?

I believe it is. In fact, I believe it's a wide black line tightrope on which we walk with a firm footing, only stepping off to trust the Lord when we can visually see, feel, and touch his hands beneath us.

Reading that verse on my calendar this morning alerted me to the fact that sin is so much more than not cursing, not giving enough, or not doing enough.

Sin, at its very root, is despising the character of God and his goodness.

I repented of my sin this morning. Have you heard of that word "repentance?" It's the antidote for sin, another one of those words that doesn't surface very often in sermons or bible study groups.

I'm thinking that maybe, just maybe, if I can grasp the deep sorrow I must make my Father feel when I worry about things unseen, if I can see the hurt in his eyes when he reminds me that he sees all and knows all, and if I can feel the deep love he has for me through every step of my journey here on earth (even the steps that send me climbing straight up, or falling to the ground), then I can truly turn from my sin of worry (repent) and rest.

I didn't say this is easy, although it should be, if we really believe in the very basics of our Christian faith – that God so loved the world that he gave his son. So how much more will he freely give us everything we need?

I'm pretty sure I'm going to need to rip that page off the calendar and attach it to my mirror so that I can read it every morning until I practice it and sin no more…

The day we quit worrying might be the day we truly repent of sin.

Beauty for Ashes - Trusting God with My Wounds – by Pam Charro

We all know that the Bible is filled with scripture that describes God as loving and compassionate.

1 Peter 5:7 says that he wants us to cast all of our anxiety on him because he cares for us.

Exodus 34:6 also describes the Lord as gracious and compassionate, as does Psalm 86:15.

God says that he is this way, and he has shown it to all of us countless times.

Yet, I still struggle with believing that he really cares about my hurt feelings.

I learned very young that life was difficult and unfair and we simply pushed forward. I was raised in chaos and there just was no time to worry about how I felt. Too much was happening and there was always more coming up to be dealt with. I took it all very seriously and started looking for truth at the age of 7, not realizing that it really wasn't anything personal against me; we just had a lot of dysfunction. I guess you could say that we were a family that was just barely hanging on.

I didn't even really know how true that was until I became an adult. So much makes sense now that I was just too young to know how to deal with then, and I have made a lot of mental peace with situations that used to have me tied up in knots. Yet the impression that no one has time to care about my feelings has hung on through the years, regardless of how hard I try to develop deeper intimacy with God. **I have kept so much inside because I simply haven't believed that God was interested in my feelings.** And, even if he were, I wouldn't know how to present them to him.

I have come to realize that I can't change myself, only God can do that. I don't like having this handicap, knowing that others have emotional security with God that they have never questioned, while I have never known it at all! It seems like a very unfair minus. Yet, what more can I do?

Then I remember all of the unfair minuses mentioned in the Bible, and I realize these things:

- Nothing about me has taken God by surprise.
- He knew what he was getting when he called me, and he is going to take the minus and bring about an even bigger plus than I would have had if the handicap hadn't existed in the first place.
- I remember all of his other promises, how he loves to take a hopeless situation and make something beautiful out of it so that the world will know that only he could have done it.
- And I make peace with setting my will on giving God my broken and lonely heart.

How often will I have to keep doing this before I have the intimacy with him that I crave?

I have no idea.

I just know that he is faithful and my part is to believe him and to persevere.

And, one day, he will make something beautiful.

Healthy Habits - Retain It or Lose It – by Georganne Schuch

Move it or lose it. Nothing could be closer to the truth when it comes to flexibility. Babies might have the flexibility of a Gumby toy owing to the pliable cartilage between their soft bones, but adults are not so lucky. As we age, our joints won't allow most of us to perform the acrobatic antics of an infant. However, neither should we be as stiff as a board.

Flexibility is about more than the ability to twist a leg over your head. Flexibility enables us to perform everyday tasks, such as getting out of bed or getting dressed, but it also reduces stress on joints, improves posture, and reduces the risk of injury. Unfortunately, our normal lifestyle does not promote flexibility. From sitting in traffic to sitting at a desk to sitting in front of the television, our lives involve little physical activity unless we make it an intentional part of our schedule.

If you have a regular exercise routine, include a good 10 minutes of stretching before and after the workout. Stretching before a workout warms up your muscles and joints to help avoid injury. Stretching after a workout releases stress built up during the workout. Just ask a runner how important that is. After a 5K, my husband has to walk and stretch for about 20 minutes or his leg muscles will cramp. Ouch!

Flexibility, or the lack thereof, sneaks up on you. When you don't pay attention to that twinge here and that stiffness there, you gradually start feeling less energetic. You deserve a rest after a long day staring at the computer screen, right? Yes, but a few days become a few weeks and months and then years of only moving from the desk to the couch. Without regular exercise and stretching, you might find that you have problems lifting even light things over your head or limp when you first get out of bed in the morning or have problems putting on your jacket because all that rest limited your range of motion...how high you can lift your arm or how far you can turn your head or how low you can bend. I spent years taking anti-inflammatory drugs for aches and pains and stiffness. When I began a regular stretching routine, as well as some light exercise, so much of that disappeared. **What a relief to stop taking a medication that only masked a symptom and never promised a cure!**

With that said, here are a few guidelines for retaining your flexibility or getting back what you've lost.

1. **Work slowly through each exercise.** Slow and steady will get you farther than quick and painful.
2. **Breathe.** If you can't breathe during a stretch, you're not getting the full benefit.
3. **Work different muscle groups.** I have particular problems with my back and shoulders, but the muscle groups over our whole body are all interconnected. Makes me think of the “dem bones” song, “The hip bone's connected to the back bone.” Not a work of poetry, but you get the idea.
4. **Pay attention during each stretch**. You should feel it, but it shouldn't hurt. If you can't feel the stretch, modify it. For instance, there's the regular calf stretch, but if you bend the knee of the outstretched leg, you get a heel stretch, which helps with foot cramps.
5. **Be careful**. It's easy to lose your balance while doing some stretching, not that I know what I'm talking about. Use a wall or chair for support when appropriate.
6. **Hold stretches** for at least 20 seconds. It takes time for stiff muscles and joints to begin relaxing.
7. **Consider taking some yoga or Pilates classes** to learn new stretches. I'm not one to do class workouts, but they are helpful when you don't know where to start or need to change up your routine.
8. **Wear comfortable clothes**. You don't necessarily need a workout wardrobe, but wear something that allows a stretch. It goes without saying that tight jeans don't fit the bill.
9. **Drink water.** Wait! What? What does water have to do with stretching? Hydrated muscles and joints are more flexible and less irritated or inflamed.

10. **Alternate between dynamic and static stretching.** Dynamic stretching moves your body through different positions to stretch different muscle groups in preparation for more activity. Static stretching encourages the targeted muscle to adapt to a new range of motion by holding the position for 20 seconds or longer. Both are good practices for promoting flexibility and range of motion.
11. **Make it a habit.** The more you do, the better you feel.

While the flexibility of a baby differs greatly than that of an elderly person, it didn't happen overnight. **If you want to be the little old lady or man who gardens or dances or runs marathons, don't underestimate the investment you make by protecting your flexibility.**

A Moment in THYME – Scarred but Real – by Marcy Lytle

Just recently, I struggled with the effects of some wounds I'd received that somehow still surface after so many years, on certain days. I know I've been healed, forgiven others, and been forgiven…but once in a while, the scars from those wounds still appear and catch me by surprise. I was actually in the bathroom when I felt I heard the Lord say to me, "I still had my scars after I rose from the dead…remember I showed them to Thomas?"

I do remember that story. Thomas wasn't sure he believed when Jesus appeared to the disciples that it was really him. So Jesus held out his hands and showed him the scars where the nails pierced him, and invited Thomas to touch them.

Mostly, Thomas gets a bad rap for not believing without touching and seeing Jesus' scars. But this time, when I read the story again, the very fact that Jesus still had his scars was amazing to me. Why hadn't God healed those scars when he gave Jesus his new body, when he appeared to his disciples? Was it just for people like Thomas, those who had trouble believing without seeing?

Then I thought about my own scars. I know the truth that I've been set free from the lies that wounded me. I know the reality that Jesus has forgiven me and the others that caused the wounds. But aren't scars that linger on our bodies just reminders that we once were broken, but now we're healed?

Scars don't define us.

Scars remind us.

That Sunday morning when my scars surfaced and I saw and remembered the pain of the wounds that left the scars again, at first I felt condemned, ashamed, and frustrated. But as Jesus gently spoke to me, reminding me that he too bore scars from his wounds, it soothed my soul and honestly made me stop and consider Jesus and his scars.

God certainly could have erased the scars when Jesus conquered sin and death. But then would Thomas have been lost, because without seeing he was unable to believe?

At the beginning of the story, Jesus appeared to the disciples and Thomas was missing from the scene. Jesus immediately showed his followers his hands and his side. But Thomas was told later about Jesus' appearance and his reaction was one of further proof – he wanted to feel the scars and thrust his hand into the side of Jesus.

My scars don't define me.

My scars make me real.

When I appear to others who don't know Jesus, I can relate to their pain because I too have experienced loss, suffering, disappointment, etc. Some of those experiences left scars that sometimes surface. Without the scars, I might be unapproachable, others might fear that they

aren't good enough to be around me, and still others perhaps won't listen at all – because their scars are so highly visible and they DO define them.

That morning, I made a mind shift. It was a moment when Jesus appeared to me personally and spoke to me, pointing out the scars in his hands, so that I could look at them and receive peace…comfort…in my own scars.

If you have been wounded and feel that your scars are still prominent and ugly, I hope you hear his voice speaking to you as you read this,

"Your scars don't define you."

"Your scars only remind you."

They are reminders of his goodness to heal, to forgive, and to save. And they cause others to see and believe, too.

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road – Why I Stayed Married – by Lynn Cherry

We get the idea that strong women don't put up with any crap. Strong women take a stand. They say, "Forget this, I'm outta here!" Strong women just walk away.

The reality is, it takes a lot of strength to stay.

I chose to stay married after I found out about my husband's pornography addiction. It was a difficult decision and the most painful season of my life. My reasons for staying were like debris floating around my shipwrecked life and each reason kept me afloat for a while. As other more substantial reasons floated within reach, I assembled a makeshift life raft that eventually, after years of uncertainty, carried me back to solid ground.

1. **I had to** – I made a commitment when I got married, for better or for worse. I certainly wasn't expecting "worse" but when it came, I remembered the promise I made on my wedding day and felt like I had no choice but to stay. I'm grateful for the way my commitment carried me, but it could only sustain me for so long. After a few years, commitment felt more like resignation to a painful life of constant betrayal.
2. **My children deserved a family** – Our boys were small when things came to light in our marriage. I desperately wanted them to have the stability of the only life they'd known. I read *Bringing up Boys* by Dr. James Dobson and I saw the critical role a father plays in a boy's life from the psychological perspective. Then I read *Wild at Heart* by John Eldridge and saw the devastation caused in a young man's life by a father wound. I felt like leaving my marriage would make me an accomplice to that wound and wreck the foundation of my husband's relationship with our boys. I believed it was better to stay in a bad marriage partly because I didn't have the courage to believe my marriage could change. But staying in a bad marriage eventually made me an angry woman, a basket case of emotion. Maybe our home was stable in the sense that we were all living in the same space, but I was as unstable as a sixth grade chemistry project.
3. **Cynicism** – As I began to research porn use, the statistics were just plain depressing. I discovered the majority of men on the planet had some sort of sexual issue. I remember telling myself that at least I knew about my husband's secret life. If I was to leave and find another man, odds were he had a secret life that would come to light after a few years and I'd find myself in the exact same position. I was jaded and bitter. But in a way, the cynicism forced me to reckon with an issue I had pretended didn't exist. You can't deal with a problem when it's buried underground. When it rises to the surface, you have the option of getting help.
4. **I found hope in a friend** – I sat outside on the patio at Starbucks and cried as my friend told me about the betrayal in her marriage. They were going to counseling and finding help. She was on the other side of the pain in which I was drowning. I found the hope to believe there was an "other side" for us too.
5. **My husband wanted freedom** – When I realized I needed help and told my husband I was going to counseling, he came along. He wanted freedom from sexual addiction; he just didn't know how to get it. He believed the lie that his use of porn only affected him.

He believed the lie that he could stop anytime he wanted. Once the lies were exposed, he began to do the work of breaking free.

6. **I wanted the inside story –** Regardless of whether or not our marriage survived, David would always be our boy's father. I wanted him to be free of addiction for his role as father as well as husband. If I stuck it out, I'd have more confidence in knowing he was living free because I'd be there to see it.
7. **I saw the fruit of change** – During week four of our first twelve week therapy session, I tried to get my husband to skip class and just go out for lunch, but he was committed to the process. Tiny blossoms of change budded. He dragged me to class. During week eight, the fruit of change continued to grow as he acknowledged the effect his use of porn had on our marriage and on me, and established a lifelong commitment to friendships with other men and online accountability through Covenant Eyes.
8. **God asked me to stay** – I know that sounds super spiritual, but it really did happen. One of the questions our counselors asked was, "What is God telling you to do?" I had never asked God that question because I assumed I was stuck. I made a promise. I had to stay, right? It took some courage to ask, but when I did, God answered. I was reading *Captivating* by Stasi Eldridge and she expounded on the meaning of the Hebrew words for Eve's role in Adam's life, *ezer kinedgo. "The word ezer is used only twenty other places in the entire Old Testament. And in every other instance the person being described is God himself, when you need him to come through for you desperately."* When I read that, I felt God asking me, "Lynn, will you come through for my son David?" I saw my husband not as the man who had broken my heart but as God's beloved son. I knew David desperately needed me beside him. And I knew if I stayed the course, we would come out on the other side together.

We don't have the marriage we used to have. This one is better. I'm proud of the work we did together. I wasn't sure we'd make it but we did. And I'm glad I stayed.

Date Night Fun - Let Me Entertain You – by Marcy Lytle

April is the month when the big thaw starts, at least in some chilly parts of the country, and people start to venture outside again, as the temperatures rise just a bit. We also get that spring energy that's in the air and we want to go outside, have friends over, and have a lot of fun! Entertainment, in the form of food, music, friendship, drama, and people watching are on the agenda for our date time ideas this month.

Hang up your parkas, put away your snow boots, and open up the windows to let the scent of blooming flowers fill your nostrils and put a spring in your step, as you plan a fun evening with your date now that the sunshine is warming up all things cold….

1. **A fondue experience.** We have a place in our town called the Melting Pot where one can enjoy a four course meal of fondue! Fondue is all about experiencing the cooking together with friends, in small bites, of all kinds. The easiest fondue to set up is cheese, and chocolate. So why not try Swiss & Gruyere fondue, and Bittersweet Chocolate fondue? If you provide lots of bread and fruit, cakes, and brownies, you won't really need a main dish. Invite a couple to share the entertainment, or stay at home and entertain with fondue for two!
2. **Musical Merriment.** I think one of the best evenings of entertainment must involve music. This night can be as exquisite as a concert in a beautiful arena surrounded by fans, or in a coffee shop listening to the quiet strumming of the guitar over a latte. Besides listening to others' music, write a song to sing for your date, before the night ends, or…pick a favorite song to download and play for each other's entertainment. Need a bit of help in picking your love song? Check out this site.
3. **Friendship Fun**. Invite two other "new" couples to join you for a night of entertaining each other. Assign one couple to choose the restaurant, one to choose a coffee shop, and one to choose a pretty walk. (No complaining about the choices!) For entertainment, share how you met each other over dinner, your hobbies and talents over coffee, and while walking share your favorite vacations spots and why.
4. **Drama Delight.** This is a great date night-in idea. Find a drama to watch that you will both enjoy. One suggestion is Begin Again, starring Mark Ruffalo and Keira Knightley. This movie is about music and New York. So why not make a New York Steak together, along with a loaded baked potato, for dining entertainment as you watch the drama unfold? After the drama is over, enjoy New York cheesecake for a total night of entertainment at home!
5. **People Watching Pastime**. This is a great idea for a Saturday or Sunday afternoon date. The park is a great place for this date, where you can find a bench or a spot for your blanket, and sit down to watch people. Make your conversation about guessing the profession of the people you observe, if they're happy or not, etc. and see if you like their fashion sense or not…all in good fun, of course. And play this Bingo game using your loose change for markers. Winner gets to choose the place for ice cream!

Whatever form of entertainment the two of you enjoy, make time for it this month. Spring is in the air, laughter and smiles are everywhere, so why not join in the fun by planning a date night out you can both enjoy?

After 30 Years – Juggling Glasses – by Marcy Lytle

I juggle glasses. I do.

I have several pairs of reading glasses around the house, and I have to wear them in order to see almost anything in fine print. I also have a couple pairs of sunglasses. These too must be in my purse when I leave the house, because the sun makes me squint, and the squinting gives me a headache. And so I head out with a purse half full of wallets and keys, and half full of glasses. And I juggle them. I keep one on my shirt, to have handy while I shop. I keep the other on my head to pull down over my eyes when I step into the sunshine. And I take them off and on, off and on, until I just want to step on them sometimes and crush them, because I wish my eyes could just see clearly without any aid at all!

So what's all of this juggling of glasses have to do with marriage?

When we're first married, just like when we're young, we don't need reading glasses. Our eyes are young, the light is strong, and we don't need anything to aid our vision. We see everything so clearly, don't we? We've married the man of our dreams, we're going to make lots of money, have a couple of kids, and live in a fine house with a sweet dog running free in the yard! But then…life happens. The man of our dreams is working long hours, neither of us received the promotion we were hoping for, we're having trouble conceiving, and our fine house is a lot of work and expensive to repair! It's like the glasses we've been wearing that saw everything so clearly are now foggy with disillusionment and disappointment.

It's okay. We clean our glasses, lay them down, and our life is good again. Work has settled down a bit, the children finally did arrive, and we even got a dog! The house is full of all of the decorations and furniture in colors that we coordinated, and everything looks so pretty and colorful, now that we're settled into the routine of our little family so divine. But then…life happens. Kids have to be driven to and from all of their activities, and time alone with him is non-existent, except when we fall into bed at night, too tired for more than a kiss and a pat, and we're off to dreamland. Only we can't sleep, because we remember we have nothing for breakfast, our washing machine is making a weird noise, and our husbands are snoring so loudly we're completely annoyed…and turned off…to say the least. It's like the glasses that were so clear have now become foggy, and are missing a lens completely. ***Who IS this man we married, anyway?*** What happened to his handsome scent, his neatly styled hair, and his strong arms that held us? We only see him as an outline of a silhouette as he lies beside us, turned the other way, because we've pushed him there to silence the noise.

Fast forward another decade or so, and the kids are grown, the house is empty, and it's just you and him alone on the sofa, switching the channels to see what's "good" to watch. He gets up to go to the kitchen and asks, "Would you like a drink of water?" to which you reply, "Yes, thank you." You've lit a few candles to create ambience in the room, he sits down beside you, and you grab the throw from the back of the sofa to place over both your legs as you grab his strong, but now weathered, hands. He grabs your hand and rubs your arm in sweet affection and admiration for the beautiful woman he married a long time ago. You both have laid aside your

reading glasses, because you don't need them for TV watching. In fact, you don't need glasses at all now, because things are clear once again.

What you see is a man who's stayed with you through every phase of glasses you've both worn. You both had 20/20 vision at the onset, the future became blurred with a few hardships that life brought, he experienced a cracked lens and you completely crushed one (when you used to fight about stupid things until the wee hours of the morning) and yet you both now have several pairs of glasses lying on tables around the house, should you need a pair just for reading.

In fact, that's the only time you need the glasses, because your vision is clear once again as you look at each other in the dimly lit room with only the flicker of the light from television commercials on the big screen you now enjoy, a big difference from the tiny one you could barely afford when you first said, "I do." And you look over at his face, he looks back at yours, and you both smile at the picture you see. You see the same profile you saw and loved when you first met, but this time it's not infatuation, lust, or visual appeal that draws you closer to lay your head on his shoulder. It's the man he's become as he stood beside you when you lost a baby in the third month of your pregnancy, as he searched high and low to help you find the diamond earring you dropped among the blades of grass in the yard, as he held your hand tight when you both watched your last child leave for college, and as he makes sure all of the doors are locked at night before he slides under the covers next to you.

And you hear him snore again, you gently push him onto his side, and you reach for your reading glasses you've placed on the table beside the bed. You quickly read a verse or two from the Bible, give thanks for another good day, lay the glasses back down, and take one more look at the man beside you.

My God, he's beautiful, handsome, and he's mine**,** you think, and you almost say it out loud, because you see so clearly the outline of a silhouette so clearly defined by a life lived with love and commitment and honor.

That's the beauty of juggling glasses over decades of marriage, as long as we keep adjusting our vision so that we can see clearly the beauty in our spouse, never allowing our eyes to grow dim and completely blind to the gift that he is, to us.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems: Get Rich—Slow by Kayley Ryan

I was certain that personal finance would be the most boring class I'd take this semester. Boy, was I wrong.

I've always been a fan of money, but it's usually been one of those practical grown-up substances that I thought I'd have in the future, not now.

From everything I've learned in Dave Ramsey's *Foundations in Personal Finance*, I know that couldn't be further from the truth. Whether you have a job or not, you can start saving now.

Look, I get it. Saving money is hard work. Resisting the urge to spend your savings on new clothes or movie tickets requires patience and sacrifice. Ramsey teaches that "handling money is 80% behavior and only 20% head knowledge." In other words, accumulating cash is not about your income or about how much you know; it's how disciplined you are (Ramsey 17).

Still not convinced that you should save that $100 rather than spend it on a summer shopping spree? Well, neither was I—until I read about Ramsey's Ben-Arthur example (16).

Imagine two teenagers named Ben and Arthur who are each going to save $2,000 per year and invest it at a rate of 12%.

Ben starts saving at age 19 and stops at age 26, leaving his money to accumulate more and more interest until age 65. On the other hand, Arthur doesn't start saving until age 27, but he continue to save until age 65.

Who do you think had more money by age 65?

Was it the one who invested less money but started earlier (Ben) or the one who invested more money but started later (Arthur)?

Drum roll please…

Here are the numbers, according to Ramsey's financial peace course:

"Ben had over two million dollars, while Arthur only had about one million. In Ramsey's words, "Arthur…never caught up!" (16)

If that example doesn't impress you with the power of saving now, I don't know what will.

It certainly changed the way I look at my spending and saving and led me to the realization that I don't save enough because I am not willing to wait.

Take last Christmas break as an example. Over the holidays, I watched four movies at the Cinemark. Four! It may not seem like that much, but with how much a theater ticket costs and how many times in just *one month* that I went to see a movie, that accumulated to $30. Then, you can't forget to add all the other expenditures (not just gifts for family members, but all those *other* gifts for *myself*) such as Starbucks coffee, clothes, and music.

When I received my bank statement for January, I felt sick. *I spent that much?!*

Where did all my money go? It's simple. I made spending a bigger priority than saving, and I paid for it.

I think that we teenagers get so caught up in peer pressure that we use our money for shopping, catching a movie, purchasing a Starbucks coffee, or grabbing a bite to eat. Why do we feel the need to spend money just to hang out with each other? Why can't we do something creative, like go for a walk in the park or ride our bikes?

I sometimes find that a movie night at home with bathroom breaks, free popcorn, and an old movie from the library can be even *more* enjoyable than a night at the theater. Or I could just wait until the movie I'm "dying to see" comes out at the dollar theater, right? Believe me; my wallet will appreciate my restraint.

With all this information flooding into my brain, I wasn't sure how to practically apply Ramsey's teachings to my own life. In fact, as you read this article, you may be thinking, *Where do I begin?*

Fortunately, Ramsey has a simple list of three items you should save for (12):

1. **Emergency fund**: Save $500-$1,000 (depending on income) for emergencies and don't touch it! (12, 14)
2. **Purchases**: Whether these are regular expenses such as a phone bill or an item you've been wanting to buy such as an outfit for prom, save money to buy these rather than buying them on credit (14).
3. **Wealth building**: Let compound interest work in your favor; save and invest now rather than later (15).

Just by learning those three steps and remembering that "handling money is 80% behavior and only 20% head knowledge" (17), you will be amazed at how quickly you can accumulate cash.

Yes, saving money requires responsibility, patience, sacrifice, and a bit of organization—all four of which I'm still working on—but the effort is so worth it!

As I have had to do, you may need to reexamine some of your expenses such as regular coffee or shopping sprees and determine where you can sacrifice nice things now so that you can garner the rich rewards of financial peace.

Don't be fooled by "get-rich-quick" ideas. Get rich slow by applying Ramsey's tips, and you will be able to watch your money grow exponentially. Who knows? You might even be the next "Ben" who retires with two million dollars.

Moving Forward – Ageless – by Pam Charro

I know some old people.

And I'm not talking behind anyone's back, either.

The people I am referring to will tell you that they are old. In fact, age and aches and pains seem to almost be an excuse for them to stop living life to the fullest. They focus on shortcomings and all that they feel they cannot do or be.

I started to go there last year, right around the time I turned 50. I guess I was just listening to the wrong messages and I started buying into the idea that, because of my age, I had no choice but to start falling apart.

Well, guess what happened?

I starting having symptoms I hadn't previously experienced. I had given myself "permission" to start getting old, and my body responded accordingly. As soon as I realized what was happening, I repented and started speaking life to my body again, and the symptoms immediately began to dissipate.

I have a choice of dwelling on life or death, and I choose life!

I was reminded of this last month when a dear friend suddenly passed away. It was such a shock because, even though she was in her mid to late 70's, I never thought of her as being advanced in years. She never complained about anything that was going on with her body, and she was always smiling and warm. I later found out that she was constantly praying for others. She was focused on being alive, and that is what she was until she took her last breath.

What a blessing she was!

Her life challenges me to:

- focus on loving God
- purpose to love others
- be thankful for every day of life that God gives me

Yes, I am growing physically older.

But I choose now to consider myself to be ageless and full of life.

May that decision be reflected in my life, and may it honor God and all of the people around me.

Bush Bean Blessings - Perspectives of the Sunrise by Tammy Morrison

Lately, I've hit a rough patch. My perspective has been off. *Way* off. There has been so much noise, so many things distracting my thinking. My clarity has been dulled. And I don't like it. Not one bit.

This "slump" I've been in isn't necessarily self-induced (although I *do* have to own how I've reacted to it). It has to do with my daily grind--those outside forces that just so happen to be part of my life for this season of time. Oh, how I love that phrase "season of time." For me, that means it won't last forever. This too shall pass. Wonderful words that aid in survival. Reminders that nothing lasts forever.

I know all about coping skills. I understand self-efficacy and how to train the brain to clear thinking. I'm fully aware of the coping strategy Name It, Tame It: if you can identify your problem or obstacle, you can tame it, or learn techniques for how to control it, rather than it control you. All of this psychology is great. It really is. But as great as psychology is, here's the answer to the trial I'm currently facing: PERSPECTIVES OF THE SUNRISE, courtesy of God.

You see, a few mornings ago, on my way to work at 6:30, the sunrise was once again absolutely staggering. It was breathtaking! Please understand, the beauty of the sunrise wasn't lost on me, yet I still found a way to lament my heartbreak to God. As I was stunned by His glory, I was also crying out my frustrations. There I sat at the stop sign, literally sobbing, longing with everything in me to turn my car to the left, ***into*** the sunrise, instead of to the right, seemingly ***away*** from the sunrise--in the opposite direction. I'm not just speaking literally, I'm also speaking figuratively. In my viewpoint, for the past few months, I've been out of the rays of the "sunrise."

In that moment, while nothing in my life seemed clear, God's voice saturated my spirit with the clarity I've longed for. In no uncertain terms, God brought to my realization that although my life has taken some turns I didn't anticipate, and I have traversed a direction I never imagined, the sunrise still decorates each morning with majesty.

Although the sunrise is now on my right, instead of on my left, the fact remains that the SUN IS RISING! In reality, I'm not traveling away from this phenomena, the sunrise still surrounds me in every way. It all boils down to my perspective! That particular morning, I realized that my specific attitude--my view of the sunrise--has been skewed. God assured me that just because I'm headed in a different direction than what I'd anticipated doesn't mean I've been abandoned by Him.

Just as the sun rises every morning, every morning He is all around me. His love and guidance surround me--even when I've lost my way. He alone is the Light of my life. He alone is my Direction, not all the noise and distractions that pull me this way and that. And just as the sunrise dispels the dark and the morning is new again, so will His love shine through me and a new day will dawn.

"He is like the light of the morning at sunrise on a cloudless morning, like the brightness after rain that brings the grass from the earth" 2 Samuel 23:4 (NIV).

Written by Tammy Morrison
02232015

Saddle Up - GLORIOUS! – by Melissa Critz

Glorious!
Glorious!
Glorious!

That's the word reverberating over and over in my head as of late. I spoke those words today quite often with the young girl that takes riding lessons from me.

The weather this past February in Texas was well, let's just say, not so winter-like. It's Texas, after all. One day we were sweating while wearing shorts and the next day we were pulling out our North Face jacket and leather gloves. Quite a few days as of late have just been *glorious*!

Along with the weather, my horses are as peppy and healthy as can be. I feel that I have been on a mountain high being able to not only ride both horses but also really truly enjoy them and their 100% healthiness. When I saddle up Domingo, Elijah follows right along. Sometimes Elijah will get distracted, so a fun game of hide and seek ensues. But it doesn't last too long – Elijah spots us rather quickly. If Elijah is the choice for the day of exercise, then Domingo keeps him in sight. As much as they can irritate each other, they cannot stand to be apart.

During these riding times, I have been thinking so much on this word, *glorious.* Its use is an adjective in this form. It has quite a few meanings, but the one that really spoke to me is: bringing great happiness and thankfulness. Of course, my first thought is about who is glorious – our Father, our Lord, our Savior. I was also wrestling with how to making even the hard times glorious. It sure is easy to be thankful and happy when things are going well, but I guess we can also forget to be thankful and appreciative during the good times.

So how do we bring the glorious into all times, all things, all thoughts, all of life?

I have heard over and over in the Christian world to be thankful even during the tough times. "In everything give thanks because this is God's will" (1 Thessalonians 5:18) and "Give thanks always *for* all things" (Ephesians 5:20. It's right there in the Bible. And the Lord doesn't just say to be thankful in the rough times but also FOR the rough times. WOW!

So sometimes, I fear that we at times are *fake* with our 'praise the Lord' mentality – maybe on purpose – or maybe just because we don't know HOW to be grateful FOR all things. We see the fake smiles and hear the "Praise the Lord" but the pain is SO obvious! Can't we be saying "glorious" through the pain but be in tears and wracking in pain, yet telling our Father how it feels and even others who can share our burdens and pray with us?!

Oh, to be *honest* is glorious!

Don't you think that He wants you to share your heart and your burdens even while saying, "Glorious"?

When we go before our Lord and share our fears, hurts, pains, we start to recognize

more and more our need for His covering, His love, His peace, His healing, His joy, HIM.

Look at what Jesus did – God's Son who was sent to earth so live as a man, face all temptations, live sinless, and suffer. He SUFFERED, on our behalf. He didn't even deserve the suffering. But Jesus knew it was God's will and that the Holy Spirit would guide him. The sufferings Jesus endured would draw many people to God – how grand is that! How Glorious!

We can be encouraged that even in the tough times while obeying the Lord and giving praise FOR all things, we can be open and honest with Him. We can seek others for comfort and guidance. We need someone to wrap his or her arms around us as we give Him praise together as we shed those tears.

I only imagine as Jesus dragged that cross and then hung on it, he did not have a fake smile. He may have been shedding tears for those that would be lost without knowing Him. And he did suffer. He went through tremendous pain. He was very honest with His Father in the garden as well.

So **be honest** – praise Him FOR all things and **repeat *glorious*** over and over.

We have so much to be thankful and happy for, and our wonderful saddle partner is always there guiding and supporting, for He is GLORIOUS!

Real Stories - Scars on my Child - by Valorie Quesenberry

I remember the feel of her – newborn, fresh, sweet. Like nothing I'd ever held before. She was my own flesh and blood, wrinkled and red from the indignity of birth but unmarred and beautiful. In that moment I became an alternate person. No longer was I a sweet, expectant mother; I was now a growling, hackles-raised she-bear. Protecting my young was the first thing on my agenda, and I became an expert in sensing danger, sometimes even imaginary danger; my instincts were on high alert.

My first skirmish came the very next day – a tornado passing through the southern city where we were living at the time. As my mother and I waited in the hospital hall, the clear baby bassinet beside us, the emergency lights glowing, I remember a fierce panic rising within me. I wanted to grab my baby and run. But, of course, there was nowhere to go just then. Thankfully, the storm was content merely to blow out the entrance doors to the hospital – just a bigger exit now for this crazy, new mama! And my little one was safe, cocooned in her blankets, unscathed.

But not for always.

She's grown now, this child of mine, and recent days have brought pain to her, pain encountered while seeking His will in her young life. I could not prevent it, didn't even know about it until the wound had been received. My anguish over her hurt was from a distance. She faced it without me. The mama bear had let the cub go, sent her off to see the world, and stayed in the den with the other smaller cubs. That's the way it goes. It's right and proper. But you never quite allow for the first big blow that sends the offspring reeling.

And now she has scars.

Oh, they're not visible to the human eye, but I've seen them. I've noticed them in the different look to her eyes, in the shadows of her young face, in the fragility I sense in her soul. No longer is she untouched and fresh. She has experienced life's pain, and she will forever bear its mark.

I grieve those scars. As a mother, I would have kept her free from them. Foolishly, I would have kept her in the pink of little childhood. But she has become an adult now. Life has seen to it. She will get tougher in the days to come. Scar tissue will form, healing over the wound. And I must help her resist bitterness which will damage the living tissue of her young spirit. I must aid in the healing and growing process.

And I must point her to the Father who sifts through everything which touches her and offers the balm of His love for every hurt.

Perspective

Moms are usually not great at perspective when it comes to crises involving our children; we tend to see "in the moment." But taking a step back and looking at the event logically made me realize that the hurt she was experiencing was actually proof that she was a pretty great kid.

There are random hurts in this world, but the kind of pain she was facing came from risk-taking, and that's a sign of character. Now, of course, I'm not talking about a foolish approach to life, yet every parent knows that in order to raise a normal child, one has to take appropriate risks. And one has to let her child take risks. Without it, there would be no scholarships, no

graduation, no careers, no friendships, no social life, no character . . . nothing. So, having to do the difficult job of soothing a painful experience is also an opportunity to quietly celebrate the initiative and ambition of my child. That's pretty cool.

Another big realization is that no one gets very far in life without having to accept challenges and move ahead in spite of them. The sooner a young adult encounters this the sooner he or she can develop the muscle needed to keep going when the going gets tough, as they say. The older generation used to talk about the "school of hard knocks." Turns out, they knew the value of it. And our children can learn from it too.

Grace

But more than human wisdom, I'm glad that I can point my child to the most profound source of strength I know – the God Jehovah. He is the Rock, the Refuge in troubled times. He offers us the embrace of His everlasting arms. And He gives abundant strength to press on.

I found myself praying that my daughter would experience His grace – that divine enablement available to His children. I knew that if she had this grace she could face the devastation of the moment and the painful reminders in the days to come.

Through the Apostle Paul, God reminds us in 2 Corinthians 12:9 ""My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect [fulfilled and completed] in weakness." (NKJV)

I prayed that she would have ***emergency grace*** – for the immediate crisis; grace to get her through the present and to hold up when everything tilts without warning.

And I prayed that she would experience ***everyday grace*** – for the long-term; grace to help her get up in the mornings to come and to stay sweet in spirit and joyful in heart.

Trust

And because I know from experience that Satan gets out the big guns when we've come through a big disappointment, I prayed that she would have faith to trust her Heavenly Father. When the storms come, trust really counts. *Sunshine trust is fragile; hurricane trust is solid.* Like the man in Jesus' parable who built his house on a rock, we need to be able to rest on our foundation in Christ and weather the storm.

Trust is what Job exhibited when the Enemy threw everything he had at him. Listen to his words in Job 23:10 ". . . He [God] knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." (NKJV) In the midst of personal suffering on a scale few of us can imagine, he made the choice to trust his God. He was confident that the Father knew exactly where he was and what was going on. He was persuaded that there would be an end to the pain, that there would be a "coming forth." He refused to "curse God and die" as his wife suggested. He banked everything he had on the integrity of Jehovah. And he has inspired millions of people to do the same.

So, as I view the scars on my child, I must choose to see them through the lens of His providence and plan. In my human "momness," I grieve that some of her youthful gloss is gone, and perhaps that is understandable. But I must keep the perspective of eternity and believe that God is working out the purpose for which I prayed. On that long ago day of baby dedication, I

held her out to God and surrendered her future life to Him. How can I fault Him for working with what was freely given? He has her on the Potter's wheel, and she is being fashioned into something beautiful. He has allowed this crack in her soul and He will sooth and smooth it with His masterful hands until it becomes part of the lovely whole and then not even I would choose her life without it.

For scar tissue is a beauty mark when seen from heaven's vantage point.

Glory

And so I look in Scripture and find many examples of parents who offered up their children to Him, and by faith, accepted an unknown future. As I unclench my hands and let my child bow under her pain, I am Job offering sacrifices for his children and hearing of their deaths and worshipping still; I am Abraham laying his son on the altar and raising a dagger above his heart; I am Jochabed laying a helpless infant in a woven basket and pushing it into the crocodile-infested Nile; I am Hannah leaving a long-awaited child with an old priest who doesn't have a good parenting record – I am a mother committing her child to God's hands.

And when the wounds come and the scars appear, I must trust His heart, knowing that He can do only good, and He will complete His work in her. After all, the scars of earth are not "worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us" says Romans 8:18. And what mother doesn't want her child to experience glory?

Someday, in that other land, I will look at her, my child while on earth and find no disfigurement, no scars on her; I will rather be dazzled by the beauty that suffering has wrought.

And nothing will ever take that glow away.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - A Mystery Date – by Kezia Neusch

Every month, we include five date night ideas for you, so that you can have a fun time with your spouse. Earlier this year, we included ideas for mystery dates. We thought it would be fun for you to read a personal story of one couple who went on a mystery date, how it was set up, and how delightful it was! And we hope it encourages you to do the same for your special someone. Enjoy…

After weeks of secret phone calls, planning in my absence and telling me with a grin, "I forgot," as I continually pried about our surprise weekend, at 4pm on Friday, my husband Jared opened the door to a shiny white rental car and drove me out of town. My bags were packed for a few days and I had no knowledge of any part of what was to come. Living in a small town far from any big cities though, and knowing the trip was short, I had some potential destination ideas in my head. As the hours on the freeway passed, the sun set, and my cappuccino was all gone, those ideas they were slowly crossed off my list.

With one final turn, all my ideas were exhausted and my sneaky husband pulled into a small Whole Foods. It's one of my favorite places, so I wasn't complaining, just a little confused! My secretive man led me to the produce section and told me, "I need you to pick out 12 perfect avocados," and then disappeared.

What?

I didn't question, but set about feeling and picking out the best avocados from the large selection. At number 8, as I balanced them in my arms, he reappeared and told me we had to take a selfie for my parents. I wasn't sure why my parents needed a picture of me in Whole Foods but we arranged ourselves in the iphone screen for the avocado selfie and as we got ready to snap our happy (*I was slightly bewildered and confused*) faces, another face appeared in the screen. I whipped round to check that I was seeing correctly. The face was my sister, who had 30 minutes ago texted me a (I now knew *fake*) picture of her in her New York apartment! Beside my sister were her husband and their small carry-on bag. They'd flown in to surprise me, and the Whole Foods rendezvous was to throw me off the scent!

I was in shock.

We picked up a basket and I looked at them with wide eyes while we bought treats for the night and headed to an apartment. Over wine and chocolate, they let me into the plan.

Jared had a day planned in Napa Valley for Saturday, and a day in San Francisco for Sunday.

Dreamy..

Thanks to the time change, we were all up and out early for a sunny Saturday morning. Balmy weather surrounded us as we picked up coffees and granola from Sightglass, a favorite city haunt, and hit the road into the wine country.

First stop was brunch.

We started in downtown Napa at a bustling corner restaurant boasting local, organic, and sustainable food. Plates of asparagus, poached eggs, chilaquiles and pancakes, glasses of fresh juice and happy conversation fueled us for a walk over to Napa's large indoor market, Oxbow Market. We spent a few hours tasting, buying, eating, and sampling as we wandered around together, and to go with it all – a lot more hugging and loving the time together! None of us wanted any part of the day to end!

Whenever we travel, great coffee is a part of every day and at multiple points in each day. Slowly drinking a cup of well-made coffee is one of our favorite ways to slow down, savor moments, and relax. We love to let the world go by without thoughts of anything but the joy of the moment. So in true vacation form, we finished our market wandering with a stop at Ritual Coffee for a perfect almond milk cappuccino.

My heart was so happy.

You can't come to Napa without tasting wine, so that was the next stop. Jared had stumbled on a gem that offered its sprawling patio, acres of vines and gardens to gaze at, a delightful sommelier, and a selection of high quality wines.

The perfect sunny, spring afternoon.

We laughed and tasted, tasted and laughed, and enjoyed being together and whiling away the hours until dinner.

A stop for two bites of most treats at Bouchon while the sun set was not enough to spoil our dinner. We took the evening slowly and started with cocktails and olives at the exquisitely decorated and softly lit bar of Redwood. Watching the kitchen through a large pass-through whet our appetites and we sipped, laughed and relived the last 24 hours. A long, evening around a table of good food, with great people, is one of my favorite things in the world and this evening was one of the best.

Despite a late night return from Napa, we were up bright and early again to fill our city day full! While Jared had fully planned everything else, he let me call the shots for the San Francisco day, so our first stop was for toast. The Mill, a white shop front with large windows and light streaming in over tables is the epitome of Sunday morning relaxation no matter what day of the week you're there. Hitting it on a perfect California Sunday morning with no cares in the world, and tummies hungry for toast and coffee, is just about perfection.

After a little farmer's market wander and an early morning oyster for my brother-in-law, we joined the line for the simple but artisan toast and coffee that this little place offers. Four people obviously need far more than four pieces of toast, so we piled up the table and sat back with our hands wrapped around some of the best Americanos the city has to offer and planned our day.

We spent the day fully soaking up this Bay Area gem and our city tanks were filled to the brim with street side coffees, chocolate tasting, perfect tacos, ice cream, walking up and down hills, taking lots of photos together and making memories.

Sunday was Oscar night so we decided to head back to the apartment and have our own Oscar party together!

After hitting Whole Foods again to pick up supplies for loaded gourmet burgers, we sat back and cast our predictions with cocktails in hand, admiring the red carpet elegance from the comfort of the sofa. Then with burger plates piled high and glasses filled, we watched the awards ceremony. While my predictions did not win me any prizes, the moment was about as happy as it could possibly be imagined.

With the sadness of the moments ticking away and our departure imminent, we packed our bags, our coffee to keep us driving, and then procrastinated to steal as many sibling moments together as we could squeeze from the weekend, before loading up the rental car and glancing to see waves in the rear view mirror as we hit the road home.

Coffee at Ritual in Oxbow Market
Soaking up the sun at Rugusci Winery
Perfect butternut squash tacos at Tacolicious

FRESH THYME - Leave No Trace – by Marcy Lytle

If you've ever gone camping, surely you've heard this mantra to "leave no trace" when you pack up to head home. This phrase actually refers to a set of ethics in the great outdoors built on seven principles to practice while camping.

As I was worshiping one morning, I thought of the things we "camp out" with as we live in this world, such as fear, addictions, ideologies, and so on…ones that really leave our "campsite" a mess. And I thought to myself,

I don't want to leave a trace of these for the next generation! No trace at all!

Here is the list of ethics, and how we can apply them to our own lives here on earth. After all, we've only set up temporary housing here, we're not really home yet, and we need some good rules to go by:

Plan ahead and prepare. Camping requires thought and preparation – and lots of it. If we show up to camp without a tent, we're in trouble. If we bring food to prepare, but no utensils or pans, what will we do? While living in our temporary campsite down here, we need to make sure we have the things we need to eat well, sleep well, and the equipment we need to manage the forest of trees around us. It's up to us as moms, wives, daughters, sisters, to make sure we've enabled our children to live well in this place where we've set up camp. And that means equipping them with all that they need, should emergencies arise – like faith, hope, and love – those three things we read about in I Corinthians 13.

Travel and camp on durable surfaces. Imagine trekking through the woods for primitive camping and setting up your tent over a pile of ants – or worse yet – next to a sinkhole! Campers are wise if they know the lay of the land before they set up camp, and if they are aware of the resources nearby. Our kids are not born with this wisdom of where to place their roots, where to lay their heads, or where to establish themselves for safety. It's our job to train them to watch, look, and listen to the instructions given in the camping manual – the Word.

Dispose of waste properly. It's absolutely disgusting to arrive at a campsite full of trash and waste lying visible on the ground. That's so wrong! Yet, we often leave our own waste of bad habits, fears, and lies, lying around for our kids to step on, wallow in, and pick up as their own. Leaving no trace of the things that used to hold us hostage is a work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, as we surrender to him daily. We must allow the blood of Jesus to erase our waste, to dispose of it properly – as far away as the east is from the west – so that our campsite is super clean for the next campers!

Leave what you find. This instruction refers to those good treasures at any given campsite. Did you find a beautiful array of blooming foliage? Don't pick it – leave it – for the next campers to enjoy. Is there a green meadow just perfect for picnicking? Don't destroy it by digging and stomping until it's full of holes and mounds. When we find a treasure, a hidden glen of peace and quiet, let's share these finds with our children and make sure they too know where to rest, where to find those cool streams, and how to enjoy the goodness around them, undestroyed, untouched, and beautiful.

Minimize campfire impacts. There's nothing more fun and inviting than a roaring fire with chairs circling around, inviting us to come sip some hot cocoa and warm our feet! However, if a campfire is unattended it can get out of control and destroy an entire forest! How in the world does this apply to us spiritually? The "fire" of God often refers to his word, his revelation, his burning within our souls. These fires are beautiful, and we want those around to catch the flame, when we're bursting with color and warmth. However, we cannot live by the fire alone. We cannot leave these revelations unattended by the boundaries and wisdom of the Word. Campfires, like weekends of high praise, retreats where highs are experienced nightly, are all good and welcoming and warm. However, a campfire is delightful because it draws us, warms us – and when it dies out – it sends us…

Respect wildlife. One of the things I do not like about camping is the fact that ants show up uninvited, if food is not put away properly. My kids have to be taught how to guard their belongings from the thieves that are present in the wild. Leaving a lunch unattended on the table during the night might just invite a woodsy critter that will eat everything in sight! In order to respect wildlife, we need to be aware, be smart, and be wise. These are all things that come from learning, and how will our kids know the schemes of the enemy in their lives, if we don't show them the plans of the Lord for their future? We must inform them of the dangers that lurk, but more importantly of the wisdom that protects.

Be considerate of other visitors. If the weather is good, the campsite is inviting, and the people are free, they're going to show up and camp near you. We teach our kids to be quiet late at night, to keep away from bothering the neighbors' belongings, and to be friendly and sharing, should a camper arrive without an item they need. It's no different in our circle of friends that our family has, where we train our kids to show courtesy, love, and honor to those around them. After all, loving one another is His command to us, so that all of those we encounter will want to camp near Him.

That's the list.

Leave No Trace is packed full of good and wise instruction for a successful camping trip.

I suppose the one thing I'm working on more than all of the other directives is to make sure that when I leave the campsite (leave this world) that I've left no trace of any waste, that I've swept clean my heart and my mind, so that what my kids remember is the truth and love that I shared with them.

It's hard work to camp. But millions of people do it when the first pretty weekend arrives, after a long winter. They long to get away, set up camp, and relax – even though they're busy cooking, strapping, cleaning, and setting – somehow it's refreshing to be among friends and families under the stars.

It's hard work to live in this world in our homes, right in the middle of the huge forest of dangers all around us, a huge campground – so to speak – where others are camped beside us and all around us. And "leave no trace" is good for literal campsites, but it's also a good mantra for this temporary place we're resting our heads until…

It’s time to go home.

How will your campsite look after you leave? Will your kids want to come back again and again, or will they avoid it like the plague?

FRESH THYME – Look Again – by Marcy Lytle

Thursday Morning: I knew they were there. I had used them the day before and put them back, right where they belonged. But as I was searching for the tweezers that morning, they were nowhere to be found. I even asked my husband, "Did you use the tweezers? " And of course he replied, "I haven't seen them in a long time." I knew they were there in that drawer – they had to be.

Friday Morning: I opened the drawer and there they were, in plain sight – the tweezers. I knew they were there, I just couldn't see them the day before, for some reason. But when I looked again the next day, there they were.

I'm sure you've experienced the same scenario, where you search for that elusive item in the drawer, scrounge around messing things up as you look in a hurry, slamming the drawer shut as you leave before you arrive late at your destination, only to never find what it was you needed so badly. And then you return home later that night, open the drawer and there it is.

Isn't that a funny thing about life?

The morning that I couldn't find the tweezers and then there they were the very next time I opened the drawer made me think about *why* that happens. And why it's necessary to stop the hunt for a bit; then look again, if we want to find something.

Here's why I think we miss things we're looking for:

We're in a hurry: When we're running behind and in a hurry, somehow our vision seems to be stressed as well and unable to see clearly. It's the same phenomenon when we get in the car only to realize we've put on two different earrings that we were sure matched in the bathroom mirror. Being in a hurry makes us rushed and being rushed skews our ability to see.

Point learned: *God never gets in a hurry when he teaches us the truths of his word. So if we try to rush it, demand it, and grab it on our way "out the door," we most likely will miss what he's trying to show us.*

We're tired: That particular night when I was searching, I was super tired and should have gone on to bed. However, when I couldn't find those darn tweezers it angered me, and I started looking furiously, tearing up the drawer as I searched. I knew they were there, and it was as if they'd purposefully hidden from me, and were teasing me to find them!

Point learned: God knows when we are tired and he knows that we need rest, so sometimes he purposefully is silent, so that we will lie down, observe the green pastures, and quit stirring up dirt as we kick around like a toddler who rolls and rants just before falling asleep.

We're frustrated: The part of my story that really stirred me up was the fact that I knew the tweezers were in the drawer. I had placed them there, and the drawer wasn't really that big. But it was cluttered, and the tweezers are thin and small, and somehow they never materialized as I looked and looked.

Point learned: Frustration is not a good place to be when we're looking for God's truth and promises in our lives. Being frustrated is akin to throwing a tantrum, and any good parent knows not to respond to such antics! When our children calm down, sit still, and listen – then we respond. Our good Father does the same.

So then, why in the heck did those tweezers stare right into my face the next morning when I opened the drawer as if to taunt me and say, "Here I am where you placed me, shiny and silver, just waiting for you."?

I had rested. I was not in a hurry. I was no longer frustrated. In fact, I had forgotten about looking for the tweezers. And so when I opened the drawer and saw them, I was delighted (and mad at them at the same time.)

Point learned: Rest is good. Slowing down is necessary. Frustration is pointless.

God has treasures that await us in his word, he does. His truth is always available when we read it. However, in those times when it seems that his voice is silent, his ways are elusive, and his reality seems anything but real, we can take a minute to look at ourselves and see our own hearts. We can quiet ourselves, still our minds, settle our hearts – look again – and there it is – the very thing we needed all along.

FRESH THYME - No Other Route – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever wondered if there was another way the Children of Israel could have gone, to get to the Promised Land? Or why would God lead them to the brink of a huge body of water that was completely impassable, yet expect them to make it to the place he was calling them set up camp? Surely there was a longer, maybe less menacing path to follow, around a few small mountains and across several tiny streams, instead of right smack through an engulfing sea!

When there's a road block in my neighborhood, we find an alternate route. When there's road construction on the highway and lanes are shut down, we exit the main road and take another path. And when there's an accident, we definitely avoid the area, because we'll be stuck for hours if we don't!

However, I've realized over the years that God doesn't choose the roads that are completely clear or free of debris. In fact, he's called me to walk some pretty treacherous paths, and I've wondered why, just like those Israelites must have wondered, when they followed the cloud by day and the fire by night, only to wind up at an impasse.

Road Blocks. These are often put up when work is being done on the road, maybe a new surface is being laid, or the striping is being redone. If we barrel on through these updates that are taking place, we will ruin all of the new surfaces and end up with paint and tar on our tires – a mess indeed! God obviously lines out our paths when we choose to follow him, and when we encounter road blocks that seem to keep us from our intended goal, we often think it's a bad thing. But maybe, just maybe, he's resurfacing some areas in our hearts that are hard, cracked, and in need of intense repair. After all, we've got kids and more generations following us, and we wouldn't want them lose their way because the way isn't clear, would we? Road blocks just cannot be avoided as long as we're human, because of constant travel and wear and tear. We must allow the down time, the repairs, and the fixes.

Construction. Isn't this the worst? Highways take sometimes years to make new roads, create another bridge, or design loops that will help us avoid traffic found in the middle of the city. I just have no patience for these types of road blocks. But I must admit, when all is said and done, I do enjoy the new view and the new ride. I just don't like the time that it takes to create them. God is always about creating…always. But what's he creating now that he's finished all of creation? He's fashioning, forming, and molding us into His image, and this process takes time. Lots of it. He is constantly going before us to lay out new paths of faith for us to try, to demonstrate his power by lifting us up above the traffic of life to show us a new route, or to design His wills and purposes in our hearts so that our ride is secure and safe. We could turn around, but God wants us to see the new and wait for it…expectantly…and then enjoy the ride.

Accidents. These are not fun to encounter, especially if there are injuries to those involved. We recently encountered an accident right in front of a restaurant where we had reservations for dinner. Starflight was hovering, traffic was backed up, and so we opted to leave that area and eat at another place. It wasn't our job to stop and render aid, but it was someone's job. And the traffic had to slow down to allow that rescue. There will be accidents on our roads, and there will be injuries that our friends experience, or even strangers, due to slippery surfaces, the bad

decisions of others, or just inattention on the road. We can always take a detour, but sometimes it just might be our job to be the Good Samaritan to take that exact route and render aid, to offer a lift, or to pray a prayer.

So back to the Children of Israel story. What they saw as an impossible route, God saw as the exact route he wanted them to take. In fact, it just took one sweep of his hand to make those waters part and give the group a way through. And… the very waters that seemed so ominous soon became a wall of protection and the very force that destroyed their enemies.

Wondering why you're at an impasse, and there seems to be no other route to take? If you're following Him, just stand still and wait. Wait for the strong wind, the strong arm, the parting of the sea...and then walk and don't look back. There may be no other route except that dry ground right in the middle of the sea, with your enemies drowning behind you.

A BUNDLE OF

THYME

May 2015

TIPS

The Dressing – Bag it Up – by Marcy Lytle

I don't know about you, but I absolutely love bags, purses, totes, of all kinds. One year, I decided to have purses in all colors. Another year I was into backpacks. And while the trends do change from season to season, totes of all kinds are always in style! I've had all kinds of purses and I know now which ones I end up not carrying – those that are too small, too big, or ones that do not have the over-the-shoulder option. Of course, a pretty clutch is always nice for a night on the town.

If you're in the mood for a bag, here are some of our favorites we've found that are cute, stylish, roomy, and have great straps for carrying. If you keep your purse items organized in a couple of large wallets, it's easy to switch out your contents from bag to bag! And, we looked to find purses that won't deplete your pocketbook.

The brown bag. A good solid brown satchel is a great purse to have and to own for years. It needs to be rather simple, have plenty of room inside, and go with dress clothes or casual wear. Strut is a store in my town that I love, and they have great bags. They also sell on line, and this purse includes a body strap to go with, for when you need your hands to be free. What a pretty purse!

A black staple. Bucket bags are a trend this season, so why not add one to your stash of purses, like this one from Urban Outfitters? It comes in ivory, neutral and black – so if you don't need another black purse – opt for one of the other hues! With a drawstring closure, this purse is easy to manage and looks great with any outfit!

Tote for the movies. We do buy movie popcorn sometimes, but we always take our own water bottles and sometimes our own air-popped corn in bags, and candy. And all of that will not fit in a purse unless it's big. These totes are perfect for movies, for holding magazines for a road trip, or for carrying to the beach for the day. And, Sari Bari employs women who have been in sex trafficking, to enable them to make a new life. What better way to spend your dollars than on a tote made by these beautiful women?

Hobo Bag. This striped colorful hobo bag from JCP is a great purse to wear in the summer with your sandals and shorts. It's got several pockets, a shoulder strap, and a carry handle, and is so roomy. Hobo bags are also a trend for this season, and the stripes on this one just make it an irresistible, fun addition to your wardrobe for the upcoming travel months.

Clutch for dinner. This envelope handbag, which includes a dress gold chain strap, is great for evening wear on a date, or out to dinner with the girls, or just for a fun lunch, when you're dressed up and feeling fancy. It's super affordable, too, from Target! In fact, you can get two of these in different styles, or give one as a gift to a friend!

Summer whimsy. This really cute retro mini crossbody bag in several choices is one of the cutest bags I've seen for the new season. I really like the toasted oat, and this classic black and white. Macy's always has coupons in the newspaper, or sales on line, so hopefully you can get this gem at a discount. The aloe color is pretty, too!

Backpack purse. I'm not usually a fan of white purses, but this white backpack is pretty and versatile, a great travel companion. Backpack purses are great if you have little ones in tow, or if you just want your hands free on vacation while you shop! This purse from Target is super affordable and very white – to go with every outfit you wear this summer! It can be worn with shorts…or sundresses!

Don't keep carrying the same old purse on your shoulder. The purse is an accessory that can make or break an outfit. Pick one that suits your needs, find it in a pretty color or design, and then fill it with all of your goodies – and enjoy!

Seven for You – Watch & Learn – by Marcy Lytle

I've been watching cooking shows avidly for a few years now, and I've learned so much! I'd say I was quite the novice cook for years, since I never even started cooking until I got married. And with all of the food trends in our culture now, cooking has become something many of us aspire to do, and to do it well! Gourmet cooking doesn't have to be something we just enjoy when we pay big bucks. But let me scale it back a bit, here. These aren't gourmet cooking tips, but they are some cool things about cooking and serving that I've learned just from watching gourmet cooks perform their works of arts on the plate.

1. **Make it pretty**. Yes, you can cut a sandwich in half and slap it on a paper plate, and eat chips out of the bag. But why not slice the sandwich on the diagonal, lay one half on top of the other, place a pickle spear alongside, and set the chips in a pretty small bowl on the side? There are all sorts of culinary pretties that can be designed on the plate, without much effort. Lemon wedges, twisted orange slices and herb stems can adorn the dullest of entrees!
2. **Serve it up**. Instead of laying out all of your dishes in one horizontal plane on the table, serve some of them "up" – so that there is height on your table. Use tiered trays, or turn a clear bowl upside down and set a dish of food on top of it. If you have a cake dome, use the base of it as one of your serving dishes. You'll be amazed how much prettier your table looks if two or three dishes are served *up*, instead of flat.
3. **Be adventurous**. Have you always just served green beans from a can? Do you just hand an apple to your kids? Is chicken your staple entrée four nights a week? Try incorporating more fresh veggies into your meals by roasting them ahead of time on a baking sheet, and serving them up in different ways throughout the week – atop pasta, in a wrap, or on a baked potato. Slice the apples and drizzle caramel and mini chocolate chips over them for a sweet and cute snack. Cooking doesn't have to be boring – it can be creative.
4. **Use fresh herbs**. Keep fresh herbs in pretty vases (or drinking glasses) in an array by your sink, for pinching and chopping. Use them liberally to add taste and color to your meals. Chop up fresh dill to sprinkle over new potatoes. Add fresh basil to your pizza, or chopped cilantro in your homemade salsa. If your herbs are visible in front of you, you'll be more inclined to use them.
5. **Gadgets are great**. There are some useless gadgets for sure, but there are some I've learned to love and use often. A lemon squeezer, a zester, a whisk, and a garlic mincer are among my favorites. And I also have a salt box that is pretty and full of pinches, for cooking, instead of the big blue salt box in the pantry. Do you have a good chef's knife? A food processor? Food prep cups? Once you start using some of these tools, you'll be so glad you have them!
6. **Lay aside fear.** Recipes are just sentences and a few numbers. You don't have to print out ones with 20 ingredients. But do choose new ones with flavors and ingredients you can buy easily, and ones that don't take hours to prepare. Look for new ones on websites like Food Network, or Rachael Ray, or from Pinterest. Don't let trying something new overwhelm you. Search for what you want, print it out, or download to

your phone, and try it! Soon, you'll be craving something new every time you cook because it's so fun.

7. **Prep ahead.** If you've got a weekend free, or one particular morning or night that you can devote an hour in the kitchen, do it. Chop up your veggies, cook your ground meat, squeeze your lemons, or gather your ingredients for the next meal, and set it all up, get it all ready. If I have all of my ingredients prepped ahead, when it's time to cook the meal it's like just putting an easy puzzle together in no time flat – and the picture that's created is amazing and so rewarding!

What cooking shows do you watch, and what have you learned? I'm enthralled with The Chew and Dinner at Tiffani's – both of which are so enjoyable to record and watch in my free time. The above are just seven simple ways I've "spiced" up our meals at home. And now that it's just me and my husband, we can try all sorts of new things to taste together!

Selah's Style - Sweaty Swag – by Selah Irwin

In April I turned 9! For my birthday I asked for a Fitbit... And what do you know? I got one! I thought it would be awesome to do this month's column on exercise clothes because I am so inspired by my Fitbit to get fit! I call it "sweaty swag!"

These are called Harem pants. They are very in style right now. I think they are very cute! Did you know that this is actually an adult half top? I bought an extra small and layered it with my pink zebra tank top! Fun and funky!

My fabulous friend Thea Smith gave me this wonderfully cute outfit for Easter! I went on a hike for my birthday and took a few snapshots of me styling it and BOOM! A new trend was born! The birthday bash became a fashion show!

Here is my zebra tank again. This time I wore it to my cool friend Kelly Gonzalez's fitness studio Fuego for a booty kickin' workout! I wore it with my gray capris and boy was I exhausted! I couldn't take another step!

My grandma (who I call Gweeny) gave me this little number. I strutted this outfit for Zumba at my church (Zumba also taught by cool Kelly!) It is comfortable and cute!

I hope this inspires you to get healthy. Get your fit on! Buy a Fitbit and get fit in a tiny bit!

Peace out!

Fearless Kitchen - Waistline Friendly Mexican Food – by Christina Vetter

Just like any self respecting Texan, I love eating my fair share of Mexican food. Unfortunately, the lard and cheese dripping from so many of these dishes threaten to sabotage my post baby diet. Consequently, I've been on the search for delicious Latin dishes that measure a little lighter on the calorie count, and in honor of Cinco de Mayo this month, I'm happy to share them with you.

Mexican food gets a bad reputation thanks to the many, many Tex-Mex restaurants that serve warm plates of cheese and fat. Don't get me wrong, I'm a sucker for chips and queso, deep fried chile rellenos, and many of these notoriously high calorie dishes, but the thing I love most about Mexican cuisine is the wonderfully fresh flavors that these restaurants seem to overlook. Ripe tomatoes, low sodium black beans, hot peppers, and marinated lean cuts of meat are just the beginning. I'd bathe in cilantro eating nothing but avocados for a year if it was feasible. I absolutely love salsas-red, green, mango, it doesn't matter, and I judge any Mexican establishment according to them. Sadly, many fall short.

Next time you find yourself craving **red salsa** try the one shown below. I have to give credit where it's due and admit that it's my husband's recipe, and he simply knocks it out of the park. A traditional Tex-Mex dish, **nachos**, can be a calorie breeding ground when ordered at a restaurant, but our lighter version will satisfy the crunch you're craving without the guilt. The trick is simple: lighter cheese, use chips as the secondary ingredient, and pile on those veggies! Don't forget gobs of salsa, because the result is delicious! Lastly, I want to share some healthy black bean and cheese **enchiladas**. They are simply divine. Don't fall victim to the thought that lard-laden Mexican dishes are all that exist.

There are so many ways to explore the delicious and healthy ingredients that can fall in to the Latin cuisine category. Have a great month and as always, happy eating!

Black Bean and Cheese Enchiladas with Ranchero Sauce
Serves 4-6
Recipe courtesy of Cooking Light

Enchiladas are notoriously high in fat and calories, but thanks to this recipe, you'll be able to achieve the same great taste without the guilt. These are great served immediately and also as leftovers the next day, so don't be afraid to double the recipe.

Ingredients:

- 2 dried ancho chiles, stemmed and seeded
- 2 cups water
- 2 teaspoons olive oil
- 1 cup chopped yellow onion

5 garlic cloves, sliced

1/4 teaspoon kosher salt

2 cups organic vegetable broth

2 tablespoons chopped fresh oregano

2 tablespoons no-salt-added tomato paste

1/2 teaspoon ground cumin

1 tablespoon fresh lime juice

1/8 teaspoon ground red pepper

1 (15-ounce) can black beans, rinsed and drained

2 cups shredded reduced-fat 4-cheese Mexican-blend cheese, divided

3 thinly sliced green onions, divided

Cooking spray

12 (6-inch) corn tortillas

6 tablespoons light sour cream

Directions:

-Preheat oven to 400 F.

-Combine chiles and 2 cups water in a saucepan; bring to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer 5 minutes. Remove from heat; let stand 5 minutes. Drain chiles in a colander over a bowl, reserving 1 cup cooking liquid.

- Heat oil in a medium saucepan over high heat. Add onion; saute 1 minute. Reduce heat to medium; add garlic and salt. Cook 5 minutes or until golden, stirring occasionally. Add broth and next 3 ingredients (through cumin); cook 8 minutes or until thickened, stirring occasionally.

-Pour onion mixture into a blender; add chiles and reserved liquid. Remove center piece of blender lid (to allow steam to escape); secure lid on blender. Place a clean towel over opening in lid. Blend until smooth; stir in lime juice and red pepper.

-Combine the beans, 1 cup cheese, and half the green onions in a bowl. Spread 1/2 cup sauce in the bottom of a 13 x 9-inch glass or ceramic baking dish coated with cooking spray. Warm tortillas, according to package directions. Spoon 3 tablespoons bean mixture down center of each tortilla; roll up. Place seam-side down, in prepared dish. Pour remaining sauce over filled tortillas. Top with the remaining cheese. Bake at 400° for 15 minutes or until lightly browned. Sprinkle with remaining green onions; serve with sour cream.

Dan's Salsa

Serves 12-16

My husband made this delicious recipe for one of our family gatherings and now it's requested every get together we have. It makes a large quantity and can easily be frozen and thawed when ready. For a milder salsa remove seeds in all peppers.

Ingredients:
3 jalapenos with seeds
1 medium onion, quartered
2 large garlic cloves
2 (28oz) cans diced tomatoes
2 Tbsp white vinegar
¼ C cilantro
2 serranos with seeds
Salt and pepper to taste

Directions:
-In food processor, blend onion, garlic, cilantro, vinegar, and peppers.
-Add tomatoes and salt and pepper and pulse (in batches if needed) until chopped together.

Lighter Nachos
Serves 4

This is a Vetter family dinner favorite. It's super easy to throw together and clean up is very minimal. We simply eat it as a family straight from the cookie sheet.

Ingredients:
1 bag tortilla chips
½ C grated sharp cheddar cheese
1 can no salt added black beans, drained
¼ C minced cilantro
3 roma tomatoes, small diced
¼ C diced red onion
2 avocados diced
1 large jalapeno minced
1 C shredded lettuce
½ salsa

Directions:
-Preheat oven to 400 degrees F.
-On a cookie sheet, spread chips out in a thin layer. Sprinkle grated cheese across chips. Top with black beans and bake until cheese is melted. Remove from oven.
-One at a time, add remaining ingredients in layers. Serve immediately.

Tried and True – Simple Shortcuts – by Marcy Lytle

While it's true that taking your time and doing it right is a good standard to live by, there are other times when a shortcut is the best and most efficient thing to do – in our busy world. Not all shortcuts end up in disaster. In fact, finding a faster or quicker pay to perform a task, when time is of the essence, can free up time for rest and relaxation. And after being rejuvenated, we can get back to our tasks that take a while to complete.

Here are a few shortcuts that are worth the time and effort saved, so that the headache of the to-do list is avoided:

In the kitchen:

Go ahead and buy a stash of paper plates and cups, to use on weeknights when you're too tired to set the table. It's okay, it's the best thing to do, and paper goods come in all colors now – so lay aside the guilt and use them! (Saves time on cleaning up).

Buy a rotisserie chicken or two. Debone it, chop it up, and store in the fridge for the week. Then use it atop pasta, in a quesadilla, or make chicken salad. (Saves time roasting or boiling chicken.)

Store it down low. Rearrange your dishes so that plastic bowls and cups are in a drawer, easily accessible to the kids. This way they can get out their own dishes for breakfast. Little toddlers can easily play with them too, while you're cooking! (Saves time in preparation and frustration.)

Caddies are your friends. Remember those paper goods you bought up above? Organize them in a caddy, along with plastic forks and spoons. Leave this setting out in the center of your breakfast table and you're good to go for any quick meal. (Saves time setting the table)

Chalk it up. A cute chalkboard is a great shortcut and looks so cute as wall art, too! Train your entire family to use the chalk to write down anything they use up – so you can add it to your list when you shop. Did your daughter just use the last of the milk? She writes it down! (Saves time making a grocery list).

In the Laundry/Closet:

Can't keep up with putting away clothes? Assign a laundry basket to each family member (color coded or labeled). When clothes come out of the dryer, they are tossed in each basket and that family member puts them away. No television, playing, or iphones until this chore is done – and not by you!

Towels need to be folded and put away? Make doorknob sign that says "Towels" and rotate it around the house. On any given day, if that sign is on your door, it's your responsibility to check the laundry room for clean towels, to fold them, and put them away. You then place the sign on the next family member's door!

Ironing got you down? I personally love to iron clothes, but it does take time and effort that is sometimes not available. Consider purchasing wrinkle releaser spray or a steamer, and instruct

the entire family on how to use them both (no little ones with the steamer, though). Incorporate into the nighttime routine the choices for clothing tomorrow, and prepare ahead.

Dirty clothes too much? I tried training my kids to wash their own clothes, but it really was a pain for me. They used the washer when I needed it or didn't have enough to make a full white load, etc. so this idea never worked. However, having one central location for dirty laundry, with sorting bags attached, made it easy to see when they were full, wash a load, and then use the baskets mentioned above. It wasn't so much the washing, as it was the putting away that took up time.

Can't decide what to wear? Spend 15 minutes on the weekend (kids can do this too) standing in your closet and putting together outfits, hanging them next to each other, with scarf or necklace looped around the hanger. Check for missing buttons or to see if the piece is wrinkled or stained and either wash or treat, or pick another outfit. This saves loads of time when getting ready the next week!

Can't find anything TO wear? Place a chalkboard or white board on the wall just inside the closet or outside, and encourage each family member to write down their "wish" list of clothes, or their needs. Perhaps your daughter realizes she has no shorts, now that the warmer months are here. She can write "shorts – Target" and your son might scribble "white socks" or your husband "a new belt." This way, when it's family shopping day, everyone has their lists ready to go. Also keep your jewelry and other accessories on the wall, easy to spot and match.

In the yard:

No time to mow? Consider finding a teen who needs a little extra money and go ahead – make their day – hire them to mow. This will at least free up your time to do the trimming and hedging, and it won't break your bank if you just pay to mow, and do the rest yourself.

No time to water? I love pretty plants, but they do take time and attention! Consider using the watering time as your devotion time and conversation with your spouse. Set up the watering schedule and both of you take a hose or can, and visit and worship and adore God's creation while you perk up your plants.

No time to corral the toys? If you've got kids, chances are that the yard is full of balls, broken toys, water guns, and all sorts of plastic objects. Keeping the toys corralled is a must, but can get out of hand if there's no place to put them! A baker's rack with plastic bins on the back porch can be used for the small stuff, and a large plastic tub can house the larger items. If kids are outside, they must clean up before coming inside – it's that simple.

No time to sit outside and relax? Cut out kids' activities away from home. This is a simple solution, but many parents fill their weeknights going to and from practices for too many different activities. Home life is an extracurricular activity that is getting lost and becoming obsolete. Kids don't need to play three sports, learn two instruments, and have friends over every free night. There needs to be time for the family to chill. Make it happen.

There are so many more shortcuts we could write about, but we will save the rest of the house for another month. Life it too busy and too short to fill it to the brim with activity, chores, cleaning and responsibility, placing theses all on one person – the mom. It's easy to burn out, fall over, and fizzle out, so we must cut things short! And not feel one twinge of guilt about it, as we hold our kids close, whisper in our husband's ear, and find all of those hands to hold…

HOME

Practical Parenting – Hang on Tight – by Georganne Schuch

Life can get away from you before you know it. Blink and your giggling, roly-poly baby is a moody, gangly teenager.

Sigh.

Parenting is a roller coaster ride for sure. The only survival method is to hang on tight.

One thing I have realized lately is that as life moves fast, I tend to get swept along. My never-ending to-do list crowds out spontaneity. Chores take precedence over making memories. I constantly feel behind, and so I push harder to catch up, mowing under any joy that tries to pop up. The urgent annihilates the important.

Maybe I'm the only one this happens to, but if most people are honest I think it happens to every parent at some time or another. Therefore, I resolve to push back more. If I have to, I'll schedule fun time and add memory making to my to-do list. Who's with me?

Over-achievers unite to do less!

You know me. I have to make a four-step program out of almost anything I do, so here's my method to get out of the rushing rapids that try to drown me.

1. **Limit the to-dos on my to-do list.** It might sound sacrilegious to Type-A parents, but since everything doesn't get done anyway, let's just be real and limit the number of things to accomplish. Be realistic about how long some things really take and don't try to do three two-hour projects on the same day. You know you do it, too.
2. **Schedule family fun.** Come on. We set dates to do everything from doctor appointments to grocery shopping. Why can't we schedule some fun, too? All fun things don't have to be big, blow-out events. We began going for family walks after dinner when the time changed to give us some extra daylight in the evenings. 15 minutes of skipping, chasing, chatter, and laughter. A perfect way to wind down the day.
3. **Say no.** Oh my, this is my hardest struggle. I always feel obligated to do more, volunteer for everything, and finish every last detail. Instead, resolve to do less, avoid the sign-up lists, and declare good-enough for now. My stress level, not to mention the stress level of my family, drops tremendously when I don't raise my hand for every roll call.
4. **Live in the moment.** I'm often guilty of planning the next thing or reviewing in my head all that I'm not doing while I'm doing this. Yes, I can be a kill-joy.

Don’t let life become a blur, chasing one obligation after another and being swept over the waterfalls of urgency. Those urgent blips are part of life, but one after another shouldn’t become all you ever do. Never forget the important stuff. It’s what life is really about.

I Don't Do Teens - Ordinary is Great – by Marcy Lytle

I feel sorry for our teens these days. I really do. They watch television and observe the "stars" as they sing, act, or dance their way to being important, well loved, and of course…beautiful. Our kids go to school and they find themselves in a sea of other teen "fish" where the most athletic, the ones with the best bodies, and their peers with the smartest brains go on to achieve accolades, honors, and success. And then here the majority of our kids sit – feeling ordinary. Girls start feeling less than, and boys start acting out, and our teens start getting lost among the school of fish, just taking life where the waters flow…right over the edge into the deep…lost. And sometimes, their parents are disappointed along with their kids, because they're just "ordinary."

Some of us have those kids that are "stars" and we know that that too holds its own set of woes. The struggle to maintain good grades, the effort required to keep on winning, and the attention and time necessary to look good and perform well is back-breaking, to say the least. These "fish" swim out ahead of the school, with those behind them thinking these leading fish have it all together, when they really just want to linger back, and swim with the pack and be just one of the gang. But they can't, because their parents are pushing them to maintain, keep up, and push harder.

But what if…ordinary is great?

One definition of the word "ordinary" is "normal."

What if our teens are allowed to be normal, and praised for being themselves, without anything that makes them stand out or appear "special" to others?

What if average grades, singing a bit off tune, being a little too slow on the track, and sporting a few zits on the face make our teens beautiful in our eyes? I believe if we see them in all of their ordinary-ness and accept them and love them for being normal, they will start to believe in themselves as well. They won't look to the outside for affirmation and self-worth, because they will know it from their moms and dads.

So how can we, as parents, make our ordinary children realize their greatness, and encourage our teens who appear to be extraordinary feel normal?

- We can love ourselves.
- We can stop pushing them toward excellence to the point of breaking.
- We can quit comparing them with other teens.
- We can encourage them in their uniqueness.
- We can let them lose once in a while.
- We can be the parents and monitor what they watch and where they go.
- We can point them to the love of Jesus.
- We can encourage them to join and attend steadily a healthy youth group.
- We can pray for them.
- We can enjoy them, as they are.

Sometimes our teens feel less than, because we too struggle with our identity. If that's the case, we can join their hand in ours and seek to know Him better.

Jesus lived an ordinary life among the people. And yet he was the most extraordinary man to ever walk the earth. And it's all because he knew the Father, he was loved by his Father, and he did whatever his Father told him to do – and nothing else. He didn't seek fame, he never donned a king's robe, and he always served instead of seeking to be served. That ordinary life is what we all should strive to mimic, as we raise our kids to make extraordinary impacts in this world.

Life as We Know It - Perfect Love – by Erica Simmons

It is hard to believe that a year ago, I absolutely refused to think about the idea of my boys being in high school. The thought brought me sadness beyond belief; the boys were not even allowed to bring it up. It meant that in four years they would be starting the leg of their life journey of college.

After prayerful consideration of the situation, I discovered that I was worried that I had not deposited what I felt the boys would need, while away at a college.

I no longer have that weighing heavily on my heart.

What changed?

I started to write these articles for this magazine.

How did writing this column take me from being fearful, to where I am now?

The answer can be found in one word: **revelation**. In order to write, I have had to learn to draw near to God in ways as never before; and in the course of this, he has given me many revelations about my heart as a parent and about his heart for me as a parent. It is not always easy deciding what to write about, what to share, because this is not just my life, it is my boys' lives as well. It is a revealing and honest look into our hearts and the decisions we make as humans trying to walk our Christian walk. Ever faithful as he always is, God has also used these revelations to bring me comfort and peace as a Christian parent.

The list of revelations is long, but there are three that I want to share:

1. **God gave me my boys, not only as a gift. He knew what they needed and he chose me to give it to them** because he knew that I had the life experiences to be able to do so. God created us all for one thing: to worship Him. How we do this is unique to each of us and we all need to find it and develop it. God prepared *me* to be able to help my boys find and develop how they are to worship him with their lives. I can take comfort in knowing that there is nothing that I am presented with as a mother of my two boys that God has not already prepared me to be able to handle.

   Ephesians 2:10

   For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

We were created to "do good works." What better work is there than bringing up our children in the Lord and what amazing comfort is there in knowing that God prepared in advance for us to do? This means it is already done. God did the preparation, and we just have to do our part. When someone puts together a casserole for us to cook, they prepare it and they do the work. We don't then go back and prepare it again. We just do our part. As parents, we guide our kids and we set godly boundaries, we protect their hearts and we show them godly love. Most importantly, we surrender them to God.

2. **I am not to bring my boys up in *my* ideas of right and wrong, but in God's truth**. This revelation is a new one, and I am just now starting to wrap my head around it. One thing that I do as a parent is that if I am wrong, or if I act on emotion and make a bad

decision, I make sure to go to the boys and apologize. I teach them they are not my inferiors; they are to be respected. *Not a bad thing, right?* However, an issue that arises is that Jordan expects every adult he encounters to be this way. And because of this, he makes bad choices. It came to me that if Jordan was operating from the godly truth of "Treat everyone as you want to be treated," instead of my example of showing respect no matter who it is, then he would be equipped to deal with other situations the right way. This was not an intentional thing that I instilled in him, but I also did not intentionally deposit in Him the truth of treating our neighbors as we treat ourselves. My way is not *wrong*, it is just not *enough* to cover the multitude of situations Jordan will encounter. God's truths are more than enough to guide all of us, no matter what we face. Learning to get out of God's way is not easy, but God in His great faithfulness always knows how to bring us comfort, which is the third revelation I will share.

3. **Our actions with our children are not always perfect, but the love that we operate from is perfect.** God's love is perfect. He is not looking to punish us when we slip up.

I John 4:18

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

Because we operate from a perfect love, we do not have to fear that the bad decisions we may make will result in irreparable harm. Romans 8:28 gives us comfort in that God is able to use all things, even our imperfection, to do good work in our children, because He searches our hearts and knows our motives (Jeremiah 17:10.) And if we really pay attention, he can use our imperfection to draw us closer to him to show us more of His heart for us.

This is what writing this column has done for me.

It has taught me to learn to seek God more as parent, to listen for his voice, and to learn more about his heart as the ultimate parent.

When I let perfect love rule in each situation I encounter with my boys; fear has no place, and that perfect love becomes a conduit for Romans 8:28. It allows God to make a good work out of every experience.

After all, the work is already done.

I just have to have faith.

Simple Solutions – Who Do You Call? – by Georganne Schuch

Advice.

Everybody's got some. If you don't believe it, just post a question on Facebook or Twitter or your social media channel of choice. You'll have advice coming out of your ears in a split second. Most of it is worthless, mind you, but advice you will get aplenty.

While you can Google any topic known to man, you still can't guarantee that what you read is grounded in fact or experience. Not to mention that some of those people are plain cuckoo.

To save myself the task of sifting through all that non-advice for something that might really help me out, I rarely even put much out there for the masses to respond. So, who do you call when you need advice? Not Ghostbusters! Instead, I think about someone who might have reasonable advice for my situation and talk to her directly. I mean, why get a lot of untried opinions when someone with experience can cut to the chase?

For instance, why would I solicit advice from someone with no children when I have a friend with five girls (just like me) who is a few years ahead of me in the parenting journey? That lady is cemented in my contact list, and I love to talk to her! Makes me feel less like a crazy person on those days when the hormones are flying around our house like tornadoes.

I've come up with a few reasonably simple ways to get opinions that will help when I'm in a bind.

1. Your friends are usually your friends because you share some kind of bond. When you have children, you tend to gravitate toward those who are like you. Someone is bound to have walked where you're walking.
2. Blogs are often helpful, though you want to make sure you follow ones that have a track record of exhibiting good behavior and sound advice. Take the counsel for what it's worth, usually someone's personal experience, which may or may not be applicable.
3. Professionals, websites or one-on-one, are trained in particular areas to offer expert advice. Though they tend to be a one-size-fits-all approach, they are, nonetheless, helpful resources in many situations.
4. Counselors, like professionals, are trained to help you see the bigger picture and to either give advice when appropriate or to help you arrive at a decision based on some targeted discussion. Never underestimate the value of talking things out with an unbiased third-party.

When I need some advice, which is like every other hour, I consider the situation and decide who is the best fit. Do I need a friend to prop me up or a counselor to unravel the mystery? Will a blog post give me enough insight to make a decision, or do I need a professional opinion to keep me out of trouble? Most advice is from well-meaning individuals, but not all of it is worth much. So, consider the source and rely on the ones you trust.

A Night to Remember – Mother, May I? – by Marcy Lytle

Mother's Day is this month, and there's probably no other gift a mom of young children desires than to have obedient kids that play together without fighting, play alone at times so mom can rest, and kids that do everything they're told – when they're told to do it. Isn't that the best? But who has that kind of family?

This month, we're going to spend time playing a game. Have you played Mother May I with your kids? *Check out the steps on line, and play it, before you sit down and enjoy this family devotional. If you have a husband or older child, you might want to let them lead this devo, as you are blessed.*

Now set out some cookies and milk, and sit down for a time of reflection on the game you just played. Allow kids to answer the questions without judgment or criticism, encouraging all to be honest.

How was it trying to remember to ask, "Mother May I?" before you took a step? (*Solicit answers).*

Which type of steps were the most fun? (*See what each one says.)*

Did you ever feel like "MOM" was being unfair? (*Let each one respond*).

What did it feel like to be the winner/loser or the one in between? (*Encourage expressions of feelings.)*

Did you know that God gives us moms for protection and love and guidance, and that the bible instructs us to obey our mothers? ***Read Ephesians 6:1-3.*** In fact, there are promises we can receive if we are obedient to our parents.

Let's pretend you want to use the stove in the kitchen. Why is it important to ask before doing something like that? (*Solicit answers.)* Moms have wisdom that we don't have, because they are older and have lived longer. **Asking** mom before acting is wise.

Let's now say mom says, "No, you may not use the stove." What are ways that we can react? (*Let the kids answer*). **Accepting** mom's answer is wise.

Let's say that mom says, "Yes, you may, but in a little while, when I can help you." What might happen if we disobey and turn on the stove anyway? Will we hurt ourselves or hurt mom the most? (*Encourage answers from all*). **Allowing** mom to direct our steps is wise.

Let's say mom says, "Sure, come in over and we'll cook something together." What should our response to mom be, then? It should be contentment with any answer mom gives, because we know that she loves us and that we can trust her answers to be the best. **Appreciating** our moms is wise.

Did you notice anything above? All of our responses start with the letter **A**!

Ask

Accept

Allow

Appreciate

These are four good words to remember when it comes to honoring our moms by being obedient and wise.

We can ask before we do.

We can accept mom's answer.

We can allow mom's direction

We can appreciate mom's wisdom.

Gather the family around mom and let her pray over us all. Then let's each one pray for mom, and ask God to help us to remember this little game of "Mother May I?" as we obey and love her with all of our hearts.

The Family Practice – I Just Can't – by Rachel Toalson

I am the mother of twins.

They were a terrifying surprise, lined up behind three boys and a girl I miscarried two months before they showed up in my womb.

So when we sat in that room for the first pregnancy sonogram, I cried at the way God had given two where one had slipped away, and it wasn't hard to choose the first name: Zadok. Our God remembers.

But.

They have never been easy.

There are two of them in every maddening stage, and they share a more complete brain. So when one of them is in the bathroom unrolling all the toilet paper from the last roll in the house, you can bet the other one is standing at the sink, ready to see how toilet paper looks in a puddle of water.

Sometimes I have a really hard time not getting carried away by my frustration and anger when it comes to their misbehavior.

I must have really been banking on Year 3 being easier than Year 2, because this week, two days after they celebrated their birthday, I lost it. Completely crumbled.

They were down for their naps, and one of them kept trying to sneak the socks out of his sock drawer for hand puppet fun and the other one was rearranging stuffed animals into slippers he must have grabbed when I had my back turned, and I was trying to get some work done. After the third time I had to warn them that it wasn't play time, it was nap time, it happened.

I raged and stomped around and said things I shouldn't have said, about how they're just so dang hard ALL THE TIME, and how I wish they could be different, and how, dear God, I never asked for twins.

*That talk followed me all the way to my writing chair, where I sat and shook and cried, because sometimes I just can't handle the way **they** are.*

Except the truth is, sometimes I can't handle the way *I* am.

Just that morning, before any boys were awake and the baby slept in my arms, I wrote in my journal about the twins and how I really want to like them as much as I love them, and God please help.

And then this.

It's startling how quickly an attitude can come flaring back, how those negative thoughts can trail it like faithful friends.

I just can't handle them anymore, the voice in my head kept saying. ***I just can't, God.***

Please do something.

And then I heard another voice, a whisper breathing in my heart.

Choose to.

Every morning I wake up with renewed resolve to look with acceptance at my two boys with the identical eyes and noses and lips, and then that misbehavior mounts too high and the dislike comes creeping into the shadows, waiting for its moment.

I have to choose not to let it have its glory day.

I can rage all I want. I can try to adjust consequences and limit privileges and take away freedoms, but the deep, underlying attitudes I hold aren't changed by what they do. They are changed by the way I see.

It's not easy for moms of littles to see through acceptance-eyes and remember that they are just kids, because he's been told a million times not to play with LEGOs, and he is still doing it; and he's been handed the consequences of wandering from his naptime place a thousand times and he is still doing it; and we've stepped in dozens of times when they've unrolled that toilet paper roll, and *they are still doing it.*

Sometimes we get so wrapped up in how we want them to behave and who we wish they would be that we forget to see their ever-present curiosity that tells them to build a plane with LEGOs and their creativity that turns a slipper into a stuffed animal boat and the end of a toilet paper roll into a pirate's looking glass.

It's all still there, waiting for us. But we must change our lenses.

Every day we get to choose how we see our children. I get to choose whether I will see my twins as difficult, disobedient 3-year-olds who should know and do better or as intensely curious and creative boys who will do anything in the world to avoid falling asleep.

And maybe it doesn't make my day any easier in terms of logistics or convenience.

But it will ease my heart. And that's worth more anyway.

How to adjust a negative attitude:

1. Cancel out the negativity. For every negative thought, lob three positive thoughts at it. When we bend beneath negativity, it takes a great effort to get up again. An example might be: "I never asked for twins," balanced by "They are so amazing to watch. I get to have double kisses every minute of the day. I love to watch them figure things out together."

2. Have a staring contest. Sometimes our negative attitudes just need a little breathing room. Looking into our child's eyes and connecting with who they are deep down can turn that attitude right around. If your children are older, share with each other your thoughts and feelings at that moment.

3. Choose gratitude. When you're at your wits' end with your child, list the reasons you're thankful for him/her. Fill a whole sheet of paper. Write it in a letter to him/her. Kids love knowing what we love about them.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - He Hears the Birds – by Marcy Lytle

"The doves are back," he comments, as I'm sitting at the table on the computer clicking away on the keyboard not hearing a thing around me. I'm surprised I even heard his comment about the doves, but I did… and I stopped to listen.

I listened for a few seconds to their cooing and marveled that my husband heard the doves. The cooing was quiet and blended in to the morning noises of the day – the garbage truck as it stopped to pick up waste, the cars driven by parents hurrying their children to school, and the coffee maker in the background as it filled my husband's cup with his favorite beverage of the day.

After a few seconds, I went back to my work and never heard those birds again.

"The birds are chirping," he says to me as he's leaving for work. Again, for a second time, I'm clicking away on my keyboard too busy to be bothered with the chirping birds. But there they were, when I stopped for a few seconds once again, and heard them. In fact, my husband joined in the chorus, as he chirped. He's really good at mimicking bird noises – especially woodpeckers!

My husband left for work, and here I sit clicking on my keyboard again, but I'm writing this message to myself and hopefully many of you, who have also not realized that the birds are back, they're singing and chirping, and green is growing.

I rarely look at birds or listen to their voices. However, I do observe and become annoyed at their droppings on my patio furniture or their diving when I step out my front door and scare them from their perch on a branch nearby. But the birds are mentioned several times in the bible, that we are to notice them.

Birds are mentioned at creation, five times, in Genesis 1 and 2.

Psalm 104 even talks of the birds' voices being lifted up among the branches!

Matthew 6 reminds us to observe the birds and how they don't worry or fret over their food, because their heavenly father feeds them.

Luke 12 reminds us of our value, being of much more value than the birds.

There are even birds mentioned in the book of Revelation, when describing heaven in all of its glory!

Since I've heard my husband twice now call attention to the birds cooing, chirping, and singing, I'm going to purpose today to listen to them. My husband has an amazing way of living life – each day – one day at a time – observing the simplicity of nature and God's goodness everywhere. I live a hurried life – each day planning the next – observing my lists and things to accomplish and do.

I don’t want him to show up again in the morning and draw my attention to the birds singing. I want to get up and hear them for myself.

In fact, I’m listening right now and they’re talking incessantly about something, right outside my window, with all sorts of chirps, high and low pitches, short and long sounds…and it’s making me smile.

I think it’s going to take some purposeful effort on my part to open the windows in the early morning and stop to listen, before I open my laptop to click, but I want to do it. I want to be the one who says to my husband as he arrives in the kitchen,

“The birds are singing. Can you hear them?”

Healthy Habits - Outside Therapy – by Georganne Schuch

If I could only be thankful for one modern invention, I think it would be air conditioning. If you don't live in Texas, maybe you don't share my enthusiasm. Come on down in August, and we'll discuss it. Outside. In the sun. With no breeze. Then, I think you may be more inclined to share my point of view.

Honestly, as much as I love air conditioning in the summer, I realize the need for getting outside at least some of the time. Yep, I'd rather do a summer hibernation, similar to bears, but during the heat rather than the cold. But my body tells me repeatedly that I need some outdoor time.

Sun gets a bad rap these days with the increase in skin cancer rates, but sun still shouldn't be avoided at all costs. Likewise, air quality concerns and allergies keep a lot of people behind closed doors. No one wants to overload their respiratory system with snot-inducing and cough-producing emissions. Cedar is the most hated of all trees in our area of Texas. If you haven't experienced cedar fever, you're missing a real treat in misery.

Despite all that, **getting some fresh O_2 and rays everyday is really good for both your mental and physical health.**

Everyone knows that sun exposure increases Vitamin D levels. In fact, the body synthesizes Vitamin D through sun exposure faster and with fewer side effects than when absorbed from food or supplementation. Just 15-20 minutes a day of sun exposure without sunscreen is enough to boost your Vitamin D levels, though skin pigmentation affects absorption rates. What does Vitamin D do for you, you ask? It is important for the regulation of calcium and phosphorus absorption, think healthy bones and teeth. While sun exposure has been blamed for skin cancer, Vitamin D actually helps protect against some cancers.

In addition to Vitamin D, research shows that sunlight helps reduce cholesterol and lower blood pressure. It builds the immune system and increases oxygen content in the blood. Sunlight even cures depression. Ever heard of seasonal affective disorder? It's real and can be mitigated, if not cured, with time in the sun.

Have trouble sleeping? A little dose of sunshine may be all you need. Living all your time in an artificially controlled environment confuses your body's circadian rhythm, a 24-hour cycle that regulates biochemical, physiological, and behavioral processes. In other words, your body can't tell the difference between daytime and nighttime. Getting outside helps it zone in on what time it is and what it needs to be doing, as in knowing when to shut down at night and when to wake up in the morning.

As with most things, sun exposure should be done in moderation. Use natural sunblock or clothing to avoid over exposure. If you're outside for long periods of time, remember to stay hydrated with water.

Don't forget that fresh air comes with all that sunlight. Obviously, you're breathing air all the time; however, in some areas clean air is in such short supply that you have to buy it in a bar. That's not the norm most places, at least for now. And while people with air-borne allergies or

who live in smog-prone areas appreciate air purifiers, a little time in a park may just give you the extra boost that money can't buy. The smell of fresh cut grass, blooming flowers, and even a little sweat helps clear the mind and improve concentration.

So, while I appreciate the invention of air conditioners and don't plan to turn mine off during the summer, I will plan my days to include some real time outside, maybe not at noon, but definitely with sunshine and fresh air.

Sources: http://health.usnews.com/health-news/family-health/heart/articles/2008/06/23/time-in-the-sun-how-much-is-needed-for-vitamin-d

http://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-5999/10-Healing-Benefits-of-the-Sun.html

http://www.healthline.com/health/depression/benefits-sunlight#1

Beauty for Ashes - Praise Him in the Dark – by Pam Charro

I don't like long trials.

Does anyone find it natural to say nice things to God when life isn't looking so good?

I definitely don't. But I just got so tired of hearing myself complaining during my time with the Lord that praying to him wasn't fun, and there didn't seem to be any power in it.

I came across Psalm 22:3 at one point, and, even though I had *read* it several times in the past, it seemed I was *seeing* it for the first time.

"The Lord inhabits the praises of His people."

Does that mean that I will see God's power when I start to praise him? Even before things seem to be getting any better? It was probably worth it to find out, especially since whining all the time wasn't getting me anywhere. And the Bible seemed to support it in other verses, too, particularly in the story of Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20) when he and his people were up against an army that was much too powerful for them to defeat. All they did was praise God and their victory miraculously came!

Maybe I could find my successes in the same way.

So I set my mind to praising God all of the time, particularly when I didn't feel like it. I started telling him that I believed him and everything that he said about who he is, and what it meant for me and my situation. It wasn't easy, especially at first. It was discipline, but it was words of faith when my feelings just wanted to be dark.

Have I seen how powerful God is in every trial I have been through since? Honestly, not necessarily in the outcomes of those trials, *at least not yet*. But that doesn't seem nearly as important to me anymore, because I have such a greater faith in who God is for me, no matter how those things turn out.

The Lord is powerful, loving, all-knowing, and only wants good for me.
Not just when everything seems okay, but all of the time.

It is still a constant discipline for me to remember to praise God, regardless of how I feel. But it is definitely worth the effort it takes to focus on what he says is true. It gets easier as I do it more and more, and I am so much happier because God has rewarded the faith it takes to speak light into the darkness, even when I don't see any light. Maybe he rewards it even more because I don't see it.

Created for Life – Perspectives – by Ginny Hurley

I love people.

I always have.

Many over the years have said I view life with pink-colored glasses, and I know they weren't exactly saying that was good, but I just say to myself, "It's worked out pretty well so far."

Listening to tales recaptured by my Uncle Rod made me laugh as a child and become aware of the joy found in loving people. He would recount funny stories about my beloved grandfather, my shy mother, and several other victims of his humor. The stories were always told, and still are, as he is 84 years young, with humor so rich that I couldn't help realizing the joy of human nature, and the hilarity of our escapades.

Recently, I took an overseas trip to Turkey to visit a pastor friend of mine. The cost of the trip was shared by my church as they were sending me as an ambassador of encouragement. How I shared that with my school (where I teach) in order to take off several days after spring break, turned out to be no problem. I have a wonderful school and they embrace a Christian Worldview. However, to say it mildly, many friends and family were appalled that I would go to such a dangerous place in order to offer the goodness of the Kingdom. Many precious believers prayed and I knew the Lord had said, "Go," so off I flew, with just mild trepidation of dirty streets and scary people.

Upon arrival at the enormous airport, I was greeted with smiling faces, foreign language, and perfect direction to my domestic flight. I arrived to meet my friend without a hitch, despite the dire predictions.

These very precious people were the opposite of scary; and actual street cleaners with brooms and soap were hosing down the streets! While sauntering along the business district, cheerful young men came out and offered me chai tea or coffee, my choice, *on the house*. While shopping for supplies with my friend, people came out of the back with steaming cups of the most delicious treats, again, *on the house*. Of course since I couldn't understand a word they said, except of course, tea or coffee, I just smiled and said, "Why, thank you!" in my most southern drawl.

In my vast experience with people, as I am getting on in age, all I could think of was that people everywhere desire the same things.

Everyone I've ever known or met wants to be loved and walk in freedom.

It is such good news to realize that this is just what Jesus came to restore, our ability to walk with Him in His Presence and receive all the love and freedom He died to give us. Our perspectives of life flow from our limited view and our inability to see as God sees. Most of us see and make our judgments based on our own personal experiences and the culture we live in.

Isn't it wonderful that we serve a God of such magnificent eyesight that He lives to show His splendor to anyone who asks or watches?

His perspective of every human is, "I sent my Son just for you."

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road - Speaking Life – by Sylvia Neusch

Words.

They can encourage, or they can destroy.
They can tear down, or they can create.

Proverbs 18:21 tells us, "*The power of life or death is in the tongue.*"

This is a huge statement!

So, what do words have to do with marriage? I'm glad you asked!

Our communication with one another is, of course, made up of words. When my husband and I do marriage counseling with couples, one of the first things we emphasize is the importance of good communication skills. These necessary skills are a back-pocket tool in every successful marriage. You keep them accessible in your back pocket because you never know when you might need to pull them out.

It is inevitable when two powerful people enter into a covenant of marriage, that there will be differences in opinion. **When you are armed with good communication skills, then you learn how to express yourself without harming or wounding the other person.** It can be awkward and sometimes uncomfortable at first, especially if you have bad habits of speech that need to change. But, a little work in this area pays off in huge dividends as your marriage begins to grow and flourish.

I was raised in a household where negativity was a frequent pattern. After my husband and I married, I was convicted one day reading,

Proverbs 14:1, "*The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down."*

The Lord spoke to me and said I could substitute the word '*mouth*' for hands. In other words, if I continued on the path of negativity, I could tear down my house with my mouth, or by the words that I spoke.

It has been a process, and I'm so thankful for the work God has done. I've learned that I have a choice when it comes to the words I use. A wise person builds her house, or chooses to speak life into her spouse and family.

It's not enough to just quit speaking negatively, but transformation in our relationships occurs when we began speaking life.

Sometimes, in the midst of difficult situations and relationships it can be difficult to speak life. This is where our walk with the Holy Spirit is so important. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how He sees your spouse. What is his potential and how is he known in Heaven? Remember God called Gideon a *mighty warrior* way before Gideon did anything mighty. God can see the beginning and the end and what each of us can become. When we partner with the Holy Spirit in releasing life over our spouse, we are well on our way to building our house.

Remember, God created the universe through words. Words have creative power. We are created in His image and our words are powerful, too. The declarations we make with our mouths can go a long way in helping to create the kind of marriages we have always longed for.

Below are some declarations to begin speaking over your marriage:

- Our marriage is blessed and we have a delightful inheritance in God.
- Today I choose to see my spouse from Heaven's perspective as I speak life and truth over him.
- Our marriage is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ and His kingdom principles.
- I declare that every hopeless situation must bow its knee to the authority of Jesus Christ. *If God is for us, then who can be against us?*
- Today, I choose to walk in humility, honor, and creative wisdom as I look for ways to love and bless my spouse through my words.

Learning to speak faith-filled and life-filled words over your spouse and family is life changing. Not only will people and circumstances begin to positively shift and change, you will be transformed as well.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock, and my Redeemer – Psalm 19:14

Date Night Fun – Pedal Power – by Marcy Lytle

Did you know that May is National Bike Month? I didn't know that until I started writing this piece, so I decided that pedaling might be a great activity/theme for date night in May! Bicycling is always fun for two, as well as pedaling around town or in parks other ways, too! I think getting outside (before the summer heat turns up) is so healthy for us physically, but it's also healthy and fun for us as couples! In this merry month of May, let's enjoy date night at all times of the day – together – moving our feet!

Bicycle Built for Two – Maybe you don't know where to rent one of these, but if you do – go for it! If you don't, then get out your bikes or rent two bikes and head out on a trail, ending at a favorite burger joint. Our newspaper recently listed such trails. With a little bit of searching, you can find a park with a trail, and see if you then can find a place to fill up when you're done. Check out this stash bag for your goodies as you travel.

Pleasant Pedal Boating – This is such a fun activity and it seems we forget about it so often! Pedal boating across the water can be a great time for conversation and enjoying the great outdoors. Find a place near you, and reserve a boat for two! Fill your water bottles and add in strawberries and basil, for a refreshing drink to carry with you, as well as a great trail mix to enjoy! And consider even taking a sketch pad to park along the banks and draw, as you observe wildlife and pretty foliage.

Cycling Classes – Sign up at your local fitness center and take a cycling class where you can bike to music and colorful videos together. You might want to make it a regular routine! Getting and staying healthy together can be encouraging to each one of you. After your class, head home to enjoy a movie about bicycling. Premium Rush is our choice – download it from Netflix or order it ahead of time to have for your movie library!

Enjoy a Pedicab – Does your downtown area have pedicabs? If so, save up to ride one and let someone else do the pedaling! If not, see if you can find a town nearby that does! Plan your route ahead of time and stop for dinner, along the way. No pedicabs nearby? Have fun hailing a taxi and hopping a ride, instead of driving your own car. And why not pull out your cute hat to wear for this fun outing?

Pedal to the Metal – If bicycling, pedaling a boat, or taking a class isn't agreeable with you when date night is near, then hop in your car, put the pedal to the metal and drive… Where to? An unplanned, spontaneous drive can be one of the best dates ever! Pick a direction and go. Look for these things along the way: pretty flowers, cows grazing, a unique shaped tree, an old abandoned house, etc. Snap photos of each. Be sure to keep track of your journey, so you can get back home! And try out this cute picnic basket to fill with goodies while you go!

Bicycling is fun, moving our feet together is invigorating, or just getting out of town for the day is scrumptious! Don't let this last month before the summer heat slip by without enjoying the last of the cool breezes together, hand in hand…or foot by foot!

After 30 Years - Leave it Unsaid – by Marcy Lytle

I rarely keep my thoughts to myself, at least around my husband. We are very open in our communication. But there have been times when I've been told that it probably would have been better if I'd said nothing. Proverbs 25:11 says," Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances." I'd like to say, "Like rotten potatoes in a vegetable bin is a word spoken at the wrong time."

In other words, when we speak things that are better left unsaid, they stink, they ruin any kindnesses previously spoken, and unlike potatoes – they're hard to throw away once they've escaped through our teeth.

There are things we as women say to our husbands that if they said those things to us – we'd shut the door to our room and cry – accusing them of being the meanest guys, ever.

"You look fat in that shirt. Go change it."

"Your breath stinks. Go away."

I've been guilty of both of the above statements.

It's not wise to speak everything we think about our husbands, just as it's not good to speak everything we think about others. My mom used to say that we can't keep birds from flying over our heads, but we can certainly keep them from building a nest in our hair. And furthermore, if we keep that nest of bad thoughts out of our hair, the little chirping, nagging baby birds that peck our husbands to death won't hatch and appear, either.

Obviously, there are times when we need to speak to our spouse about things that might be unpleasant, but we can certainly converse in a nice manner. But there are simply some things that need to be left unsaid, if we want to have a husband who holds his head high, loves us and honors us, enjoys time alone with us, and is kind and considerate back to us.

What are these things that we need to leave unsaid?

Accusations. It's not cool to attack our husband's character out loud, no matter how off he seems on any given day. And it's also not cool to attack his family members (especially his mother.) Accusations against character, calling people names that define what a horrible person they are, never accomplish any good.

Criticism. Our husbands are not going to perform chores, planning of dates, or even making a lunch, like we do – and they shouldn't have to. They are not our prize poodle that we've taught to jump through rings of fire for audience applause. They are men with opinions, mannerisms, ways of doing things, etc., and criticizing them just because they're different is just plain rude. And rudeness never helps a marriage.

Fearful lies. If we constantly spurt out fears that our husbands are looking at other women, that they are wanting to leave us, that they don't love us anymore – without reason – we are creating an avalanche of rocks about to slide down and kill everything in its path. There are times when

fear may be present because of actions, but when fear is present because of our own insecurities – we need find our identity and security in Christ – and receive and accept the love of our husbands.

Threats. "Let's just get a divorce," is something that should never be shouted in the heat of an argument. The threats only multiply from there, when we start with one. It may seem like nothing, after the argument is over, but threats of leaving the one to whom we've made a covenant with is like a dagger in the heart. And if children are in earshot, these words are killers to their vulnerable hearts, as well.

Fantasy. On any given talk show, when a cute actor appears on the set, the camera pans across the crowd to see all of the women in the audience swoon at the looks of the tall, handsome man "of their dreams." When these fantasies are voiced to our husbands in the form of asking him to perform or dress like that man we've been thinking about, it's like cutting off one of his limbs. He won't be able to perform to full capacity because our minds are on another. We should never compare our husbands to another man on his looks, his masculinity, or his sexiness. And if we think such thoughts of fantasy, we're headed down a dangerous path.

There are many other things we need to leave unsaid, but we won't be able to keep our mouths closed, if we entertain the thoughts that fly above our heads like the birds mentioned above. However, if we keep our eyes, ears, and minds focused on the truth about our marriage and what God says about our husbands, we will be less likely to let a foul ball hit him in the chest. And if too many of those balls hit him, he'll be unable to stay in the game.

If we have trouble in our marriage, we need to seek help on our knees, in a counselor's office, or when we're quiet and can talk to our husbands without any of the sentiments above. And if our marriages are healthy, and we're still spewing out accusations, criticisms, lies, threats, and fantasy – then we need to take a look at what's going on deep inside our hearts that causes us to tear down the most beautiful gift God has given us – our marriage.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Hidden Gems: Memories by Kayley Ryan

As I scanned through pictures of my childhood leading up to my senior year, I was filled with joy and gratefulness. Each snapshot represented more than just a moment in time: it was a memory that shaped my life.

We teenagers underestimate the power of memory. That's what hit me as I was clicking through the pictures on my senior slideshow. Once we reach the teenage years, we want to grow up too fast, and it tends to be the parents or other adult figure in our lives who try to slow that process down.

I can think of numerous instances when I sighed in exasperation to let my mom know just how much I disliked stopping on the trail to take a picture. But what if she had listened to the grunting of my childhood ignorance and let go of that picture-perfect moment? I wouldn't be able to look back and enjoy it today.

As I peruse these captured moments in time, I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude for each memory and for each person within it. At which point, I tend to tear up and get distracted.

But looking at my past memories is nothing to be sad about. Life goes on, true, but memories last forever, and they are symbols of those moments and people in my life that have shaped me to be the person I am today.

In writing this article, I have just recently celebrated the Passover on Good Friday, a meal which both Jews and Christians commemorate. I'm reminded of a passage in the Old Testament that describes how Jews are to remember how God saved them by annually celebrating this meal and all the traditions that come with it.

Verses 26-27 have always stood out to me in this passage (Exodus 12). In them, the child asks the parent, "What does this ceremony mean to you?" I imagine a four-year-old in the 21st century would ask something more along the lines of, "Why are we doing this?"

Then, the parent has this incredible opportunity to pass on a revelation of truth to his or her child by saying, "'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'"

In the same way that traditions and festivals keep that gratefulness for salvation alive to the Jews, photos and journal entries keep my gratefulness for my family and friends alive to me.

I'll be honest. I'm a bit of a packrat when it comes to memories. I have a keepsake box filled with every surviving birthday card I've ever received, the first few books I read, and my first diary.

Despite the amount of spring cleaning these nostalgic tendencies of mine have necessitated, I recognize that each item and picture is of inestimable value. It's a real joy to me to read old journal entries, the good and the bad, the beautifully written and the one-sentence summaries with terrible spelling.

I don't think I value these merely because of the places I went or the things that I did. If I did, I'd be somewhat superficial. **Pictures and journal entries can represent great experiences, but what makes those experiences meaningful are the people you spend them with.**

As my mom described, "Relationships are so important in life. Sometimes, we can get so driven to succeed or so stressed out with what's going on in the present that we put those relationships on the back burner. Those relationships *are* our life."

What I noticed about each picture in that slideshow is that I always looked the happiest when I was *with* other people. Otherwise, I just looked like someone who was trying too hard to give a model pose or smile.

My first full-length play with my best friend, Hannah Greer, was *Pride and Prejudice*. I played Lydia Bennet, and she played Catherine (Kitty) Bennet. Our casting was perfect because we didn't really have to act. We were playing best friends and sisters and were already best friends and practically sisters.

I still remember opening night: two giggling girls in grade school trying to contain ourselves. As I look back on that play and the loads of fun we had, I am so grateful that God put Hannah in my life.

While I tended to go shopping or play dress-up with my friends at that age, I tended to pursue much more rugged activities with my family members. Hiking the Guadalupe Mountains in Texas with a blue pack on my back that was deemed light as a feather despite my protests to the contrary, I earned the nickname, "Feather Blue."

Yet, I have a picture that unfortunately didn't make the final senior slideshow cut in which I am collapsed on the trail, drinking water, and refusing to hike further. See? Proof my pack was heavier than a feather.

Overcome with exhaustion, it was only through God's assistance when I called on Him that I was able to make it to the top of the mountain. When I caught up to my mom, dad, and brother who were already setting up camp on the top, I loudly proclaimed, "I think this place is awesome, and I think we've made a lot of progress!" My hyper optimism after a trip filled with my complaining must have come as a surprise, and it's now become somewhat of a tradition for someone in the family to quote my proclamation any time we've just come on a long journey.

Speaking of journeys, these past four years in high school have taken me on quite a few ups and downs. During the ups, I've felt like I'm on top of the world. But during the downs, I have had a serious case of senioritis.

As excited as I am about graduating and forging new memories at Texas Christian University—where I will be for the next four years of my life—I cannot forget my past memories and the people in them who have influenced me.

If there’s one statement for you to come away with from this article, it’s to not grow up too quickly, but to hold fast to your memories of experiences and people who have shaped you and to be grateful for their influence in your life.

Oh, and one more thing: Let your parents take pictures of you. You’ll want them for later.

“Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory.”

~Dr. Seuss

Bush Bean Blessings - Footprints Forever - by Tammy Morrison

In this day and age, we hear the term "digital footprint" tossed about. This term describes the trail or traces--footprints--that people leave online. Everything that is posted by or about an individual is available in the virtual world forever. This accumulation--or trail of data--is open for the world to see. Needless to say, there has been much discussion about this lasting effect or lasting impression of one's life.

Make no mistake about it: mothers fulfill the same type of impression in their child's life. There is an indelible effect woven into the very fabric of a child.

From the womb to the grave, a mother's impression is evident in a child's life.

Our moms surround us in every way--from the physical, life-sustaining home from which we begin, to the end of our time (whether she's with us or not), the impression of our mothers runs deep. Imagine...God loves us so much that He created mothers! It's one of the greatest gifts He could ever bestow upon us.

For me, personally, God couldn't have gifted me with anyone better than Nancy Ann Williams Kuykendall. She is my lifelong treasure...my hero. I've always told her that I want to be just like her when I grow up (and in response she just laughs her incredible laugh that warms my heart and says, "Oh, Tammy! You're so funny!"). Frankly, I don't think I'll ever be too much like her for the simple reason that she's one of a kind. Let me describe her to you. Maybe you'll connect with how blessed I am because you'll think I'm describing *your* mom.

I've already mentioned that she's a one of a kind treasure and my hero. I can say those things because she is the most precious, selfless human being I've ever met. She is as good as gold. She's the epitome of a lady without being a “prissy pants.” She's fun, loves to laugh and have a good time. She's kind-hearted and gentle and doesn't speak ill of others. My mama shines the light of Jesus like no one I've ever seen. She's soft, warm, considerate, giving, caring, and loving. *See why I want to be like her?* Talk about a forever footprint on my life!

The lasting effect--the impression--of my mom will ring through the ages. Already, her impression is evident in my daughter's and my granddaughter's lives. The echo of her voice will continue to resonate throughout time. Her beautiful life will continue to shine because of the effect she has on those she loves and influences (which just so happens to be countless lives).

There's no greater compliment than to hear, "You sound like and act just like your mom!" I can't think of anyone I'd rather emulate. The beauty of it for me is that if I follow her pattern of living, she is an incredible model of Christ-likeness for which I endeavor to live, which is what I believe God intended for mothers.

Moms bear the responsibility of unconditional love, acceptance, and forgiveness.

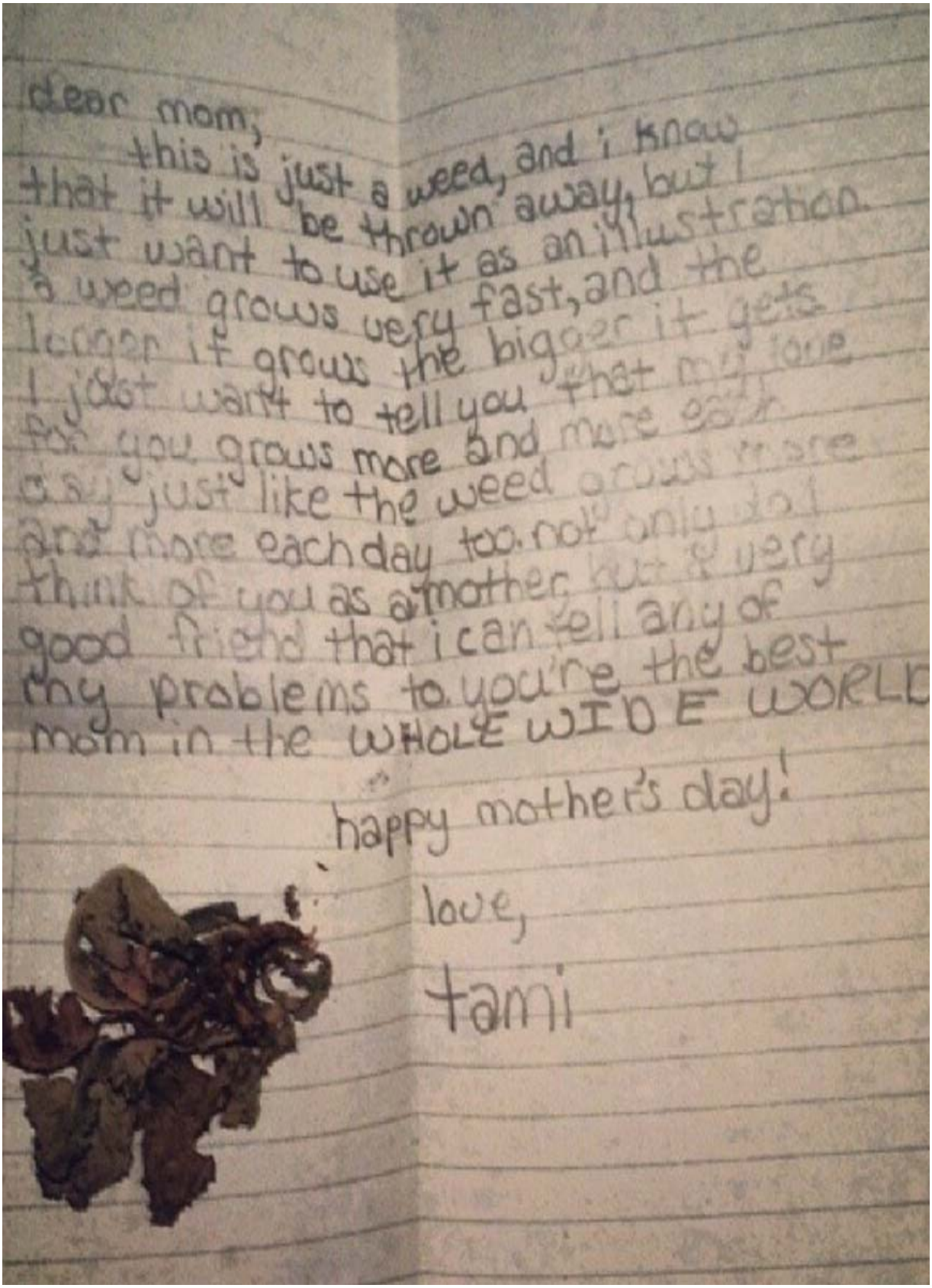
The marvelous love of a mother can be likened to that of Jesus: a firm hand to guide, direct, steer, prod, correct when necessary, yet a loving heart to wipe the brow, tend to the hurt and harm of life, gently caress the spirit, and to celebrate life to the fullest.

When I was 11 or 12 years old, I wanted so much to give my mom an amazing Mother's Day gift. Silly me, I went out to the yard, picked some weeds with a dandelion in the mix, and I wrote my

mom a love note, something to the effect that my love was like weeds: nothing could destroy it, and it would always come back no matter what. Not too long ago, I was visiting my parents and we were going through old treasures of photos, cards, and the like, as we so often do. What do you think we came across? Yep! That love note with the remnants of the weeds from all those years ago! It still makes me cry just thinking about the honor of knowing my mom kept that love note through all the years. (She probably needed to re-read it a few times to remember my promise of love when I acted like a punk.)

I am continually amazed at the undying devotion of mothers. Their forever footprint is felt in our hearts and their lasting impression radiates in our lives. Today--and every day--honor your mother for the precious treasures she possesses. Share your love...share your life with her. Appreciate the lasting effect she has imparted to you and know that her gift will go on and on and on through you.

"A capable, intelligent, and virtuous woman--who is he who can find her? She is far more precious than jewels and her value is far above rubies or pearls"
Proverbs 31:10 (Amplified Bible).


dear mom;
this is just a weed, and i know that it will be thrown away, but i just want to use it as an illustration. a weed grows very fast, and the longer it grows the bigger it gets. i just want to tell you that my love for you grows more and more each day just like the weed grows more and more each day too. not only do i think of you as a mother but a very good friend that i can tell any of my problems to. you're the best mom in the WHOLE WIDE WORLD

happy mother's day!

love,

tami

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Moving Forward - A Godly Giver – by Pam Charro

I love so many things about God, and there is so much about him that I want to imitate.

One of his most challenging attributes for me to copy is that of being a giver.

I started asking myself this week, "What kind of a giver is God? What motivates him and what is his heart toward giving?"

Paul quoted Jesus as saying the giver is more blessed than the receiver (Acts 20:35). The Lord understands what it takes for a person to be happy and healthy, and one of those things is an attitude of generosity toward giving! It definitely goes against what most of us have been taught, but it is true. The happiest people I have known hold very loosely onto "things" and value relationships first. It feels so wonderful to bless others, and it is a great safeguard against selfishness (which only creates misery).

In Matthew 5, Jesus claims that the Father blesses all people generously, not just those who live lives that are pleasing to him.

Do I only want to give to people who will appreciate it?

If so, I am not giving like God does. He gives because he is a giver, not because anyone deserves it. God enjoys giving. While I need his wisdom and discernment in making wise choices about giving, it should never be because I like one person more than another, or feel that a person deserves my giving more because he or she appreciates it.

God enjoys giving, but he often gives even when it hurts because of his great love (a great example is how he gave his only son for us all).

How often do I give when it hurts to do so?

This, again, requires wisdom, but it is impossible to be a godly giver if I only do it when it's comfortable. I need to ask the Holy Spirit for guidance when opportunities present themselves for me to be a sacrificial giver.

- May I resemble Christ more and more in being the kind of giver who knows how blessed I am in doing so.
- May I always hold relationships in higher regard than *things*.
- May I have godly wisdom in giving without favoritism, often, even when it hurts.

I will never be able to out-give God, but I sure do want to look like him as much as possible.

Saddle Up – Reliability – by Melissa Critz

Grabbing the flat head screwdriver, I head towards Elijah in order to pick his hooves.

Yes, I use this tool.

The typical tool for picking hooves just doesn't seem to work with the hard Texas soil and rocks that get stuck in the hooves of a shod horse. I run my hand down my horse's leg and give the 'cluck' that signals to him that I need him to lift his leg. Domingo doesn't even need the cue. He shifts his weight and lifts his leg as I place my hand on his elbow. Elijah is good for the most part, but has his moments of slight rebellion.

As I clean all the clumped mud out of the sole of the hoof, I notice his shoe seems slightly off. The nails on one side have pulled through the hoof near the base so the shoe is free on one side but solidly tight on the other, as those nails are still intact in the hoof wall. This means no exercise for Elijah as I cannot remove this shoe. I sigh loudly with disappointment and grab my cell phone. I report this situation in voicemail to my usual farrier, saddle Domingo, and head to the round pen.

A week goes by, and after more attempts (which, sadly, I must say has been happening over a good number of months), I still have a loose shoe. Eventually and thankfully, the shoe comes off on its own…but I still have a horse without a front shoe. The decision is made – the hunt is on. A new, RELIABLE farrier is needed, and the pursuit begins.

Reliability – this word that says a great deal about something or someone. Having reliable appliances is a plus and having a reliable car is definitely a good thing. *Agreed?* How about reliable people? How important is that? Of course, we have all failed in this area to some extent, as are human and simply mess up. But don't we all agree that when we are counting on someone to be where and when they say they will be is extremely paramount? Isn't this expected for appointments made to repair our houses or businesses?

Reliability - my saddle partner spoke to me once again. People fail each other. It is guaranteed to happen. Thus we have the need to forgive one another. I kept thinking on this, but my mind kept going to who **IS** truly reliable – Our Heavenly Father.

Two definitions for reliable are: "able to be trusted to do or provide what is needed" and "able to be believed." Our Father promises both of these.

He says in Philippians 4:19:
"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

Can we trust Him on this? Of course!

His Word says so, in Proverbs 3:5-6:
"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him and He will make your paths straight."

The second definition states that reliability is "able to be believed." Is our Father 'able to be believed'?

Just look around at all of creation, the beauty of it all, the simplicity as well as the complexity. Creation, of course, includes people, his people. He created people in His image:

Genesis 1:27 says,
“God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

He is reliable.

His Word says in Matthew 28:20
“…teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

He IS reliable. He is able to be believed. He is able to be trusted to do or provide what is needed.

We cannot count on people to meet that definition in its totality. BUT we can count on the Lord, put all faith and trust in Him, seek Him, and extend grace and forgiveness to others when they fall short, as no one can be completely reliable. But in knowing that, we can turn to Him. He knows our hearts and wants us to know His heart. The Lord is always there for us for anything and everything.

He is reliable.

Psalm 33:4 says,
“For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.”

1 Kings 5:56 says,
"Blessed be the LORD who has given rest to his people Israel, according to all that he promised. Not one word has failed of all his good promise, which he spoke by Moses his servant."

My saddle partner is reliable. His promises are forever. He wants the best for His children. Always, I can trust Him. I can give all to Him. He will always be there.

He is reliable.

Real Stories - Jesus is Better – By Jill Watson

It all started when I was 12 and my grandmothers started teaching me how to sew.

I loved the idea of getting to make my own clothes and loved coming up with crazy outfits for the celebrities I saw on television. My mom and I started attending the University of Texas fashion show every year and it became clear to me that this was what I wanted to do. I wanted to study fashion design at the University of Texas. I wanted to have a collection walk down the runway. I wanted to be a famous fashion designer. So, I set down that path. My senior year rolled around and I designed my collection and saw it go down the runway. I even won Most Marketable Collection. But there was one difference that my 12 year old self did not foresee. I was married. Don't get me wrong, I love being married and I love my husband more than anything, but I didn't have the freedom to move to New York that I thought I would have when I graduated college. That last piece of the puzzle, becoming a famous fashion designer, was going to be a lot harder to achieve if I stayed in Austin.

Here I was, married, graduated, and on my own. I needed to get a job to help pay our bills, so I started working at Chico's. This felt like a major blow to me. I was so embarrassed and so ashamed that this is what I was doing with my life. Ultimately, Chico's wasn't able to give me enough hours, so I got a full time job as a receptionist for a construction company.

Fashion to construction was definitely not what I envisioned for myself.

To make matters worse, the first question anyone asks when you meet them is, "What do you do?" Anytime anyone asked me that question I was so embarrassed. Not outwardly, but I was dying on the inside. About every six months or so, I usually spiraled into a breakdown about how much I hated my job, or about how unfulfilling it was, or how if I could just do something creative I would be happier. My husband started to notice the pattern and that I wasn't actually making any changes. I just seemed to be putting a band aid over the top of my issues and not addressing them head on. As we started digging deeper, I began to discover how much I found my identity in people's approval.

My desire for approval was so deep that I felt like I didn't know who I was if people weren't proud of the work I was doing or didn't think I had a cool job.

This theme of having a "cool" job kept coming back over and over. I know that might seem a little silly, but I so desperately wanted people to look at me with approving eyes and say, "Man, Jill has such a cool job."

With the help of husband and my community, I actually began to fight instead of just letting myself be the victim. God really began changing my heart and showing me that my identity as his daughter, the daughter of the Most High King, is so much greater than any identity this world can offer me. It is better than having a cool job. It is better than having all of the world's approval. Philippians 3: 8 started to make more sense to me when it says "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus my Lord."

Jesus is better.

He is better than the approval of those I admire most. He is better than a cool job. He is better than all the success I could ever achieve. All of those things are loss when compared to

knowing Jesus. That shift in thinking was a huge step for me, but still something I had to fight to believe every day. I did begin seeing my way of thinking change. I started talking more positively about my job and was able to admit fairly confidently that I worked for a construction company. I started to appreciate the benefits that my office job gave me and realized how much I loved the people I worked with.

In January of 2014, I decided I wanted to start pursuing a career in styling. This desire came from a much healthier place than it would have previously. I saw my opportunities start to grow and was actually really thankful that I had a full time job that allowed me flexibility and stability while trying this out. In Feb 2015, the company where I worked filed for bankruptcy and shut its doors. I had no idea that was going to happen and it was quite a shock. It is kind of funny to me when I look at it.

The time when I appreciated my job the most is when it was taken away.

I can't help but think that this is God's way of saying "Okay, Jill, do you really trust me?"

He could have taken my job away when I wanted him to, he could have given me the stability of finances until I proved myself a successful stylist. But His timing is good and perfect.

I look back at the last four years and I wouldn't trade the things God has taught me for a cooler job. He has grown me in ways I would have never been able to grow if he had given me what I wanted. This is proof to me that sometimes I might not see what God is doing in a moment, but that his plans are so much better than mine.

He is trustworthy.

He is better.

Jill was born and raised in Austin, TX and attended the University of Texas where she earned a degree in Apparel Design in 2010. She is married to her High School sweetheart, AJ, and they currently reside in south central Austin. She loves lattes, red lipstick, gray t-shirts, cuddling, cooking, picnics, throwing parties, leopard print, and most of all, Jesus.

FRESH THYME

Fresh THYME - A Heavy Load – by Marcy Lytle

Church was over. *His stuff* was lying on the seat, including a chocolate candy bar he'd bought from one of the youth kids.

"I'll be nice and put it in my purse," I said to myself silently.

"Why doesn't he carry his own purse?" I asked to myself, right after I had the nice thought.

Maybe it's because we're moms and we've carried everyone's "stuff" for years, maybe it's just me, but sometimes I can be nice and mean in the same moment. I really didn't want to carry his extras in my purse, but I picked up the candy bar and carried it, because it felt like the *right* thing to do.

Fast forward a few hours, we're in the car, it's a warm day, and I realize that chocolate candy bar is still in my purse!

"Why don't you carry your own stuff?" I ask, as I take out the candy bar, in hopes that it hadn't melted and run out of the paper in which it was enclosed, onto the fabric of my new backpack purse.

There it was:

That hidden resentment.

That nice thought gone bad.

That pointing finger and irritated heart.

All spilling over and ruining a good afternoon, just like what I thought the candy bar might do if left in my purse too long.

Over the years, on vacations, while out shopping, or just walking around, I had carried his stuff. At the pool when our kids were young, it was my tote that I packed, and he needed it to store his wallet. While sightseeing, he picked up a brochure (that I knew he'd never read) and asked me to carry it in my purse, and by the end of the day his stuff and the kids' stuff made my purse heavy, while his hands were fancy free to swing back and forth as he walked.

What a little thing, right?

Yet, I made it into a big thing! So one day…I pleaded, went with him, and we bought him his own man bag.

"Now, you can carry all of your own stuff," I declared.

However, over time that bag ended up in the floor of his car, and never on his shoulder. And I became irritated.

My husband has a servant's heart. I do not. But I'm learning.

This morning, I saw him scraping and cleaning a baking sheet I used last night that had burned juice stuck fast and hard to it. He gladly scrubbed and got it clean. He whistled while he picked up my big box of work that he delivers for me twice a week so that I won't have to get out and do it. He put in a load of towels before he left, and smiled as he hugged me good-bye.

He never once said, "Why did you leave this baking sheet out all night?" or "Can't you get out and take your own work in?" or "I washed the towels FOR you." He just gladly served and gave, and thought nothing of it.

I serve, and I give, and I think about it – and resent it.

I realize we both have different personalities and what might come easy for him, comes hard for me.

However, that cannot be an excuse for being rude, self-absorbed, and resentful.

Jesus tells us to give without letting our right hand know what our left hand is doing, to give cheerfully, and to give generously, without expecting anything in return.

This doesn't mean we become a doormat for everyone to step on. But it does mean picking up a little candy bar on the seat as a gesture of kindness and then saying nothing about it as you arrive home and potentially find it melted in the bottom of your purse. And it does mean dealing with resentment instead of carrying it around until it becomes heavier in your heart than a full backpack on your back.

The next time I see a candy bar my husband has purchased lying on the seat near me, I hope I pick it up and smile cheerfully as I carry it home, instead of arriving at the door with it weighing me down until I stumble and fall.

FRESH THYME - Condone or Condemn?- by Marcy Lytle

Every generation in the church has its own list of do's and don'ts of what's acceptable as a Christian, and what is "sin."

In my generation as a teen, we knew and didn't question a "big" sin like sex before marriage, because fear was instilled in us that we'd go straight to hell if we committed such a heinous act. So we picked at smaller things like what we wore and where we went, a list of "holy" rules to follow. The only thing is, we weren't any holier than the person who visited our church and didn't know about the rules, because we weren't any different on the inside. And before long, we bucked those rules and started wearing jeans and going to movies – two actions that felt so good and freeing. I know, that's hard to believe, but it's true.

In this generation, folks show up at church in shorts, attend all sorts of movies and concerts, and there's no discussion about *those* kinds of things. Instead, we have issues before us like living together before marriage, discovering our sexuality, divorcing because we've "outgrown" each other, and other kinds of relational "sins." I am including quotations around the word sin because it seems that sin is a word that is relative in our culture. If you think it's sin, then okay. But if I don't, let me be okay, too.

So here we sit in the church today, and a big topic it seems is,

"Do we condone things we used to call sin, or do we condemn those who commit such acts and call them sinners?"

What did Jesus do?

One of the most commonly read stories in the bible is one about the woman who was being stoned by the religious leaders because she was committing adultery, found in John 8. They were following the law and condemning her because of her sin. However, Jesus asked if there was one among them who was without sin, and there was not. They all walked away. It was then that Jesus did not condemn her, but he did say this,

"Go. From now on sin no more."

Did you know, that in the same chapter, down many more verses, the same group of guys picked up stones to throw at Jesus, because Jesus flat out told them that they were not of God, and they flat out accused Jesus of having a demon?

In one verse in this chapter, Jesus says this, "Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin," but "…if the Son makes you free you are free indeed."

Jesus set the woman free who was committing adultery. He didn't condone her sin by patting her on the head and soothing her conscience. He did three things:

- He met with her alone – face to face.
- He told her he did not condemn her or accuse her.
- He set her free to stop the sin.

So do we condone sin or do we condemn the sinner?

Jesus did neither.

The issue in this generation is not only do we condone or condemn, but is anything really a sin at all? If it feels good, we do it. It if makes us happy, why not? If I'm not hurting anyone, then what's the big deal?

So far, our society still adheres to calling the "big" sins when people commit them, like murder, stealing, and even lying. At least some of the time.

But those relational type sins that stir up some folks…are they really wrong? Can't we fall in love with who we are attracted to, and can't we be with them in intimacy when we want to? What's so wrong with that?

I guess the most interesting thing in the above story is how Jesus, the holy, spotless son of God was about to be stoned, in the same manner as the woman brought before him who was considered to be filthy and an outcast. Jesus also received the same punishment as a thief, when he hung on the cross, even though he had done no wrong. So Jesus knew what it was to feel condemnation.

However, one thing that set apart Jesus from all others was this statement that he said and believed, because it was true:

"I am the Light of the World, and he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the Light of life."

Our goal as Christians should be to have the same identity in Christ as he had with his Father, because after all, Christ lives within us.

Our goal as Christians should be to so reflect the light of God in the way we love others and love Him that we illuminate the darkness in others (yes, sin) so that they turn to Christ and follow him.

Our goal as Christians should be to focus on the light instead of the darkness, so that people are drawn to the Light. It's then and only then that they can leave the darkness behind.

You see, when we condemn and point at the sin – instead of exalting and shining the light – we just send people away in shame, anger, and bitterness because we've attacked who they are. Those religious guys started attacking Jesus and who he claimed to be, as well. But Jesus knew who he was, and he was confident in his relationship with his Father and did things that "pleased him." – It was then that many came to believe in him. What "things" did he do? He loved them and met with them personally, speaking to their deepest need to be loved by his Father.

Back to the question in the title of this article, do we condone or condemn?

The answer is that we walk in the light of His love and point others to Him, and let Him set them free. And he will. And we won't even have to cast one stone.

FRESH THYME - Free High-Fives – by Marcy Lytle

We recently made a fun weekend trip to Dallas, Texas and stayed in a beautiful old hotel right in the middle of town, where we were able to walk to many eateries and sights. On one particular morning, we set out to walk to breakfast, just a few blocks away. As we stepped outside our hotel, we saw lots of runners, with numbers pinned to their shirts, and they were running our way!

It was so fun to walk to our breakfast destination, alongside a huge group of runners in what we found out later was a rock-n-roll marathon, and there were lots of people! We watched as all sorts of people raced by us, and one little girl standing on the sidelines caught our eyes. She was holding up a small sign that read,

"FREE HIGH FIVES"

She held her hand out to slap the hand of any runner who wanted a high-five as he ran past, and I saw many people curve their path over to her hand just to be slapped and encouraged by this little girl with a sign. My husband and I were both impressed and in awe of this young lady taking the time to encourage the runners; and I was intrigued at how many saw her small sign and ran over for the five.

Interestingly enough, on our way back from breakfast, there were a few stragglers still running. We even saw the end emergency vehicles as they crawled along behind the last of the runners, who were barely walking by now. These were the ones who weren't so fast, weren't so fit, or maybe who didn't care to win – only to make it. We looked, but the little girl was gone. These stragglers weren't going to get a high-five as they ran their last lap.

And here's the thought and emotion I had,

"Oh no, these last two ladies aren't getting a high-five! How sad…"

This is a simple illustration of a Sunday morning event that has such awesome implications in our spiritual lives.

We're all running a race. And some are way out in front, some are running hard and fast, but others are lagging behind due to injuries, lack of motivation, or all sorts of reasons. The point is that we have no idea the why's of where people are in this race, but we do know that we're all running the same direction toward the finish line of life.

This one action by this one little girl won't be forgotten by those runners. And in fact, **I wonder if her high-five gave some of them the energy to pick up the pace instead of falling behind.**

I want to be one of those people who offers high-fives to those who are running. There are times when I'll be out there running hard and fast, and then other times I might be on the sidelines encouraging those to run, while I rest. And when I'm there, I want to be holding a sign. I want to lift my hand up for a slap. And I want to be there for the stragglers, the wounded, and the weary.

I felt sorry for the last two runners I saw, because they didn't know that just minutes before, there was a little girl standing there with a sign. And I bet they could have used her high-five.

What are some ways we can offer high-fives to our fellow runners?

- An encouraging word
- A prayer
- A smile
- A text
- A phone call
- A card in the mail
- A note in her purse

There are numerous ways we can encourage. And each one just might be the energy bar, the cool drink of water, the slap on the hand that enables our friends to keep on running and finish the race…even if they're the last ones in line.

FRESH THYME - Stuck in the Middle – by Marcy Lytle

Middle age-ness. Sounds bleak, non-descriptive, and neither high nor low, doesn't it?

Kids are grown, on their own, making their own decisions and creating their own traditions with their families. They need you from time to time, but you're not their #1 and that's the way it should be if you've done a good job, right?

Middle age-ness. It's above the generation below you but below the generation before you, and you don't really want to go back or forge ahead to either of those, but here you sit in the middle.

Dreams and plans for jobs and houses were long ago, and now you're settled into a neighborhood, into and at the end of your careers, and approaching another decade that really sounds more old than middle.

Middle age-ness. It's that place that's pretty good in the sense of financial stability, being settled into who you are, and being happy with the man of your dreams, but wondering still at the energy and beauty of youth and how it flees so quickly.

The styles you wear reflect your age, because you're revealing less and less of your skin, because – well – it's just not taut and firm and pretty. The home you've built is full, decorated, clean and waiting…for what?

Middle age-ness. It's that place where you spend a lot of time caring for your aging parents and crying as you drive away from a visit, because they just look so old. It's that place where you spend time caring for your grandkids, and you sigh as they go home, because you just feel so tired.

The thoughts you think are about your future, and about the future of your kids and their kids, and there's a little bit of fear that creeps in if you think too long. The plans you make involve long walks, holding hands, and people watching and somehow – that seems so fun and inviting – over and over again.

Middle age-ness. It's that place where you feel wise because you've now lived for decades, but you feel sorrow for the same reason. It's that time in your life where you wonder if you did it all right, if you've still got time to dream, and if your presence is really important to anyone.

The heart is still pumping strong, the desires are still there to make a difference, and the faith is really rising because you've seen his faithfulness to you and yours, and the heart feels as though it will burst and then…

Middle age-ness. It's that place where you feel the reins pull you in when you dream too much, start to rise and fight, or when you think about taking risks again. It's that pull back and forth between resting and enjoying the sunrise and sunset…and training for yet another marathon that requires strength and planning.

The mind is full because there have been lots of thoughts you've entertained, the spirit is alive and well and super charged because you now see so many things so clearly, and the soul is awake and healed from the wounds that life inflicted.

Middle age-ness. It's the place where you stop and pray, because you still need the ear of a Father. You fall to your knees and worship, because you so much adore the face of your Savior, and you rise to believe that he still hears and he still cares and he still moves – on your behalf.

The knowledge you've learned is now the foundation in concrete on which you stand, because that which was truth settled and hardened, and that which was false crumbled and sank. The faith you stoked, you wavered with, you discarded at times, is now the legs on which you walk every morning that never fail, never fall, and never grow tired.

Middle age-ness. It's the place where you're stuck for now. It's the place that balances, the fulcrum so to speak, the spot that keeps the past and the future in check – not tilting too far in either direction. It's an important piece to the scale of life. It's not only important. It's where you sit, immovable, strong as an ox, and steady as the breathing of a peaceful, sleeping child…as you weigh, balance, and observe all things…playing an essential role in the lives of those placed around you.

FEATURE STORY

FEATURE STORY - You are Not Your Mother – by Marcy Lytle

Moms and daughters have a special bond, usually. Or at least, sometimes. And that bond is beautiful. However, what about the mother/daughter relationships which are toxic, unhealthy, and certainly damaging to the next generation? What about the times we realize we are spurting out judgment, anger, and criticism to our children only because that's what we heard all of our lives?

We hear ourselves saying it, we find ourselves wallowing in self-pity and rejection, and one day we look in the mirror and sadly comment,

"Oh no, I'm just like my mother."

We are told in the bible to honor our fathers and mothers; and in doing so; we will have longevity on this earth. And honoring our parents is something we most certainly can do, regardless of what kind of parents we had. If we had a healthy relationship with our moms, honor comes pretty easy. But if our moms were overbearing, forceful in shaping us to be what they never were, or if they were critical and harsh, it's hard to feel any sort of honor in our hearts.

Many times, we judge our moms for their behavior, their abandonment, their incessant damaging remarks, or even just their bad habits that we most certainly vow to never pick up, when we become a mom.

And then it happens. We have children, and they get on our nerves, they talk back and begin to grow up with their own personalities and opinions, and we catch ourselves as we gasp again, realizing that we are mimicking our own mothers in ways that we swore we'd never do. We are amazed at the things that come out of our mouths, the bad feelings we have for these precious kids we wanted so badly, or the mean looks and body language we give our husbands – those same images in our head from the way our moms looked at our dads.

This realization that we've become just like our moms hits a lot of us at different ages. And we sit down in disgust, disappointment, and distaste at the women we've become – the women who caused us so much angst and pain when we were at home.

What should we do?

It's important to start out by *offering* forgiveness. Think back to the moments where our mothers shamed us, criticized us or embarrassed us, and ask God to help us see our moms for the brokenness they must have encountered in their own lives that caused *those kinds of things* to come out of their mouths. Forgiveness will free us from judgment, and will enable us to love our moms despite their flaws.

It's important to know the truth. Just because we grew up in a less than healthy environment and we ended up with the same rejection, the same self-image, and the same thoughts as our mothers, our minds can be renewed. They can be renewed by reading the truth about who we are, in light of God's word. He says his thoughts toward us are for us, not against us. He has

good plans for us, not evil ones. And he loves us and cares for us, and will never leave us. The truth can trump and eliminate the power of lies that destroy our spirits.

It's important to also *ask for* forgiveness. When we mess up and release a sharp tongue on our children or our husbands and we know it cuts them to the bone, we can fess up. We can go to them in humility and honesty, repent of what we've said, and state the truth into their ears and hearts, as well. If we are quick to criticize and judge our sons and daughters, the quicker we realize it and ask for forgiveness, the less frequent those outbursts will occur. We can show our family that we are willing to humble ourselves and immerse ourselves in God's word over us, and at the same time ask forgiveness when we slip and fall.

It's important to break old habits. Habits we learn as children and carry into adulthood are hard to break. It's easy to just fall back into ways that are familiar to us, attitudes that enveloped us like a hammock, and to just close our eyes and pretend we don't see the damage perpetuating into the next generation. *They say* it takes several repetitions of doing the right thing in order to stop doing the wrong thing.

Start a list, or a journal, of bad habits you want to stop. Pray over each one and ask God for a new and good habit to replace each one. For example, if every morning you scream at your kids to come downstairs, you point the finger at them while they eat, and you send them off with nothing but directives to make all A's on every test…maybe you can start the morning with a verse of encouragement, sitting down to eat with your kids while you compliment what they've chosen to wear, and then send them off with a "Have a good day" in their ears as they go out the front door.

It's important to seek help. Passing down an inheritance to our kids is such a great thing, if that inheritance is a blessing. If we inherit land, for example, but the taxes on that land are way over our budget, the land becomes a burden – doesn't it? It's the same principle with our attitudes, our judgments, and our words. If they're heavy with criticism, our kids will enter their own adulthood entangled in this knotted mess of a trap from which they will have a heck of a time breaking loose. They will start the cycle all over again…when they have kids. Seeking professional help, or at the very least prayer from a friend, is key to breaking free from our own knotted mess.

Our moms, all of them, have their own stories to tell. And very often, they were mistreated, they didn't have anyone to speak the truth to them, or they made bad choices that ruined their self-image or self-worth. As we stand up straight and take responsibility for our own actions, thoughts, and deeds, and as we forgive our moms, and pray for them too, we might just see something new take place.

We might like the image we see in the mirror, and thus project that image onto our children, enabling them to grow up healthy and strong. And we might see our own mothers have their eyes open to desire and want what we have, that strong faith and knowledge that we belong to Him, our children are an extension of his grace in our lives, and we can do all things in his strength. And our family might begin restoration…for generations to come.

You are not your mother. You don't have to reflect her bad image. You can replace the mirror with one that's not cracked, shattered, or smeared with red lipstick words that hurt to your core. And when the new mirror is hung, invite your mom to come stand beside you and gaze at her own reflection, in the new light turned on from above. And if your mom is already gone, give thanks for the life you now live…free to be you…in His image.

A BUNDLE OF

THYME

June 2015

TIPS

The Dressing – Sundresses for Summer – by Marcy Lytle

Who doesn't love a sundress? It is lightweight, cool, flowy, and comfy for the hot months of the summer. However, sometimes it's hard to find ones that aren't too short, show too much skin, or fit too tight for comfort!

We searched high and low for pretty sundresses that you'll love for your vacation trips, for an evening out, or even for shopping around town or just a coffee date for two. We tried to keep the price under $50 too!

Here are our picks:

This cute bird print is from Old Navy and it's great for summer because it can be paired with a jean jacket or a cardigan if the nights are cool. It's so affordable you might want to buy one for you…and for a friend!

This sundress from Target looks super comfy and comes in lots of colors and patterns! It's going to be hard to choose which one you want. This can be worn with flat sandals, fun slip-on tennis shoes, or even paired with heels, depending on where you wear it!

I love this "shark bite" hem on this sundress from Maurice's with a cross strap back. You can change up this look by wearing a tank or tee underneath, or a short jacket and adding a pretty necklace. I like the way it looks like a scarf made into a dress!

The best thing about a solid color sundress, like this one from H&M, is that you can wear a pop of color in a shoe, add a handbag, throw on a scarf around your neck or waist – the sky's the limit! And this dress is made of jersey material, which is easy to roll and pack for your trips to the beach!

The best thing about this Daisy Fuentes smocked dress at Kohls is that it's not too short, and it's a beautiful color for summer. There's not much else needed to make this dress a winner for wherever you wear it! Pin your hair up, or add a pretty hat, and you're looking good!

If you like something a bit more flowing and loose-fitting, this dress from Forever 21 fits that style! There's a slip underneath and pretty crocheted panels that make this dress something you can wear out to dinner with just a pretty bangle on your wrist!

If you like polka dots, and a more demure style, this dress might be your choice for the summer! It's from JCP. In fact, there are several polka dot summer dresses available here! How fun to bring back this vintage look, especially in a flamingo hue or classic black and white!

It is now the summer season and time to enjoy ourselves by relaxing while we get away. Maybe we don't get away as often as we'd like to, but when we slip into one of these fun dresses we feel like sitting by the water with our feet up, sipping our favorite drink over ice. Happy summer to you!

Seven 4 You – Those Versatile Herbs – Marcy Lytle

I love herbs. My husband built me a box outside so that I can grow my own herbs, pick them when I start to cook, and enjoy them as they grow. As my cooking skills have improved over time, I've discovered uses for herbs that I have never known before. I thought it might be fun to share seven different herbs and how to use them in the kitchen for a tasty and delightful presentation next time you have guests for dinner…or even just for your own fun use!

Rosemary. Have you ever used rosemary sprigs as skewers? It can be done! Take a long sprig of rosemary for each person and thread on the chicken cubes before you grill. You can actually skewer vegetables too! And when you present these on the plate, they're so much more fragrant and tasty than metal or wooden skewers that we often use! (You can also place rosemary in your olive oil bottle for some extra flavor.) Also, a spring of rosemary atop a gift, or tied around a napkin, makes a cute adornment!

Chives. These are great on baked potatoes as a topping, we know. But chives have others uses as well. There's a great recipe online for cheddar chive mashed potato waffles, made in the waffle iron! Chives mixed in with mayonnaise, lemon, sugar, and yogurt makes for a creamy dressing over salads. Did you know that chives are high in vitamin K which is essential to bone health?

Cilantro. You either like this herb, or you don't. I do! I use bunches of it in my homemade salsa. However, cilantro is a very versatile herb. Try mixing it with cream cheese before you spread the cheese on your bagel, and see how you like it! Baked cilantro fries are so easy and tasty, too! And if you need a quick side dish with a kick, add cilantro into your favorite coleslaw recipe.

Mint. I love to pinch off a leaf from my mint plant and just hold it to my nose and breathe in. Mint can take over a flower bed, so my mint plant stays in its own pot! Did you know you can chew on a few mint leaves for fresh breath? And you can add whole mint leaves to your bath for a home spa experience. Who knew? How about a strawberry mint face mask? Check out the recipe here. Some say that mice hate mint, so you might want several mint pots around the yard…

Thyme. You knew we wouldn't leave out this awesome herb with its tiny pretty leaves! Some say a sprig of thyme added to water with honey and lemon can cure bronchitis – an awful thing to have in the summer months. According to Rachael Ray, you can place thyme in your salt shaker and use on corn! You just add the sprigs for several days, then discard them, and then use the salt.

Dill. I love this herb, especially when it's sprinkled over new potatoes after they've been boiled until tender! And this herb too has a strong aroma that's so pleasant and inviting! You can even use dill weed as a garnish for sandwiches. Some say you can place a pinch of whole dill seed in your cheek and chew on it to relieve indigestion.

Basil. An Italian staple in every kitchen, right? According to Ecosalon, steeping basil leaves in water for 20-30 minutes and then applying the cooled water with a cotton ball to acne prone

areas on the face can prove to be an effective treatment! Have you ever tried basil lemon ice? And you can freeze basil and water into ice cubes for later dropping into soups!

Herb gardens are one of my very favorite things to tend, to harvest, and to then use the herbs for so many fun ideas. Even if you only have a windowsill available, it can make a great place for setting a box in which to grow your herbs. Herbs can be expensive in the stores, so why not grab a bag of dirt, shop for your favorite herbs, plant them, and watch them grow?

Selah's Style – Swing into Summer – by Selah Irwin

Yay!

Summer is finally here! The year felt so long.

Being outside in the tees always inspires me.

I just want to talk to you about a few subjects:

I really like to wear sundresses, but they always have to be comfortable! Remember that! It makes it hard to play around if you are feeling not so right. This dress is very pretty. I got it in San Diego. It is the perfect play dress. *You want to know why?* It's smooth like a caramel apple! It has so many colors it almost makes me go dizzy!

Oh! The sun and the waves! They are so beautiful! I have on my Little Pony dress from Target. Obviously, I like it. It is so blue that if you hold it up to the sky you won't see a difference in the color. I could so easily be Rainbow Dash for Halloween! Check out my shades! They really draw attention. You can't see me blink because they are so amazingly pink!

These are the most comfortable shorts I have. They are the best climbing shorts! I added a grey tank and long, awesome possum socks! And, Good Morning, America!

If your pants happen to get too small for you, you can cut them into shorts! This pink shirt has an adorable ruffle that adds some flare! I don't mean to brag, but it is pretty cute…

I love to wear fun summer clothes but they must be comfortable! No matter what you are doing this summer – swimming in a pool, playing at the beach, or climbing a tree – summer make you feel so free!

The Fearless Kitchen - Summer Sides – by Christina Vetter

Summer is in full swing this month, and it is wonderful outside! The next couple of months will find me alongside a grill as many days as possible I can assure you.

With Father's Day this month, grilling, smoking, and every other form of outdoor cooking seems to take place out of the kitchen, and I'm happy to be on board. After all, these methods of cooking produce some of my husband's (and mine for that matter) all time favorite foods. One thing I've noticed however is the lack of summer-worthy sides.

I love macaroni salad, potato salad, and coleslaw as much as the next girl, but sometimes I like a little change. That's why this month I'll be sharing some scrumptious sides that will be a great addition to any summer cook out: Texas Corn, Vegetarian Stuffed Peppers, and Broccoli Summer Salad.

What are your family's favorite summer sides? Share them with me in the comments below. I hope you continue to have a happy summer and as always, Happy Eating!

Broccoli Summer Salad **Difficulty:**
Serves 4

This salad is easy to throw together and tastes delicious. It's best if left in the refrigerator overnight, that way everything softens, but can be eaten after four to five hours.

Ingredients:
3 C fresh broccoli florettes, cut small
2 roma tomatoes, diced
½ C dried cranberries
¼ C sunflower seeds
¼ C red onion, small diced
½ C mayo
2 Tbsp sugar
1/8 C cider vinegar
Salt and pepper to taste

Directions:
-Mix ingredients together in medium bowl. Cover and refrigerate overnight.
-Taste and adjust for seasonings before serving.

Texas Corn **Difficulty:**
Serves 6

This corn makes a great side dish to any grilled item. It tastes very fresh and has a fantastic flavor that's perfect for summer.

Ingredients:
2 Tbsp olive oil
1 lb frozen corn
2 small zucchini, small diced
1 red bell pepper, small diced
1 jalapeno, seeded and minced
2 Tbsp minced cilantro
1 Tbsp cumin
Salt and black pepper to taste

Directions:
-In a large pan, heat oil over medium high heat.
-Add all ingredients except cilantro and saute until vegetables are tender.
-Right before serving, stir in minced cilantro and adjust seasonings if necessary.

Vegetarian Stuffed Peppers **Difficulty:**
Makes 5 peppers

These are one of my favorite summer meals. They can be eaten as a side or a meal all on their own. Either way they manage to be comforting, filling, and healthy at the same time.

Ingredients:
5 green bell peppers, tops and seeds removed
½ onion, small diced
2 large garlic cloves, minced
1 Tbsp oil
1 can black beans, drained
½ C corn
1 can diced tomatoes, chipotle flavored
2 C cooked brown rice
Salt and black pepper to taste
Shredded cheddar cheese to garnish

Directions:
-Preheat oven to 350 F
-In a large skillet, heat oil over medium high heat and sweat onion and garlic.
-Add beans, corn, tomatoes, and rice and heat thoroughly.
-Add salt and balck pepper to taste
-Stuff peppers with as much rice mixture as will fit and top with shredded cheese.
-Bake on a foil lined cookie sheet until cheese is melted and peppers are soft to the touch.

-Serve immediately.

Tried and True – Some Fatherly Advice

Each year since A Bundle of THYME's first issue, we have included the writers' faves in our June issue. The past two years were our favorite gadgets and products. But this year, we're sharing our favorite advice or words of wisdom from our fathers. You will see that some of us are sharing words from other "fathers" and not our biological dads. Some of us grew up receiving awesome guidance from an attentive, loving dad and others of us were given the gift of a father in other ways, through pastors, relatives, or even just from the Father of all Fathers – God himself.

We hope you enjoy reading these great words that changed our lives this month of June – for Father's Day. If you didn't experience a great relationship with your dad, if your children are missing that dad connection, or even if you had a great and caring father – we all need to know this: Where our earthly fathers fall short, God steps in and becomes the Father we all need – the one who accepts us, invites us, and enjoys us – just because he loves us.

Zephaniah 3:17 "I am with you, I will rescue you and save you, I take great delight in you, I rejoice over you with singing" (paraphrased) – Mandy Major shares her favorite verse straight from the Father.

"Dream bigger," Richard Neusch, my pastor and boss – Mikaela Cain.

My dad said, "Never wait to have kids 'until you can afford it. You'll never be able to afford it." – Christina Vetter.

Here's something my husband tells my boys all the time. "It's okay to feel angry or frustrated or sad. It's not okay to hurt someone else because of how you feel." – Rachel Toalson

"You are pretty, pure, perfect, and pleasing to me." I heard this from God, my Father, when I was going for a walk and praising Him for attributes that began with each letter of the alphabet. He stopped me when I got to P and said this to me. – Marcy Lytle

When we kids commented on our meat or steak being "tough," dad would say, "It would be tougher if you didn't have it." – Pam Charro

I also once dated a much older man who struggled with depression (I didn't yet know the Lord at this time). I considered him to be very intelligent. I remember him telling me once, "If there is any hope in this world, it's in Christianity." I am sure it made me more open to the gospel than I otherwise would have been. – Pam Charro

My daddy has always said there's something beautiful in everything and every place and to focus on that, instead of looking at the ugly. It's a testament to him because he always finds the best in everything and every place.- Tammy Morrison

My husband reminds the kids to guard their hearts, to find the humor in things to balance the stress of tough situations, and as they have grown, he encourages our kids to seek HIM for the answers to their questions. – Melissa Critz

When I had a volley ball game, my grandfather encouraged me, “Remember you don’t have to *be* the best, you just *do* your best.” My dad too encouraged me that I didn’t have to be perfect, that it was okay to take the pressure off and just be me. When it came to things that “mattered” like church, dating, and making good decisions, my dad had clear boundaries, and those – to this day – have helped me form healthy habits in my life. My dad was so fun, and engaged with me from swimming, volleyball, playing tickle monster, etc. that I now understand how hard it is to always engage with my own children through mundane games and activities, but it’s truly important to have fun and do so! – Amber Holdridge

Interestingly enough, when I asked the writers to share, several of us had a hard time thinking of something impactful our fathers said to us. I suppose I was surprised, but then again, not really. We are a generation (and so are our kids) of people who have been affected by divorce, absentee fathers, or fathers who have been belittled, shamed and put down by their own fathers so much that they were rendered unable to father well.

My prayer this month of June (and I’m asking you to join me) is to pray for our fathers. Pray for the young ones to lean into the Word and to older mentors, so that they lead their families well. And pray that the moms will support them in their efforts. Pray for the middle-aged dads who have been battered and bruised by life and feel they have no claim or influence over their kids because of failure and disappointment. Pray for forgiveness to envelop their kids, their own hearts, and for true restoration to take place. And finally, pray for our elderly fathers who have run a long race and are now weary, but have laid a good path before us. Pray that we will take note of the fathers who have said good things and been great examples. And pray for future fathers to rise up, find favor, and be strong.

HOME

Practical Parenting - Pathway to Their Hearts – by Mandy Major

"When love and freedom replace punishment and fear as the motivating force in the relationship between parent and child, the quality of life improves dramatically for all involved."
- Danny Silk (*Loving our Kids on Purpose*)

My point of view on parenting is less about punishment and more about connecting to your child's heart. I don't want perfect children! Shocking, I know. I want children who obey, yes. But obedience is not my end game. My end game is to raise children who are responsible for their own choices, and children who choose to obey, not out of fear for punishment, but out of love.

My end game is to keep a heart connection with my kids.

Life is all about relationship. Those who have strong relationships live longer, have a more fulfilling life, and are healthier. A few years ago, I started observing how really everything in the world thrives in relationship and depends on relationship to survive. Think about it. Plants need to be pollenated to produce fruit, animals in the wild need one another to survive, procreation takes relationship, the food chain depends on connection, and the list goes on and on! Take a moment to observe this fact next time you walk by a garden or hike in the woods.

So how does one maintain a relationship with their kids? These little humans who come into our lives and wreck us? Who take away our social lives and have us ready for bed at 9 p.m.? How do we connect to the heart of a 2-year-old in the middle of a power struggle? Why does it even matter?

Early on in my pregnancy with my son Caleb, I observed a moment where I saw this in action. I was sitting in my neighbor's house drinking coffee and chatting about life with her. One of her children was upset about something - I have no memory of what it was. What I do remember about that moment was that she paused her conversation with me, got up, went over to him and sat down, right there on the kitchen floor in front of her refrigerator! On the ground she held his face, looked into his eyes and talked to him.

"Abe, I see that you are upset, tell me what happened..."

With those simple words my dear friend opened the door to her son's heart; she chose relationship. She could have told him to go to his room until he was done with his fit, she could have said she had a friend over and she'd get to him later. Instead, she chose to see her son, hear her son's need, look at his heart, and pause her life for a moment to look into his.

I've thought back on that moment so many times over the years, in the midst of my son throwing a terrible tantrum or when my kids are fighting. That moment always brings me back to the power of keeping the heart connection open with my child.

A few helpful tools we have found along the way:

1. *Giving our children the power of choices*, I mean real choices, choices where we are truly okay with either one! Not, "Go do this or else!" For example: "Do you want to brush your teeth or get your PJ's on first?" "Do you want to finish your dinner, or are you done eating for the night?" "Do you want to unload the dishwasher or vacuum the floor?" "Are you going to put your shoes on or do you want me to help you?" When we try giving our child real choices, it's almost magical to watch them respond!

2. *Quality one on one time*. Dating our kids. We take turns going on dates. The kids pick where they want to go. It's amazing to watch how the home dynamic changes when the kids get individual face time with mom or dad.

3. *Natural consequences (let the punishment fit the crime.)* I chose to use glass dishes with my kids from a young age for this very reason - if you drop it, it breaks! They quickly learned to be careful when carrying dishes, cups, etc. Other examples: If you refuse to brush your teeth you lose the privilege to consume sugar, juice, etc. “You're teeth just can't handle any sugar because you've decided not to brush your teeth.”

4. *Be willing to diffuse consequences*. Calm down first! Take as long as you need! Once you’re calm (key!) it looks something like this: “I asked you to turn the hose off and you didn't, now the backyard is flooded and we've wasted a lot of water. What do you think your punishment needs to be?” Usually my kids come up with harder punishments than I would have given! This leads us to the most important tool...

5. *Follow-through!* If you say you're going to do something - you better mean it! Whatever punishment/consequence you've come up with, give it! Kids are so much smarter then we give them credit for. If you don't mean what you say, they're going to know it and act accordingly…

Life as We Know It – Surrendering – by Erica Simmons

… we are planning on getting a new car sometime soon and I was wondering if you'd want my car for the boys…

This is a part of a text message I got from a friend recently, while I was working. Of course I said, "Yes!" and asked how much they wanted for it. The answer blew me away; you see, she said, "Nothing." The boys are months away from being able to get their license and I was (dare I say) worrying about how I was going to be able to get them a car when the time came.

I began to marvel at how God had not only provided, but had provided BEFORE the need was really there. This started me thinking about the nature of God and how he always prepares us for what is coming by giving us what we need, *before* we need it. As stated in Matthew 6:8b "…for your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him."

What other things had he provided, before I had need?

Jordan (one of my twins) continues to try to live life by his own rules, with little to no regard for any erroneous thinking that might be involved. We've had a few incidents over the past few weeks. One such incident involved him walking away from one of his coaches. In his eyes, his action kept him from saying something disrespectful. Oh, the ranting and raving that went on in that car between the bus stop and home! Once home, I dropped Jerimiah off, and Jordan and I went for a ride to continue to discuss the situation. I found myself doing two things: 1) trying to get him to understand that there are things children do not do towards adults, 2) trying to use myself as an example.

Me: Jordan why can't you be more like me, why can't I be your role model? I would never walk away from someone who was talking to me.

Jordan: Yes, you did.

Me: What are you talking about?

Jordan: Remember that time we dropped Grandma of and she was trying to talk to you and you said, "Bye Ma, I am tired," and drove off?

How is that for role model and being puffed up? Spiritual head hung.

Suddenly I was transported back to an article I wrote a month or two ago, where I talked about teaching my boys God's truths, not mine. Yet, here I was once again using my version of the truth to teach Jordan. I am not ashamed to say that I learned a valuable lesson. **God does not cater to our egos; that is for sure, He will knock us off our self-created pedestals swiftly and VERY effectively.**

You see, God had given me (before I needed it in this situation), exactly what I needed, yet I did not use it. Instead, I tried my own way, and failed.

I panicked. This was becoming a bad habit for Jordan and fear was infiltrating my spirit with visions of the worst case scenario about where he was headed with this attitude. I entered the women's bible study I attend, and the chapter for Tuesday night discussion was about worry and anxiety. I remember as I was reading the chapter, how my anxiety levels about my worries over my children start to diffuse.

God gave me one word: **surrender.**

God is patiently waiting for us to give up and surrender *everything* to Him, not just the things we don't want or the things that are easy. As parents, the hardest thing for us to surrender is our children. We have the huge undue burden to turn them into successes. They do wrong and we feel shame. They do well and we have this overwhelming sense of pride. The truth of the matter is that if my child grows up to be all that I want him to be, without ever becoming who God created him to be, I have failed. It is not our job set goals for our children.

Our job is to love, protect, and teach them to surrender to the ways of our Heavenly Father.

The enemy is ever diligent to knock us off any newfound godly truths the moment we rest upon them. The next day I got the call from the AP early in the day. The *old* me would have been so wound up about it that by the time I picked up the boys, I would have exploded the second they got in the car. The *new* me (having being transformed by my "life as I know it moment" of surrender it all to God), was not, and did not.

Instead?

We talked in the car. And as I sat down to complete this article, my spirit just was not satisfied with the outcome of that conversation, so I stopped writing and called him in to talk again. This time, I put God in the center of it all.

Sometimes as a parent, I worry about sounding "too spiritual" to my children. The truth of the matter is I am going to preach at them anyway, so I might as well preach based on spiritual truth and not the truth according to self. I dropped some godly truths on him about surrendering and found the spiritual peace I needed and spiritual acceptance in Jordan that had not been there at the end of our previous talks.

Will this be the end of it? It probably won't be, but the great truth is that I have someone in me greater than the enemy.

I can use what God has given me:

1. "Life as I know it" moments that are so profound I cannot continue to live my life as before (I let that get away from me).
2. The ability to surrender everything to Him.
3. The strength to teach my boys to live up to His truths, where the outcome is a guaranteed victory.

Family Practice – Emotions Run Amuck – by Rachel Toalson

Summer vacation means, for my boys, more time together.

More time together means more fighting.

Two of them go to public school, while the youngest four stay at home. Even before the school year marched toward its closing, my 4-year-old and my 3-year-old twins were at each others' throats every other minute.

"You took my train," one would say, and then the offender would start crying, because when boys are crossed, anger doesn't show itself in screams and cries so much as fists and feet.

These exchanges can get really old for a mama trying to feed a new baby or trying to put her broken foot up or trying to get the wet laundry in the dryer with only one working leg.

There is just so much for them to fight about.

And now, here we are, in the days with no school and two more added to the mix, and this time they're fighting about LEGOs, because the older two leave their creations everywhere, and their twin brothers just can't keep themselves from touching and, of course, accidentally breaking that Spider-Man building that the 6-year-old spent an hour putting together.

Anger is an emotion I don't like to see in my boys.

But the thing is, we are parents who want our boys to feel the whole spectrum of their emotions—good and bad—and not just learn to stuff them away for another time.

In our home, **emotions are always acceptable** (Even Jesus turned tables in the temple and cried in despair on the dirt of a garden).

The actions we choose because of our emotions aren't.

It's not always easy to stop and talk about feelings and remind my boys to choose the right actions for their feelings, because there is always something else to be done—dinner to fix, an e-mail to send, a story to write. But the times I take to sit down with them and ease them through the anger that made them throw a toy train across the room and accidentally hit their brother's foot are times I get to teach them that they are not controlled by their emotions.

They are times we get to brainstorm together the alternatives to anger—alternatives that look like taking five deep breaths and using their words to express how they feel and walking away until they feel their body calm.

Kids need help expressing their emotions in healthy ways, because they haven't been around as long as we have. Sometimes we forget that. Sometimes we forget that if we don't engage the conversation around emotions, they will never learn how to effectively express those emotions.

Children do better when they know better.

And yet.

They will still fail. Of course they will.

So do we.

We are all hard-pressed to be perfect versions of ourselves every single second of every single day. We all fly off the ledge. And if there is no room for failure, what hope do we have?

When they fail, when we do, we can walk ourselves back with grace, opening valuable conversations about how the way we act in a flooded moment is not really who we are at heart and that's why forgiveness and grace are so beautiful—because they lift us into a better version of ourselves.

My boys love each other. I know they do. But there are also moments that they hate each other for a split second (or maybe longer). That's just life. There are moments they wish they didn't have five siblings. There are moments when they wish they could just be left alone.

Every time they act out their anger or frustration or despair for their circumstances, as inconvenient as those emotions can be, it's just another opportunity to teach them a better way.

So I'll take that fighting over peace every time. (Remind me that I said this in a few days.)

How to talk about emotions with children:

1. *Make feelings more tangible.* It's hard for young children to know exactly what they're feeling. With our youngest ones, we use colors—red for anger, yellow for happy, purple for calm, blue for peace. If a child is feeling red (angry), help him envision a bucket of blue (peace) pouring into the red and creating purple (calm). The mind is a very powerful tool when it comes to emotions.

2. Like the pain scale in hospitals, *use a feelings scale*. If a child is feeling sad, ask them, on a scale of 1-10, how sad do you feel? Give them an emotion journal, where they can write about their feelings and what sparked them and then they can rate them. When they look back later, they'll gain perspective (feelings come and feelings go, but we can't take back words and actions.).

3. *Brainstorm as a family to come up with alternatives to negative emotions*. (i.e. instead of hitting or kicking or throwing things in anger, do some deep breathing or counting or take a break.) Post the alternatives on your refrigerator and in bedrooms and on bathroom mirrors so children can refer to them easily. (For the ones too young to read, draw pictures instead of using words.)

Everything Home - The Gallery Wall – by Mikaela Cain

The apartment I lived in last year had a tall wall that faced a clearing. It was probably four feet wide. I couldn't fill it with a chair or bookshelf, because it was right in front of our only bathroom—even a lamp would have blocked the walkway. A wall-to-wall mirror faced the wall, making it visible almost anywhere in our apartment. My canvas paintings didn't fill the space. I didn't want to buy something new. I didn't know what to do with it. I decided just to leave it slightly awkward.

But one night I had a dream about that wall space. In the dream, Jesus was putting pictures on the wall from my husband, Grant, and my travels. One was a framed picture of the Eye of London Grant took on a mission trip to England. Another picture frame displayed the Mediterranean shoreline that I captured on a vacation in Greece. After Jesus put up a couple pictures, he motioned for me to fill in the rest. Then, I woke up. That week, I pulled out a collection of frames I had stuffed away in the closet and started to put together a "Travel" gallery wall.

Grant and I had just let go of plans to travel. Out of the blue, we had to replace or repair three vehicles and get through a nine-month job transition on two part-time incomes. The dream God gave me filled us with hope that He kept our dreams alive in the midst of difficult circumstances. And, we were reminded of this daily once I got the pictures on the wall. The gallery wall became a spiritual encouragement to us, as well as easing an eye sore.

God cares about our living experiences, and wants to give wisdom to make even a rental apartment a home.

Gallery walls have proven to be a great way to create ambiance without spending a lot or doing something permanent. I've made two since having the dream of the "Travel Wall." Here's how I tackled both:

1. *Start with a theme.* Some ideas I've seen are: family, hobbies, dreaming, childhood, clocks/time, and motivation. You might already have something in mind. If not, spend some time thinking about what you want to fill your atmosphere with. You can ask for a dream or pray about it, if you'd like. It's fun to engage with Holy Spirit, find out what He is doing in this season, and build something together. Then, your decorations are a spiritual encouragement, as well as attractive.
2. *Pinterest Brooding*. If you can't nail down a theme, Pinterest has a ton of gallery wall pins that can help inspire or refine ideas. I did this a few months ago for the duplex I currently live in. I decided to do a gallery in the curve of the stairwell. I wanted to use the pictures from my previous "Travel Wall" but also wanted to highlight other interests—taking the dog for a walk, a free photo shoot about love after marriage, and adventures in Austin. After pursuing Pinterest, I saw a theme that encompassed all of these pictures: Adventure.
3. *Pick a color and style.* I try to find themes in what I have, and add to it. That saves money.

4. *Gather Frames and Objects.* It's fun and interesting if you don't just include picture frames. I've hung coffee mugs from a metal holder, a black shelf holding pottery, and license plates. Faux deer heads (and real ones), clocks and mirrors work great! If you can attach it to a wall, you can use it.
5. *Find Fillers.* As I pulled the pieces together, I decided to put quotes, patterns and artwork in my frames, instead of just using pictures—this helps your pictures stand out more. So, I searched for: "Free Printables Adventure" on Pinterest. I found two images that I loved that color-matched my collection. One said "Life is a Journey" and the other said "Love is the Greatest Adventure." You can also use scrapbook paper!
6. *Pick your Shape.* Gallery walls can be circular, angled, square… There are endless options. Look at your space and think about what is going to create the best energy. Use a light pencil to get a feel for the shape and size. Measure the space you want to fill.
7. *Lay it Out.* This step will take the longest and is the most important. On the floor, mark the size of the wall space you are filing. Arrange your gallery pieces within that space. Start with the biggest pieces. Balance those evenly within your space. For example, I started with a big picture in the middle, then added one on the top, then balanced with a big one on the bottom. Then, I worked in a circular motional filling with medium-sized pieces, and then smaller ones (place one at the top, one on the right, one on the bottom, one on the left, then go back to the top to place another one).
8. *Keep things in threes.* It helped me find balance by clustering big pictures with two smaller ones.
9. *Be Flexible.* Shuffle the pictures around until you get a design that you like. You might find that some pieces don't fit. You might also find that there are gaping holes. That's fine! That is why I start on the floor, instead of making a bunch of useless holes in the walls!
10. *Cut out Paper Patterns.* Grab some butcher paper, trace the frames/objects and cut them out. I like to draw pictures on each pattern to help me remember which frame goes with which paper. I didn't have butcher paper this time, so I actually cut up newspaper and paper grocery bags. *Sometimes, I do this step before even arranging on the floor. This helps me get a feeling for how it's going to look on the wall.*
11. *Tape the Shapes.* Tape the paper cut outs on the wall matching your arrangement on the floor.
12. Start nailing! Hammer your nails directly into the paper (check the back of the frames to see where the nails should go, first). Then, remove the paper and stick the frame on! I like to start with my biggest pictures. If I somehow get off, it's easier to rearrange the smaller ones.
13. *Enjoy your beautiful gallery wall!*

The first gallery wall I finished in one try. The second one took several tries, and actually, needs a little more work. The only difference was that I had all of the pictures in the right frames when I started the first one. The second one, I was a little impatient and unclear on the exact vision when I started. That just means I get to re-adjust later. But, because the theme is "Adventure," I think that readjusting and adding as I go seems strangely appropriate.

Whenever I walk by my gallery wall of adventure, I think about how beautiful my life is. It’s a fun emotional lift every time I walk down the stairs. I hope you enjoy creating something beautiful that fits your season, and I hope you experience His creative presence with you while you do it!

I Don't Do Teens – Markers – by Marcy Lytle

Some people like to fold the edges of pages, others use bookmarks, and still others (myself included) who when reading a magazine, just rip out the entire page to save it for later. All of these methods are ways to mark things, so that we can come back later to look at something of interest. If we don't fold the page or use a marker, that information gets lost in a huge sea of words and pictures, and it's super hard to retrieve it. In fact, it's almost impossible sometimes!

Our kids' lives while they live at home are like a novel unfolding before us and if we don't mark the pages for a later return, our kids will miss out on some valuable insight and wisdom! We need to note the pages in the lives of our kids that were important, memorable, and life-changing. Oh, we do a pretty good job of this by marking sports achievements by displaying trophies and medals. We even keep report cards, writings and artwork, and all sorts of "items" like these.

However, I'm talking about **markers of circumstances, events, or experiences that leave a lasting impression on our kids of God's provision and love in their lives.** They need these pages folded down, as well, because this is the really good stuff they'll need when they reach adulthood – not the dusty trophies and old papers.

Let me share a couple with you, from my kids' lives.

When my son was a freshman in high school, on his very first day, he received a four-hour detention for wearing a shirt that was about a half-inch longer than the new dress code which his mom (me) forgot to read before school started. He had on a nice Polo shirt but it was a speck too long, and a teacher with an agenda stopped him to make "an example" out of him, wrote him up, and sent him on. I went with my son to the principal's office to plead for mercy, and although the principal could plainly see that my son was a well-dressed guy, he stuck to the rules. I then asked if I could serve his detention for him, since it was I who missed the dress code changes and bought his clothes and dressed my son – and the principal looked a bit bewildered and answered, "Yes, I guess you can." I showed up that Saturday and sat for four hours so that my son could go free – a great marker and example of what Jesus did for us on the tree!

Another time when my daughter was with me, we were in a store with two entrances, checking out to pay for our purchases. She needed to go to the bathroom, so I send her on and told her to come right back. I paid and looked around, and then heard over the speaker, "Marcy, please come to the customer service desk." I ran to find my daughter crying, and I hugged her and commended her for asking an adult to page me. What a surprise to both of us when she admitted that she hadn't talked to anyone, and we found out there was a store employee there named Marcy! The message to call me there wasn't even intended for me, at least not by the store!

Both of these circumstances (and many more) serve as reminders for my children of God's love and protection over them. It's important to talk about these events aloud in the presence of the

entire family to boost faith and recall God's goodness in our lives. And we have done that throughout the years.

Here are few ways to mention and mark those life-changing events for our teens:

- Talk about them over dinner among the other family members, so all can hear.
- Write them on a calendar, perhaps one calendar for each child, so each one has a year of *goodnesses* to recall.
- Look for blessings in everyday activities and give thanks for them, together.
- Pray together for each one in the family to see and experience the markings of God's love.
- Keep a journal for your kids and write your own thoughts from a mom's point of view.
- Encourage your older children to journal and write as well, then compare notes.
- Keep a sticky note pad in a common area for jotting down markers; then affix them all to one central board for all to see and read throughout the year.

However you notice God's mark on your everyday lives, do it, and do it often. If we pray, observe, and give thanks, we will see his hand in our lives often and marvel at the ways he cares for us and provides for all that we need.

And when our kids are grown and leave for college, we can send them with the calendar, the journal, or the notes to be reminders and stones on which to stand when their faith is challenged away from home. When they recall God's faithfulness in the little things, they will have faith to believe him in the big things!

A Night to Remember – Broken and Torn – by Marcy Lytle

There are people in this world, including some of us, who are broken. Maybe we've been injured, suffered an illness, or experienced a huge loss of some kind. There are also people who have been torn apart by floods, disasters, the loss of a family, or huge disappointments in life. It's not fun to be broken or torn, but yet God says he loves us anyway, and he actually takes the broken and puts them back together again. And he takes the torn and scoops them up in his arms to make them whole.

Preparation: *Lay out a bag of pretzels, nuts, a peppermint candy, a whole onion, and an herb plant. Work through the lesson as you open and try a bite, or observe each object.*

Pretzels – *Open the bag and share the pieces, broken and whole*. Pretzels are packed, but then jostled around in delivery trucks, by food handlers, and by people when they are shopping, so some of the pretzels break into pieces. However, the brokenness doesn't change the flavor, does it?

God has made us in his image and he loves the broken just as much as those who are whole.

Nuts – *(If allergic to nuts, substitute chunks of chocolate)* (*Offer each one a bite*).These are often chopped before they are used because they taste better in cookies and pies if they are small and not so large when we take a bite of the sweet desserts. Just imagine if the nuts were alive, how much that chopping must hurt?

God sometimes breaks us so that we become more useful for him, as we are "baked" in his oven where we become saturated with his sweetness and a treat to all who then take a bit of his goodness in our lives.

Peppermints – (*Pass around and taste*). Whole peppermints are often crushed before they are used in ice cream. Imagine taking a bite of cold ice cream and discovering a whole peppermint! That might break a tooth! However, the crushed bits and pieces flavor the entire bowl of ice cream just right, so that each bite is flavorful and enjoyable.

Crushing takes place sometimes when we are humbled and even disappointed in life, but with God's grace and healing he spreads us out and uses us to reach more people than we could if we remained intact into one giant arrogant piece!

Onions – (*Ask if anyone wants a bite! Yeck!)* Would you like to have a whole onion served to you on your plate for dinner? Of course not! Onions are often chopped, sliced, grilled, and minced before we use them to flavor all sorts of dishes set out on the table. They even make us cry!

Sometimes we're too strong for our own good, because we boast and point to how strong we are in our own might. It's only when we allow God to use us in whatever way he likes, even if the process is tedious and long, that we become super flavorful to the world around us – instead of offensive and causing them to run!

Herbs – (*Present the pretty herbs and allow each one to smell.)*These grow so pretty in our gardens with beautiful leaves that are so fragrant as they branch off their strong stems! However, we tear off the leaves in order to use them in our soups, salads, and pastas. They're only useful when they're torn!

Ouch! It's not fun to be torn apart by a loss or a friend's who's hurt us. But sometimes when we stay attached to something so long, we have to be torn from it in order to see the purpose for our lives.

Our lives are sometimes like these treats we just tasted and observed. And life sometimes presents us with situations that break us, or circumstances that just about rip us apart. However, God is like a master chef who takes broken, torn, crushed and chopped ingredients, and puts them together to present a meal fit for a king! He can also take these things in our lives that hurt us and create something beautiful, like a pretty vase that a potter creates out of clay.

Psalm 34:18 says, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Pray together as a family for the broken and the torn, asking God to make something beautiful from the lives of those who are suffering and hurting.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core – Don't be Daft – by Marcy Lytle

I'm not sure I've ever done this, but I woke up with this word "daft" on my mind this morning, so I typed it into my notes on my phone. I decided to take that word and write an article on it. I'm not even sure what is going to come out, so I'm inviting you on this journey with me as I think, pray, and write about being daft.

Daft is a word that means senseless, stupid, or foolish. I think maybe the only place I've heard this word used is maybe in a British play or television movie, when someone is referring to a crazy person.

Let's look at these three definitions:

Senseless, to me, means without purpose. I suppose we could say that when we are wasting our time, it's senseless. But sometimes wasting time is a form of relaxation, and that can be a great purpose. However, what about our ways of thinking? I've thought on things before that were absolutely senseless. Being senseless in my thoughts might sound like this in my mind:

- "I don't think God loves me because I haven't been reading the bible or even praying much lately."
- "I'm not sure my kids love me. They'd rather be with their friends."
- "My husband doesn't love me either, because I'm not young and pretty anymore."

There's a theme in that thought pattern – questioning the love of those who love us the most. *It's absolutely daft to question the fact that we are loved.* Knowing and experiencing God's love is key in receiving the love of those around us.

Stupid is one of those words we teach our kids not to call their siblings, or anyone for that matter. In fact, in some households, stupid is the s-word and it's not to be used at all. Being stupid – what does that really mean or look like? By definition, stupid means lacking keenness of mind. There it is again – thoughts – what we are thinking.

Being stupid in my thoughts might sound like this:

- "She seems so smart, why can't I be like her?"
- "I wish I had the money they have, so that my house could be pretty like theirs."
- "Why is her husband so attentive? She's so lucky."

There's another theme here in this line of thinking – comparing ourselves to others. *It's absolutely daft to compare any part of our lot in life, our bodies that God created, or our wonderful minds, to those around us.* Knowing that we are fearfully and wonderfully made enables us to rest in who we are, and to quite like ourselves!

Foolish is acting unwisely, without forethought or caution. Kids act foolish because they're kids and they have to be trained in wisdom. It's not becoming for grown women to act foolish, because here's what it looks like when we do:

- We talk about her behind her back, because she's annoying and irritating.

- We snub her in public because her children are rude to ours.
- We shame her out loud because we're tired of her antics and want to embarrass her.

What's the theme in these actions? Judgment takes place in our hearts, and this causes us to act foolish as we land the gavel down hard and pronounce, "Guilty!" to those women in our circle that we find unbearable. *It's absolutely daft to take the place of God as judge in our relationships*. Knowing that we can pray for our "enemies" and see God bless them and bring them to him is wise, and releases us from bitterness and anger that causes us to be daft.

Daft sounds like a cool word when it's spoken in a British accent, but then all British talk is enjoyable, isn't it? However, if that adjective is used to describe who we are, it's not flattering one bit.

We are loved by God, and his love is enough.

We are beautiful and lovely in his sight, and always will be

We belong to Him and he can handle those who are against us.

Any other line of thinking is preposterous, laughable, and ludicrous, and well…daft!

Under the Influence - Do I Really Want to See? – Marcy Lytle

We live in a world where acquiring much sends us high up the status ladder, and when others see how much we have we are admired and envied and loved. But we also live in a world where those things fade over time, and when we end up old and alone, all of the things we acquired are stored, given away, are of very little value to us. In fact, we're lucky if we have a chair and a bed on which to lay our head at night, *if* we live to a very old age.

So why do we seek to acquire all of these things?

Houses, wealth, cars, clothes, and all of that stuff?

I recently thought about the rich young ruler who in Mark 10 came to Jesus to inquire what he needed to do in order to "inherit eternal life." Jesus reminded him of the commandments like "do not steal, do not murder, etc." and the guy stated that he had kept all of those commandments.

I'm already impressed with this guy!

However, after he told Jesus that he had kept those commandments, Jesus told him to do one more thing. He asked him to sell all that he had and give it to the poor. The scripture also says that Jesus "felt love" for the guy before he instructed him to do one more thing that he hadn't done. He also invited the man to follow him.

What? Wasn't the guy already following Christ by obeying the commandments?

The guy heard what Jesus said and he walked away grieving, because he had a lot of "stuff."

The story continues with Jesus stating to his followers that it is very hard for those with riches in this world to follow Him. Peter, the guy who always speaks up first, reminds the Lord that they had all given up everything to follow Christ.

But Christ reminds Peter that those who give it all for His sake will be given back so much more (including persecution!) in this life, and in the life to come.

What an interesting story to read in the Bible!

After this story, those who followed him became fearful. I think I'd be fearful too if I'd just heard Jesus tell a man to give away all that he owned! But Jesus began to converse with his followers, and they started asking him if they could be seated beside him on his throne. In other words, they wanted the glory of the throne because they had been willing to give it all up to follow Jesus. Doesn't that sound so lame? They felt entitled to the throne because they had abandoned all for Him.

Again, Jesus surprised them with his answer. He told them that being great among others is to be a servant.

Another contradictory, controversial statement by Jesus!

We've now been told that keeping God's commandments isn't enough to receive eternal life – we have to sell all that we have and give it to the poor. But of course, God will give back to us more than we give, including persecution! And now, we're told that in order to reign with Christ beside him when he's seated on the throne is not what we should be asking at all! We should be a servant to all.

This passage is a hard read. Especially living in the world in which we live, where stuff is all around us to acquire, work for, and obtain. In fact, surrounding ourselves with the pretties in this life makes us feel satisfied and well-accomplished, doesn't it?

I'm still chewing on these scriptures and I sort of relate to the man who walked away grieving and sad. I like my "stuff." I enjoy the things around me and take pleasure in a nice home, and all of the things money can buy. I'm not even sure I keep all of the commandments faithfully, like the rich young ruler said he did.

At the end of this same chapter, Jesus encounters a blind man on the road and asks him what he desired. Wasn't it obvious that the blind man would desire to see? But Jesus wanted to hear him say it.

He cried out, "I want to regain my sight!"

Immediately, Jesus healed him, and the guy followed after Him.

I suppose that's what we all need to do. We need to realize that we are blind to the real ways of following the Lord, in abandon. And when he visits us, we need to cry out for eyes to see, for eyes to be opened to what it looks like to follow Him. And then we need to throw aside all of the things that hinder us, and run after him – not to acquire throne status – but to submit ourselves to servanthood status.

The ways of the Lord are never our ways, thank goodness for that. Our ways leave us old, hard of hearing, dull of the senses, and walking slowly towards certain death of the flesh. But his ways don't leave us at all. They escort us into heavenly places of joy, peace, longsuffering, and love for others that exceed all riches that this life can offer.

What a concept that's hard to see.

Help us Lord, regain our sight, and follow you.

Healthy Habits – Essential Oils: What's the Big Deal? – by Mandy Major

I've spent 12 years creating herbal infusions and tinctures and salves, and let me tell you, I love them! But a year and a half ago I stumbled upon these little brown bottles called essential oils... and ever since then, my life and my medicine cabinet have been changed forever.

Added to my calendula salve, comfrey infusions, and valerian root, are now little glass roller bottles containing essential oils of: lavender, lemon, peppermint, melaleuca, and many more. Essential oils are so user friendly even my kids know how to use them. When someone in our house goes into an emotional tailspin, we grab the blend for emotional balance and rub it on their feet. Within seconds things start to look up! We have nicknamed it "the fit blend." When my son or daughter cut themselves, they grab the Lavender or Frankinsence. Lavender is amazing for its calming abilities. Frankincense (we call it God in a bottle!) is the oil to use when you are not sure what oil to use. Melaleuca (tea tree oil) has powerful anti-fungal and anti-bacterial properties. And Peppermint down the spine cools the body and helps support the digestive system. Lemon is amazing for gentle cleansing, ridding the body of toxins, and is great for DIY cleaning products (more on this later!) I love learning about nature and the powerful healing properties of plants.

Here are a few things I have learned over the past 18 months of study and research:

Essential oils are not really oils at all but rather secondary metabolites. They do not include fatty lipids or acids found in other oils. These metabolites are there to protect the plant from drought, disease, sun damage, viruses, and bacteria. Essential oils are found in seeds, bark, stems, roots, flowers, and other parts of plants, and are usually extracted from steam distillation. They contain hundreds of natural aromatic compounds with amazing, almost magic-like, abilities. I say magic-like because they work so quickly! When you are accustomed to a medication taking a while to work and you use an essential oil that works in seconds, it feels a bit like magic. I assure you it's not magic; it's science. In recent years, more research is being done on essential oils. Check it out here: Type in the oil by name in the search bar to pull up specific studies.

Not all essential oils are equal. As the popularity of essential oils has grown, new essential oils companies are appearing as well. I have chosen to go with a company that uses 3rd party testing on every single batch of oils. For me third party testing ensures quality and integrity. The only way to know your essential oils are pure is testing, specifically a test called mass spectrometry. This test reads the oil like a heart monitor with spikes for each compound found in it. One of the most respected leaders in this field is Dr. Richard Pappas of Essential Oil University. He is regularly finding what he calls "adulterated" oils from so called 100% pure oils. Adulterated oils are oils that have been changed from their pure state, by either cutting their potency with a filler, or adding synthetics to them to make it cheaper to mass produce. *Buyer beware!* This happens a lot in the essential oil world.

I have also chosen a company that sources its oils indigenously to the plants' native origins. This matters so much to me because as a herbalist, I've seen *what a difference it makes harvesting a plant where it is grown*. This plays into the potency of the plant, the quality of the plant, and the overall health of the plant. Even if you're not a gardener, you know the difference between a orange grown in Florida and an orange grown in dry West Texas! This company is also working around the world with these growers, building wells, schools, empowering women, and breathing life back into dying villages. I have chosen to purchase this particular cardamom, because with every bottle I purchase I am giving families in Guatemala a doctor for their town,

education for their children, and providing a living for generations to come.

Fun Essential Oil Facts:

– One drop of peppermint oil is equal to drinking 28 cups of peppermint tea.
– It takes more 60,000 rose petals to make 1 ounce of Rose essential oil.
– Essential oils are the regenerating, oxygenating, and immune defense properties of plants.
– The compounds found in essential oils are so small they can pass through the cell wall.
– One drop of essential oil often takes 1 ounce of plant (or more) to produce it.
– Jars of essential oils, which were considered more valuable than gold and jewels, were placed in the tombs of ancient Egyptian Pharaohs.
– Captain James Cook first mentioned tea tree oil in 1772 during his voyage to Botany Bay, Australia. He and his crew made a tea from the leaves to prevent scurvy.
– It take 30lbs of lavender to produce on 15ml bottle of essential oil.
– 45 lemons to one 15ml bottle of lemon essential oil

For more information about essential oils or for DIY recipes, contact me via email: bmcmajor@gmail.com.

Beauty for Ashes - A Custom-Made Thirst – by Pam Charro

One of the things I love most about God is his gentleness.

This attribute is especially precious to me because I have experienced so little of it in my life, especially from those in authority. At a young age, I learned that father figures were angry, impatient and/or emotionally inaccessible. Unfortunately, I continued to enforce this misbelief in my choice of romantic interests.

Because of my life experiences,
the Father's gentleness feels like cool water on the desert of my soul.

Maybe you can relate to having a custom-made thirst for God. An area of your life where you feel you have consistently experienced a lack of fulfillment. An area where you can feel an almost physical ache.

I am convinced that he sets it up that way on purpose.

He wants each of us to long for him in a way that nothing else in this life can satisfy.

In Hosea 2, God references such a thirst, and later in the same chapter, promises to use that very thirst to win the heart of his beloved.

How sweet and patient our Soul Lover is!

He goes to such great pains to show his love for us.

I am so thankful that, even though the development of my longing was painful, I have the awareness of my need for God.

Nothing else will satisfy it.

And I'm even more thankful for his longing to quench my custom-made thirst for him.

Created for Life – Alluring Beauty – by Ginny Hurley

I walked into my classroom and gasped! My desk was completely covered in the most colorful display of God's beauty I have ever seen! For my birthday, my students had each brought little flowers and bouquets and placed them together into a giant bouquet of God's Glory! Since I have almost 40 children that I teach, the result was magnificent. Together each flower only enhanced the exquisite color of the one next to it. One was stunningly large with bold color, while another was smaller and pastel. I couldn't decide which one I liked better. Alone, each delicate flower was lovely, but together, they were stunning. As I observed this picture, I was captivated by the thought that our own unique beauty truly enthralls the Lord.

The Father began to show me His heart for each of His children, and how incredibly special each one of us are to Him. I saw Him in time eternal creating and deciding how He wanted each of us to display His goodness. I felt a great sense of peace and security fall over me as I pondered this thought.

Not one of these flowers toils or spins, yet He clothes them in splendor.

The very depth of His creativity is unending and so magnificent that one little blade of grass is grown under the guidance of His knowledge.

If God's plan is to restore Eden back to us through Jesus' shed blood and resurrection, then I can only imagine how Eden, the place of perfection, has grown in splendor, too. Walking in the garden with our Creator! Can you imagine? So when He says, "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor even entered the heart of man the things I have prepared for those who love me," I think He means never before in any time or place has He displayed His glory like He will for each of us in Christ. Wow! That is mind-blowing!

How can I worry and consider my children, their jobs, student loans, etc. as too insignificant for the King to consider? He has my heart. I think He knows what I need. In no uncertain terms He has proclaimed the end from the beginning! We WIN! It's done! *Fait accompli!* My heart races with this truth!

From time's beginning, His plans were set. He KNEW! He isn't surprised at the sudden downturn of the economy. He isn't thrown out of a balance by our culture. His astonishing Presence hasn't been scowling because of my sin. It's been paid for already, making me love Him all the more. No way could I continue in sin, because the penalty has been paid! I fly to my knees when I've wronged someone or something.

A Father who chooses to love me no matter what I've done, and is actually proud of me, makes my heart soar!

These thoughts are too high for me. Who can understand His ways? Well, He said, "You can." He has given us the mind of Christ, and created us in His image, ambassadors and representatives here on the earth to display His goodness to a lost and dying world. It is something so impossible for man, yet already done by THE King.

A gospel so alluring and beautiful that it's harder to say no, than believe!

I'm forever caught!

How about you?

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road – Married for 50 Years – by Lynn Cherry

David and I went to see *Age of Adaline* this weekend. The movie features a woman who stops aging somewhere in her twenties. Every woman coloring gray hair and slathering on wrinkle cream is envious,, right?

Turns out, the journey is harder than it might seem. Adaline spends more than a lifetime running and hiding to avoid becoming a specimen. One day, Adaline has lunch with her daughter Fleming, who by this time looks much older than her mother.

Fleming asks, “Don't you miss having someone to love?”

Adeline answers, **“It's not the same when there's no growing old together. Without that, love is just heartbreak.”**

Our friends, John and Dianne, have been growing old together for 50 years. They celebrated their anniversary surrounded by loved ones. Dianne managed to find a blouse in the same shade of sea foam green that her bridesmaids wore. She smiled for pictures, mouth open wide, full of joy in the moment.

What a great accomplishment! What a celebration!

How does a couple stay married for 50 years?

John boiled the secret of their marital success down to one sentence.

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”
John 15:13 NIV

Love sacrificially.
Lay down your life for each other.
Then do it again, over and over again.

I sat beside my husband of almost half those 50 years and wondered if we are living out the secret to John & Dianne’s success. Are we laying down our lives?

This has been a challenging season in our marriage. My husband has a new job that puts him on a plane nearly every week. That sounds like he has a private jet, but his job puts him on multiple planes every week – like eight to ten of them.

His travelling causes my weekly to-do list to lengthen because he does so, so much when he is home. It’s difficult for us, but he absolutely loves his job. This is the kind of job that comes along after years of life experience, and this job puts all the pieces together. When David is gone, I do all the stuff I usually do, and I try to keep up with all the stuff he normally does. I lay down my life because I love him and I’m thrilled for him to have this dream job.

When David is home, he works hard to make my life easier, even when he’d rather put his travel weary body to bed. He wakes up early to take our boy to school. He cleans the kitchen. He goes to the grocery store. We are laying down our lives and finding balance.

Balance doesn’t look like a scale with equal contributions resting at zero. Balance looks more like a see saw tipping back and forth as each one of us lays down our life in turn.

It puts fresh perspective on life’s “ups and downs.”

We are learning how to live this new chapter of our lives.

Watching our friends John and Dianne celebrate 50 years and hundreds of chapters in their marriage provided just the boost we needed to keep learning and growing together toward our half-century mark.

Date Night Fun – By the Water – by Marcy Lytle

It's June. Six months until Christmas. But until that season descends upon us, it's warm outside! And it's that time of year to enjoy that cool refreshing, sparkling, inviting phenomenon called water. And there are lots of ways to enjoy being by the water together, reflecting, dreaming, dining, dancing, or diving in!

Here are our picks for date night fun in June:

The Water's Edge: We have a few parks in our area that have bridges on which one can stand and look out over the water, or pull up a chair and fish, or just sit, as the sun reflects its rays across the ripples. Find a park with a bridge or a pier where you can take a couple of chairs, choose to fish (or not), enjoy a picnic supper, and reflect on God's goodness to you both. In fact, take a journal and write down your reflections, as you sip together this wonderful summer drink.

Dream Catcher: Take a ride out to your nearest lake for a date together. Instead of making a dreamcatcher with feathers and stones, why not create one together with markers that denote specific dreams you both have for your future? For example, take some string and wire, gather sticks as you walk along by the lake, then park yourself to create. Make a circle together of grapevines or connect twigs with twine. Hang small rocks from the circle and write on them your dreams for the future! Spend an intimate evening together in prayer for your lives together as one.

Swimming in Suits. When is the last time you both went swimming together? How about playing cards? Why not do both? Find a pool, a lake, or even a gym where you can enjoy the exercise and fun of swimming together and playing in the water, as a couple. Be sure and pack a deck of cards to enjoy a game of double solitaire poolside when you take a break from swimming!

Sunset on the Beach. Maybe you live by the ocean – how lucky for you! But even if you don't, you can find a beach on a lake, pack your supper, along with flashlights for reading later, and head out to see the sun go down. Be sure to pick a clear night for the most spectacular sunsets! You'll need some music for this date night, so check out these songs, and play them as you dance together by the water as the day ends…

In the Boat. There are so many options for this idea! Find out about boat races near you and show up to watch. Paddle boat or kayak on a lake in your town. Purchase an inflatable boat and head to the water. Reserve a spot on a tour boat near you, for bat watching or a sunset cruise. Start Googling and see what you can find to get out in the boat with your date! And why not surprise him/her with a little something new to wear for this fun night out!

Water is a necessity of life, especially in the summer months! There is something refreshing, invigorating, and even relaxing when we spend time on the water, near the water, or just gazing into the reflections in the water. Don't wait until it gets too hot to even step outside. Plan your date and show up for a romantic night or afternoon on the water, for two!

After 30 Years - I Didn't Want His Name – Marcy Lytle

When I got married, over three decades ago, I didn't like that I had to give up my name, my identity, and take my husband's last name. I remember that it bothered me some, and I felt a bit guilty about that feeling. After all, I loved my husband – I just wanted to retain my own last name. I remember feeling the same way when my daughter got married. It bothered me a bit that she no longer carried our last name, but now she was known by a whole new name, one that identified her with a new family – other than ours.

Sound selfish? Well maybe it was, but over the years, I've notice that many women in today's society don't want to take their husband's last name. In fact, they don't want their husbands to make more money than they do, they don't want their husbands to take care of them, and they don't want to lose themselves in a man at all. I just read a magazine story in *Marie Claire* about one such woman who realized that although she loved the man who loved her immensely, that wasn't enough reason to marry him.

I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with keeping your last name when you get married, but I do think that an *attitude* of disconnection can be saying some things that will hinder a marriage from being all that it can be.

In the same vein of thought, I'd like to say this same attitude is often present in our relationship with God.

How so?

Marriage is supposed to be an example of Christ's relationship with the church, with him as the bridegroom and us as the bride. There are multiple scriptures about this metaphor. Marriage has become everything *but* that kind of relationship we can have with Christ.

Coming into a relationship with Christ implies that we bear his name. It's not so that he can strip us of our identify (after all, he created us!), but it's so that we can experience the power, the blessings, the righteousness, and the love that are true and alive in his name!

Coming into a relationship with Christ requires surrender on our part of all of our agendas, our dreams, and our plans…in favor of his plans for us. It's not so that he can ruin and kill all of the fun we've got set before us, but it's so that we can experience agendas, dreams and plans for a good future – not one that can sink on a dime. His future is secure and eternal.

Coming into a relationship with Christ requires that he be the head of our lives and our homes. This means that all decisions, thoughts and feelings come under what he says – not what we want. It's not so that he can rule us with an iron hand and crush us when we step out of line. Quite the contrary! He knows that we are flesh, our thoughts are carnal, and our decisions are made based on what we see with human eyes. His headship means that he sees ahead, he knows what lies down the path under our feet, and he wants to steer us into green pastures, still waters, and tables full of satisfying things that we can enjoy – even in the presence of those who hate us!

When we get married and want to retain our identity, our name, and our own "way," it could be that we've seen bad marriages and we don't want any part of that. Maybe we've been hurt by a domineering man who crushed our spirit, and we vow to never allow that again. Or perhaps we've observed men and aren't that impressed with their track records, and we want to forge our own way in a world where we can self-protect, self-absorb, and self-exalt, thinking that is the best way for a *successful* woman.

Not taking our husband's last name can be indicative of a deeper root, way down in the bottom of our souls, where we are planted and refuse to be pulled up to be transplanted to a different place.

But what if…the man you are marrying only wants to take all that you are and place the keys to his kingdom in your hand? Would you take it? What if…the man you are marrying knows your desires (because you've told them to him over and over again) and he wants to take those desires, tweak them and refine them so that they're used to their fullest potential, requiring you to trust him to do so? Would you let him? And what if…the man you are marrying knows every weakness of yours and wants to be your strength, your provision and your protection, not because you're incapable or less than him, but because he has eyes, ears, and a heart so big that he is willing to lay down his life so that your life can thrive! Would you welcome him to lead you?

That's the kind of relationship Christ offers us, but yes – we have to take his name and bear it – we must surrender our lives and take up his – we will follow his lead wherever he may takes us – all because he's worthy of that position in our lives. We lose nothing! In fact, we gain everything!

Think about your own attitudes toward your husband, your boyfriend, your father, the males in your lives, and see where your disdain and resistance is rooted. Ask God to heal you from any wounds inflicted upon you by the opposite sex. It's only then that you can fulfill the rest of your life whether married or not…by accepting the Bridegroom in all of his splendor, with all of his gifts, and with his hands open wide…taking his name that he freely gives to you. The name above all names, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords.

And when that relationship is secure and healthy, the marriage relationship will follow suit, and you'll smile as you bear his name…

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick - Discover Yourself – by Rachel Critz

Talking about boys, putting make up on, having the latest style trend, or gossiping about the next girl you see…

What do you think of when reading that list? We who are teenage girls, right?

Please know that we do not have to feel bad about wanting to look pretty in makeup or keeping up with the latest clothing, because I know I love those things too. Boys are not our focus right now, and neither is talking about how bad Susan's haircut looks. Our main focus as teens is discovering ourselves in the Lord and building a stronger relationship with Him.

- You can start by surrounding yourself in His love, fellow Christians.
- Best friends can help you to find yourself as well, as they make things so much easier. You are kept accountable by your girls, and guy best friends are good too. Just know your boundaries with them.
- A devotional or words from the bible every morning help increase your knowledge.

When things were looking down for me in my faith and I felt like nothing was working, my mom told me,

"Just keep feeding your spirit with the word of God even if you feel nothing happening."

Trust me, this has helped me drastically.

Keep faith with God no matter the circumstances these next years will bring you. You will face some pretty tough battles, but God does not give his soldiers wars that they cannot win.

There will be times where the boy of your dreams may crush you, but guess who will not have crushed you?

God will always be there for his daughters.

Teen years are rough while trying to find ourselves. Nobody's judgment matters, girl. Only God has a say in what you seek for your spirit self.

It took me over two years to discover who I am.

I am the Daughter of the King.

That's who God called me to be.

Once you find who you are, seek to retain that knowledge and do not give up on yourself. Keep seeking more things about yourself through God and learn what you can do through His spirit, when others are struggling around you. God will show you in ways that are different for each one. He showed me through a vision.

He might show you through other people, prayer, His word, etc.

There are so many possibilities to find yourself.

Hope is still here.

Do not give up on yourself through these teen years.

Remember, you can have victory in any trial. Show up the people who think the teen girls of the world are just boy-obsessed gossipers.

Keep the faith and find yourself in Him.

Jeremiah 29 says,

I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for. When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen. When you come looking for me, you'll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed. (The Message)

Saddle Up – The Process of Shedding – by Melissa Critz

Honestly, spring is always my favorite time of year: new birth, new growth, new beginnings. This year was no different. All the tender flowering plants that had been hiding from the wintery elements were brought out into the full shine of the fresh sunlight. Birds flitted here and there, gathering a variety of items to house their delicate eggs. The wilted grass was thickening and greening up, and wildflowers exploded across the rolling land. And…the horses were the most content at this time of year. They literally spent the whole day grazing and enjoying the peacefulness while everything around them gathered and grew.

While I was watering the thirsty potted plants on the front porch, I noticed a white patch in the front pasture. Aha! Domingo had rolled and left part of Old Man Winter behind. It was that time. Hair had fallen off in clumps that could have filled my hand. Part of the afternoon ritual incorporated filling water troughs, organizing and filling feed buckets, and spending time grooming and riding my equines. That day, I just had time to spend grooming them – no riding. I had an order to my grooming approach and always started with picking their hooves. I then grabbed the mane and tail comb and proceeded to work through the many tangles. Next, the body was tackled. If needed, a curry comb was used to get the chunks of mud removed; and if not, then I gathered the softer body brush and groomed in the direction of the fur.

On this particular spring day, one swipe on Domingo and the brush was completely full of white hair –*completely*! There was the white hair falling off in clumps that I had seen evidence of in the front pasture. *Shedding.* It was that time of year when the old goes away and the fresh and new takes over. It takes time for this process. It can also be messy and unattractive while it's happening. Elijah was a dark bay, but he looked like a light brown, dull-coated horse until the dead winter coat finally relented and came off. However, it did happen. The old left and the new came.

Okay, Saddle Partner, "What are you saying to me?" I queried.

I recalled what Luke said about old wineskins:

"Then He spoke a parable to them: ' No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old. And no one puts a new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, 'The old is better.'" Luke 5:36-39.

I am aware that this parable was relating to fasting and how Jesus was telling his disciples to put off their old skin and be renewed by the Holy Spirit, as the Holy Spirit would be coming after fasting at Pentecost. But I felt that my saddle partner was also telling me that this parable could be used generally, in terms of giving up the old and letting it go, letting it fall off as well as *helping* it to fall off (brushing the old hair off). It is messy and not very pretty *and* takes time, but the result?

It's newness!
Beauty!
Freshness!

A new start!

This can be related to the greatest event in a person's life when he or she accepts Jesus as their Savior (and all of heaven rejoices) as well as to each and every event that happens where he or she recognized old ways that need to die and desires for that new beginning, whether it's a one-time sin or a long-ongoing sin. I truly see this as something that can happen even daily as we strive to live in this world daily.

But can we overcome things that are old and dead?

But of course we can!

Why?

We have a Father that wants us to be renewed in Him. He desires for us to be one with Him – refreshed - not entrapped in the dead wintery fur.

Be encouraged with His word:

"Therefore, of anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." 2 Corinthians 5:17;
"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." Isaiah 43:18-19;
"Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." Colossians 3:9-10;
"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;
"But now that you have come to know God, or rather to known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be one more? You observe days and months and seasons and years!" Galatians 4:9-10.

There are so many more scriptures that support the process of putting the old away and walking in the new. And this process does have to happen. We do have to deal with letting go of the old, shedding the stuff that doesn't need to be a part of us anymore, in order to let the new shine. BUT it's worth it!

Read this promise:

"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." 2 Corinthians 3:18.

He is transforming us!
We must let go of the old skin.
We must let Him transform us.
We then can let the old die, and the new live.

Bush Bean Blessings - Instead of Nonsense by Tammy Morrison

I've come to realize that the magnificent heritage cultivated by my dad has provided me with a lifelong firm foundation. Of course, I didn't realize this is what was taking place while I was growing up. I did, however, know beyond a shadow of a doubt that my daddy was a fixer. He created (and still does) an atmosphere of completeness and wholeness. Daddy knows how to identify a situation and, even better, knows how to identify a solution. Not only is he a fixer, he is a doer.

Instead of nonsense, he provides rationale and logic. He is the calm in the storm and ever the optimist. What the world deems impossible, his knack is seeking the possible. I have seen and heard firsthand his positive outlook time and time again. I don't think I can actually even remember a moment when he's been a naysayer or when he lost faith or hope or belief, no matter how bleak circumstances appear. That's pretty strong stuff. I know he must have felt or sensed a lack of belief or trust at some point. I mean, he's human, after all. But instead of nonsense--instead of engaging in rubbish or foolish, unacceptable words or conduct--he has always imparted a spirit of freshness. He breathes words of hope and trust. He substantiates life.

To this day, I continue to receive love, care, and guidance from him. Through the years, Daddy has purposefully taught me strength, honor, dignity, stability, humor, hope, tenacity, laughter, kindness, compassion, peace, and love. All necessary tools for the trade of life. He hasn't just taught me, he continues to model these most important characteristics. Come to think of it, there's no doubt that's why my brothers and I are all in the "fixing" business in our chosen career fields. Even the grandkids are "fixers" in what they do in their professions.

What a legacy. What a life. What an honor.

It has always been easy for me to embrace and accept the love of my Heavenly Father because of the blessing of my earthly father. Just as with God, I've always known I was shielded from potential danger by my dad. Bottom line, I've always known I'm safe with him. Even when obstacles surround me or rush at me with force, I know my dad's there to help me clear a path.

There have been multiple times in my life when he held danger at bay on my behalf. I've often wondered where I would be without him?

Instead of nonsense--instead of senseless, foolish, or absurd thought processes--I've learned the most vital keys to a successful life through the incredible man I'm honored to call Daddy:

Love God.
Love people.
Find the very best in every situation.
Advocate for others.
Demonstrate kindness.
Exercise thankfulness.
Bless others.
Extend grace.
Enjoy laughter.
Speak life.
Make a difference.
Never, ever, ever give up.

"Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way."

Colossians 3:15-17 The Message (MSG)

Moving Forward – Ask Big – by Pam Charro

I was desperate.

I was a single college student and was still out of work after several months.

I had no way to pay my bills and felt like a huge financial burden to my roommates. Sure, they were being great about it, but it just couldn't continue - I had to get a job!

I told God every day, "Lord, I'll take anything! I don't care how menial the work or how low the pay, as long as I can get by."

Yet week after week, not even a nibble. Never had I had so few prospects for so long, and it was beginning to look hopeless.

One day, the Spirit led me to consider what I would ask for if I got exactly what I wanted in a job.

Wow, really? I had never even thought about that. It *would* be great if I really loved what I was doing. And if it paid really well. Oh, and having positive co-workers would be so wonderful. And it would be even better if I could get financial reimbursement for college.

I realized that the possibilities were endless and it couldn't possibly hurt to ask, so I wrote a list of all of the things I could think of and then prayed for God to give them to me.

Would you believe that the phone finally rang that very day?

It's true. And the temporary job offer ended up leading to one of the best jobs I have ever had. The immediate offer wasn't the dream job, but it put me in the building I needed to be in, and I began making contacts that led me to everything I had written down.

God did a miracle for me!

I am convinced that I would have had to wait much longer if I hadn't finally decided to ask God for big things.

He doesn't get any glory when we just barely get by. He wants to do something amazing that can only be done by him.

Making dreams come true is what he loves to do!

I would love to be able to say that I learned my lesson once and for all, but the story I just shared happened a long time ago.

I think it's time for me to make another list.

Real Stories – Small Signs – by Cathy Belliveau

As a single parent back in the late 80's, I struggled to make ends meet. My son and I lived on the third floor of an apartment building. The unit didn't have washers and dryers so I had to use the laundry facilities at the end of the complex. I had to do laundry but I had no money. I had given my church the last two dollars I had.

For some reason, I just picked up my laundry basket and headed down the stairs. I had no idea how I was going to do laundry without any money, but I just went anyway. There at the bottom of the stairs was a *five dollar bill*. I was in shock and filled with hope and joy.

I saw this as a small sign of something bigger; a reaffirmation of my faith.

My second small sign came many years later, when my daughter Alexandra was about 10 years old. It was days before payday, Alex was not well, and she needed medicine. I spent my last few dollars on food and gas with nothing left in the bank. I was worried about getting her the medication she needed but didn't know what to do. I started to get ready to go to the store anyway.

I went in the closet to get my shoes and folded up inside my shoe was a *five dollar bill!*

I burst into tears, so thankful for the gift and the sign that I wasn't in this alone.

A few years ago, I bought a suitcase from a resale shop. My current one was tattered and so sad to look at. Alex was home and needed cash for school. I had nothing to give her but was going to drive the 30 minute drive to the store just to get something for her, somehow. She just needed *five dollars* to replace her lost identification card.

I was talking to her and going through the suitcase to get rid of the paper stuffed inside. I said, "If I could just find some money...." and at that exact time my hand came out with a folded *five dollar bill.*

A bit of a shock!

Alex had heard the *five for faith story* before, as she had been part of it the last time.

God shows us His presence in so many ways but we often fail to see them.

His small gifts remind us that He is with us.

Someone asked me why I didn't ask God for a million dollars, and I replied, "I didn't need a million dollars, I just needed five." Every time I look at a 5 dollar bill, I say a prayer of thanks.

I've made choices in my life with some of them good and some not so good. The best choice I have ever made is to leave my heart open to receive.

God's love is all around me.

The beauty of faith and its blessings gives us all so much more…if we just believe.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - They Have to Go – by Marcy Lytle

It's my least favorite part of the job of putting together this magazine – deleting the old stories from last month so that they can be put into archives. But I have to do it, because keeping those stories and pages loaded onto the magazine just slows down the effectiveness and readiness of the current issue. It doesn't even take but a few minutes, but I dread it each month. I have to click on the page, click delete, and click to confirm…over and over again…until all of the old stories are gone.

My favorite part of putting together this magazine is inserting the stories that are new, along with their photographs, and arranging them for the next month. But all of this "other" work has to be done before I get to that fun, creative, interesting part.

In Ephesians 4 it says this,

"…you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth."

That really doesn't sound like a fun chore either, does it? It sounds like a lot of effort and work.

The truth is that unless those old stories are deleted from the magazine month by month, pretty soon the old stories will outweigh the new ones, and we will lose readers because they will be unable to load our magazine – because it will just take too long.

All because of the weight of "the old."

We all have old stories. I have stories of being so fearful of my family dying that I couldn't even enjoy the time when they were with me. I have stories of feeling like God was mad at me constantly because I was never good enough to please him. I have other stories of disappointments that caused me to withdraw from people that loved me. And the list goes on and on. Those stories, however, no longer tell the present state of my life. I don't want those stories to be what others see, when they read my life.

There's a saying that we are the only Bible some people will ever read, and it's so true. Many will never crack open the bible and read what it says, but they will observe our lives – and either be drawn to his love – or repelled away – by the stories that we present to them to read.

My new story includes one of trust in God as my Father who loves me like I am, who will care for me through every storm of life, and who never disappoints and enables me to love others even in their weaknesses – because I realize that I too am weak – but He is strong.

That's just one of my new stories.

So just like on the website where I have to click on the story, then click delete, then confirm – it's no different in my life. That same story will hang around nagging me and trying to pull me back as a character in that drama, unless I choose to face and erase it from today. *Today* is the story I want to live, to believe in his goodness *today*, and to present *today's* story front and center.

This requires that when I see the old story off to the side, I turn away and lay it aside only to be read by my children and grandchildren, when they want to see from where I've come. I confirm that I no longer want that story carrying weight on my story today.

I don't think I'll ever enjoy the deletion process, and I really wish those stories would just file away by themselves when I'm ready to start a new month of the magazine. But they don't. I have to put them away and delete the pages, out of sight from my vision.

And then…I can work on the present issue, the current story, the one that's alive and well…and present that to my readers.

What stories are weighing down the pages of your life? Take time to pull them up, delete them, and confirm that they are gone…not forgotten…from your life today.

God is always at work making and creating something new in us.

But we have to be willing to let go of the old so that there's visibility and accessibility to the new.

FRESH THYME - The Replacement – by Marcy Lytle

It was 1977 and a young man and his brothers were traveling in Mexico on their way to the U.S. when all of a sudden – wham! The truck hit a guardrail on a bridge and the driver was transported to the hospital. There, he found out he had a broken hip, elbow and jaw. The hip joint is the only one that didn't heal properly, and over time began to cause all sorts of pain in the young man's body.

He limped, he took medicine, he tried to exercise it away, but the pain from the hip that had been broken was just too much. About 17 years later, this man went through hip replacement surgery and now walks without a limp, and said after the surgery, "I feel like I've been given back 20 years of my life." That's how the new hip felt…compared to the old one!

That man was my husband. I can testify that he's a different man, and still is, now another 20 years later. He still walks without pain, can out-walk me by a fast pace, and stands straight – always thankful and always remembering life before the replacement. Before, he could hardly work and had trouble sleeping, and after, he works without pain and sleeps like a baby. It took surgery, a cut of the knife, and an actual replacement of the thing that caused him grief.

I think about his hip replacement often. I see the scar on his hip and remember. I sit in the car and watch him get out to walk across a parking lot and marvel at his strong legs. I hear him tell others about the replacement and how it gave him new life. I know he prays for others when he hears they are walking around in pain, in need of a new hip. I never cease to give thanks for the incredible gift of the replacement – one that's good for life.

You probably know where I'm going with this, so just come along with me…

We all experience collisions in our lives. Some are minor bumps with very little injury, but before this life is through we will most likely experience a few head-on crashes that leave us broken or even crushed. As time goes by, we hope we will heal properly, but we realize that we limp along and suffer in pain silently, sometimes when no one else knows. However, it starts to show in the way we talk, or the way we don't worship anymore, or in the way we avoid others and even time alone with Him, all because the pain is so severe we cannot see clearly what it is that we need in order to walk freely again.

That's the beauty of what Jesus did for us. He was our replacement on the cross. And he offers a replacement of that which is broken with his newness that is complete and well. My husband still has the scar on his flesh where he was cut open and the replacement took place. But that broken hip no longer resides his body. He got a new one, a better one, one made of material that won't deteriorate or cause pain. And that's what Jesus offers all of us, you and me.

I'm feeling a bit broken today, and maybe you felt broken yesterday or will tomorrow. But the fact is that Jesus cares about our brokenness, not just enough to soothe us, bandage us up, and send us on our way with a limp.

- He cares enough to say, “Here, let me take that burden and give you mine.” “My burden is easy and my yoke is light.” (Matthew 11:30).
- He cares enough to say, “Here, give me your sinful nature and I’ll give you my forgiveness and erase that sin from your life.” (Psalm 103:12).
- He cares enough to say, “Here, offer me your worries and fears and I’ll envelop your mind and heart with my peace that passes all understanding.” (Philippians 4:7)

God doesn’t ask us to lay down our lives or let go of our pain, just to leave us empty and hanging or dangling from a limb, crying out, “Help me, I’m about to fall!”

The cool and unique honor and privilege of serving Him is that everything he asks us to give up is replaced by something better that he has for us – something eternally rich and satisfying – something that enables us to walk, leap, and sleep without a flinch of pain…

Need a replacement? Just lie down and let him go to work…and wake up with 20 years given back to you of your life…and get up and walk. And see if others don’t notice that the limp is gone.

FRESH THYME - Myth Busters – by Marcy Lytle

Did you know there's a television show by the same name as this article? It's one where the hosts take rumors that are believed to be true, and they test them scientifically, to see if they are indeed true…or just a myth. It's a pretty interesting premise, and makes for an entertaining show. And it's funny to realize and discover that something we've believed all of our lives turns out to be a myth after all!

As I've grown older and wiser (and I've still got much more ground to cover!), I've realized that many things I dwelled on in my thoughts, believed in my heart, and even reacted to in my life were just plain myths! Fairy tales! A Pegasus horse with wings! They weren't true at all, and yet I had let these "truths" steer my life and my self-worth right down into a sunken well with no water!

I thought I'd list a few myths that we (especially women) tend to grow up believing:

- If I were skinny and cute, I'd have more friends and wouldn't feel so bad about myself.
- She just has it all and she knows it. I could never be her friend.
- God must not love me, because I'm always struggling financially.
- In order to be a "good" Christian, I have to follow all the rules.
- God is mostly displeased with me because I keep failing and failing.
- Suffering is a sign of God's stamp of disapproval.
- Relationships are not worth the effort, because people are so fickle.
- I can get myself out of this trouble, because I got myself into it.
- Prayer doesn't accomplish anything much.
- If I just had _____ I'd be happy.

Do any of those thoughts sound familiar?

Let's bust those myths with the truth, not scientifically proven, but spiritually spoken, by God himself.

Feeling bad about our looks is not healthy or wise. God made us in his image; therefore, we are beautiful.

No one "has it all" and most likely, the girl you're avoiding needs friendship more than all that she appears to have.

God is love. Period. His love is not conditional.

A "good" Christian is one who has accepted Jesus and HIS work done on the cross, that's it.

Failure is an opportunity for God to show how pleased he really is, that we've let go and are now letting Him…

In this world we will have troubles, He told us. But be of good cheer, He has overcome them all.

People are fickle. That part is true, but relationship with Him enables us to relate to them.

All of our efforts to erase trouble in our lives are futile.

Prayer accomplishes much, when attached to faith.

Happiness is fleeting because whatever fills that blank can be destroyed or burned up by fire. Joy is eternal and can never be stolen or taken away.

What myths do you still believe? Have you ever even considered that just possibly what you're believing is not true at all?

It takes practice to turn from believing a lie to believing the truth, it really does. But once the myth is exposed, and the truth is brought to light, why go back to believing that horses really do have wings?

FRESH THYME - It is Ever Wrong to be Kind? – by Marcy Lytle

Kindness leads to repentance, the Good Book says. And yet, Christians sometimes are the most unkind people to their own crowd of friends *and* to those who live "outside" the church. Judgment is something many Christians would rather hand over, than offering a hand up. Here are some thoughts that might precipitate unkind actions:

I can't be a friend with a gay person. She'll think I agree with her lifestyle.

She has a tattoo; she must be into drugs or something awful.

Why does she dress like that? Doesn't she know she looks like a slut?

He is so mean to his wife. I'm not going to speak to him again.

Okay, maybe some of those thoughts are a bit harsh, but I know they come across the minds of some of us who have been raised in church, protected by a bubble of something we call holiness (which usually has nothing to do with the heart), and we who think we've got the upper hand on all that it entails to live a Christian life.

I'm guilty of thinking judgmental, fearful, accusatory thoughts myself, at times. We all do. And some of us go even further to think that if we're kind to those who are different from us, we are somehow sending a message that we embrace that person and all that they are.

Well, would that be so bad?

Look at Jesus. After all, he is our example we are to follow, not our own heads and ideas and rules.

Jesus ate with sinners. Sinners were those who didn't yet believe in who Jesus was, and so their lifestyles reflected a life of selfishness, greed, and fleshly stuff like we all deal with.

Jesus called diverse people to just follow him and hang out, and listen to him talk about his Father.

Jesus chatted with women who were outcasts of society and offered them a cool drink on a hot day.

Jesus didn't stop and consider whether or not kindness was indeed the action for the day. He was just kindhearted and it came out. He didn't consider what others would think if he was seen hanging on a cross offering a thief eternal life, he just knew he had something wonderful to give and he gave it. **He never stopped and considered the "worth" of the other person and if they were deserving of his kindness or not; he just saw the value of each individual made in his Father's image.**

Proverbs 3:3 says, "Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart."

That sounds like a tattoo, doesn't it? If only we could burn into our hearts the evidence of kindness in our actions!

Romans 2:4 says, "…the kindness of God leads you to repentance…"

It is indeed the kindness of the Savior that leads me to repent, when I see his mercy extended to me and his love poured out in my life – I respond by falling at his feet and weeping in repentance over my lack of trust and commitment to him.

Kindness shown to another is never wrong. How could it be? Kindness is one of the evidences that the Spirit is alive and at work in our lives. And it's because of His kindness shown to us that we then can be kind to others…***all of those*** that we meet on any given day.

A BUNDLE OF

THYME

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 ½ cup of sugar, show them how to half that, or double it. ½ X ½ equals ¼ cup of sugar. Or ½ X2 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 1/3% which is about a third of the price. So if the dress is normally $30, they get 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 **Difficulty:**
Serves 4

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 **Difficulty:**
Serves 4

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 **Difficulty:**
Serves 2

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 delicieux!

Ingredients:
4 slices bacon
2 chicken legs, thighs and drumsticks seperated
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 nior 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 ½. 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 ½. 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'Occitate 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 then 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."

Mikeala 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, I 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 I 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 worshiping and made a comment. Here I was dancing and worshiping 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 clasping 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.

<u>Meatballs:</u>

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.

Psalm 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 is 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 our 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 toddle 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

THYME

August 2015

TIPS

The Dressing - Plain or Pretty? – Marcy Lytle

The bedroom is sometimes the last place we work on in our house, because it's the place where guests are really not welcome. After all, it's our private sanctuary where we go to relax, sleep and get away from cares of the day. However, sometimes that neglect makes our own bedroom uninviting, a mess, and not very pretty to look at – even with our own eyes. But it should be one of the prettiest places in the house!

It can be costly to purchase an entire new set of bedding, but there are ways to dress up our bed in our own bedrooms that are simple, and yet add so much beauty and attraction that we just might want to even invite our guests in to see!

If you're starting out, decide on your comforter first and go from there. If you already have your comforter, then start afresh with all the accessories. Here's a plain bed, simple and clean, but let's look at seven ways we can transform it into something dressed up and alluring…

Extra layer: If you add an extra layer with a thin comforter, you can pull in a new color that makes your bed come alive with color. And…you can pull back the top comforter at night when it's warm, and just use the lighter one. Then in the winter months, you can cover up with both! See how the orange makes the otherwise plain comforter pop? Both of these comforters were found at Kirklands.

Sheets: Dark sheets are pretty, but they show every little bit of anything and then they're not inviting at all. Crisp, light colored sheets made from a fairly high thread count (300 - 500) are usually the best. So if you want to "dress up" this part of your bed, look for a pattern that goes with or contrasts with your comforter. Check out your discount stores like Marshalls and Ross for sheets that won't break your pocketbook. Check out this guideline for buying sheets.

Pillows: These throw pillows were also purchased at Kirklands. Consider looking for throw pillows when you're just out shopping for other things. Find either a pop of color or a hue or fabric that complements the colors you already have on your bed. And add more than one, stand them up, or stack them. It's easy to toss them off at night, and place them back on in the morning. These pillows bring in a different texture (burlap) and include a pattern similar to the one in the comforter!

Artwork: What you hang above your bed on the wall sets the tone for a complete look. It doesn't have to be a mirror, or something that matches perfectly, or photos of your children. In fact, after your entire bed is made, look at it and decide what color or contrast you want to add to your room. Maybe it's an art piece, like the one we've hung here. And art doesn't have to be expensive. Shop around until the perfect piece catches your eye, one you'll want to look at every night for a long while…Or…choose a piece that's works as a headboard AND artwork, like the metal one in this picture. It's from Target.

Lighting: Dress up the sides of your bed with cute lamps that match…or not. We found these at At Home, and we chose them to match the gray of the comforter, and the little orange ball on the base went with our orange layering. When they're clicked on, it makes the whole bedroom scene light up, in more ways than one!

Rug: Finally, a rug looks pretty peeking out from underneath your bed, if you can find one that serves as a pretty base for the bedroom look. We opted for a large red rug in this room, since the bed is clean and simple gray, with a touch of hues of red/pink. And in another room, we picked one with multiple colors and then decorated the bed to match.

There are many ways to dress up your bedroom. You can add a throw across one corner, tuck your bedspread under or let it hang loose, add a bed skirt or leave it off and add pretty boxes under the bed. Be creative, let your own unique tastes shine through, and then when you open the door at night – after a long hard day – the cheeriness of your bedroom will invite you in for a good night's sleep and a smile.

Seven 4 You - Before the Fall – Marcy Lytle

We move in. We move out.

We box up. We unpack.

We clean out. We restock.

Our lives get full of stuff, and then a big move takes place and we realize we don't need much of what we've collected. So we purge. And when we pack up to move, we only take the essentials. And sometimes, at the end of summer we look at the summer chaos results in our home, and we feel the need to purge and clean out, before the school year begins.

Here are seven areas in the house that we can clean, and also take stock of seven attitudes we might as will throw out with the rest of the trash:

1. **The pantry**. This is where you store those non-perishables. But we all know, they do have an expiration date. Enlist the help of the kids and let them empty your pantry, tossing things that have expired, and resetting and organizing the items still good to eat. (*While you're tossing, throw out old attitudes you've had at people for years – they're not worth holding on to – and might even make you sick.)*
2. **The closets**. Depending on how many people are in your family, this is a huge undertaking. But start with clothes, first. Again, enlist the help of each person with each closet that belongs to them, or have everyone help each other and get the job done quickly. Place three baskets – one to give away, one to mend, one to store. This way you can only hang back up the items you still wear and that still fit. (*While you're sorting, consider sorting out your thoughts and only holding on to ones that are good, pure, and lovely…)*
3. **The bathroom drawers.** These poor drawers get filled with makeup, cleaning products, medicine, and all sorts of items that collect dust, spill, and clutter. Take out one drawer at a time and sit down while watching a TV show, and clean it. Remove everything, so you can wipe out the drawer with a wet cloth and then only put back the items you still use – and organize them. Use small plastic containers, rubber bands, organizers from the Dollar Store, zip bags, etc. to corral the bobby pins, the buttons, the lotions and potions, and then smile at how pretty it looks. (*While you're wiping it out, wipe away tears that you've shed over disappointments, and trust the Lord to heal your broken heart.*)
4. **The jewelry**. What a tangled mess our necklaces can become, and sometimes our earrings get tossed and jumbled too, and we can't even find a pair that matches. Or maybe we have everything sorted and arranged, but we need to reassess what goes with what, and maybe purchase a few new pieces for the next season. Egg crates are good organizers for small earrings in a drawer. A screen window can lean up against a wall and house lots of wire earrings. Cork boards enable us to hang our necklaces in our closets for easy viewing. (*While we're untangling, we can think about the lies we've believed and untangle them with the truth*.)

5. **The junk drawer.** You know, that drawer in the kitchen that gets all the stuff scooped into it when company is coming, or it becomes full of the items we might need one day – like extra batteries, blunt pencils, and stickers or magnets – you name it – it's in there! Clear plastic boxes or even silverware trays are the best for these large drawers, to separate the jigsaw puzzle pieces we've thrown inside, so that there's a clear picture of what we have…and don't have. (*While you're separating and organizing, ask God to give you a clear picture of how he sees you – beautifully made and full of strength and dignity.)*
6. **The books.** I've got several shelves of books in my house, and stacks of magazines, and they start falling over, looking sloppy, and get annoying all too often. It just takes a little time to read the covers, straighten up the magazines, and collect a pile of books and other reads to share with a friend. Dust your shelves, use what you have for bookends, and try turning some books on their sides to vary up the look. (*While you're reading covers, open your Bible and read Psalm 32: 7,8*)
7. **The fridge.** I saved the worst for last. At least for me, I just despise cleaning out the fridge. I'm not sure why though, because it feels so rewarding when it's done. Remove everything, wipe down and clean every drawer and shelf, and only replace the stuff that's still good to eat. And organize! This is your chance to group the jams, the tubs of leftovers, the drinks, etc. so that they're easy to see and use. (*While you're removing it all, pray and give thanks for Christ removing every trace of guilt and shame – and then make sure you don't set it back on the shelf.*)

That's a month full of cleaning! But once the school year begins, the fall season sets in, you'll be so happy you did this in the month of August. And you'll enjoy and maybe even notice the scents and beauty of the coming season.

Selah's Style – "Cool" Hairdo's for Summer – by Selah Irwin

The last thing you want in the summer is having your hair hang down on your neck! It makes you soooooooo hot. Here are a few hairstyles to keep you cool in the heat and up on your feet!

The situation we have here is the classic pigtail. I think this looks adorable and stylish. It is easy to do in a short amount of time if you are in a hurry.

If you have a little more time to spare here is a fun tip for your hair..... Double twisty buns! Start with two pig tails, twist them up wrap the twist around the first rubber band then secure it with a second rubber band. I like to leave a little puffa sticking out to add some flare!

The simple solution to solve the problem of summer confusion is what I like to call the floppy bun. You can put it up in about 30 seconds even of your hair is tangly! This is my go to style when I get out of the pool so I don't look like a fool!

Howdy partner! I like to keep the sun out of my eyes with a fun fashionable hat! Everyone should see what the world could be with fun hats! It cheers up my day and keeps me from getting sun burned.

These are my favorite hairstyles for the summer that keep me cool and under cover. Don't be shy to express your personality with your hair. Have fun in the sun!

The Fearless Kitchen - Weeknight Success – By Christina Vetter

As I write this I can't believe my own words. It's already August! Where did summer break go?

Hopefully, you were able to enjoy some fun in the sun the past couple months, but whether your break peacefully lingered or frantically zoomed by, here we are in August all over again. Back to crazy days packed with work, school, sports practices, homework, and everything else that seems to fill our off-summer months.

This time of year finds a lot of us searching for quick meals we can throw together in about 30 minutes, so I've gathered up some of my favorites to share with you. These aren't the typical meals we seem to have on standby every week (although I do love a good "Taco Tuesday.") No, this month I've tried to come up with some new flavors and meals that will keep us out of a spaghetti and meat sauce filled rut.

I'm happy to share my **Red Beans and Rice with Smoked Sausage, Fish Tacos, and Salmon Burger** recipes. Every one of these is relatively quick to throw together without sacrificing taste. Try them any day this week when you want a good home-cooked meal without spending a lot of time in the kitchen. I hope your family will enjoy them as much as mine has.

Happy school days and happy eating!

Fish Tacos **Difficulty:**
Serves 4

This recipe is one of my favorites. It's healthy, fast, and delicious! The fish can be changed to so many different kinds as well as cooking styles. We typically use whatever happens to be in our deep freeze at the time, whether it's shrimp, mahi mahi, bass, or catfish. I love grilled or blackened, but frying the fish is also a super yummy option. Served alongside black beans, this makes a very tasty meal.

Ingredients:
1 lb favorite fish, cut into large chunks (leave cleaned shrimp whole)
8 corn tortillas
3 Tbsp mayonnaise
3 tsp Louisianna hot sauce, amount can be to taste for spice
Shredded cabbage
Tomatoes, diced
Red onion, diced
Avocado slices
Limes for juicing

Directions:

-Cook fish according to liking. *For blackened fish, dry fish pieces with a paper towel and generously sprinkle each piece with a mixture of even parts paprika, garlic powder, and onion powder. Sprinkle with salt and black pepper. Cook in 2 Tbsp extremely hot oil. You want color on each side before turning “blackened” fish until it’s cooked thoroughly. Keep fish warm.
-Meanwhile, mix mayo and hot sauce together and adjust to spice desired.
-Warm corn tortillas in microwave for 10 seconds at a time until they’re very warm to touch.
-Assemble tacos: tortilla, fish, tomatoes, onion, avocado, cabbage, spicy mayo, finishing each taco with a spray of lime juice. Serve immediately.

Red Beans & Rice with Smoked Sausage **Difficulty:**
Serves 4

This recipe is perfect for those busy weeknights. It’s easy, relatively hands off, and only dirties one pot which means easy clean up. You can adjust the Cajun seasonings to taste, but I advise making the dish a least a little spicy. It should not be bland!

Ingredients:
1 Tbsp oil
1 lb smoked sausage, cut into medium chunks
1 ½ C white rice
3 C chicken broth
1 can petite diced tomatoes with juice
1 can red kidney beans, drained
Tony C’s or other Cajun spice to taste

Directions:
-Heat oil in medium sauce pan over very high heat. Brown sausage in oil, making sure not to stir too frequently to allow for coloring.
-Remove sausage from pan. Add rice to pan and toast, stirring frequently until you can smell a slight nutty aroma, about 3 minutes. Be careful not to burn it!!
- Add broth and tomatoes with juice and stir to combine.
-Bring mixture up to a boil, reduce heat, and allow to simmer, covered, until rice is cooked and liquid is gone.
-Add beans, stir together, and add Cajun seasonings to taste.

Salmon Burger **Difficulty:**
Serves 4

Salmon burgers are one of my favorites! By using canned salmon, they’re a great way to get those healthy Omega-3s without forking over a chunk of change for a fillet. There are a lot of different flavors you can add: lemon dill, Cajun spices, and many others, but I actually prefer it

to be similar to a typical burger, but healthier. Serve with oven baked sweet potato fries for a delicious and healthy meal.

Ingredients:
2 (6oz) cans canned salmon, drained
¼ C minced onions
1 scallion, sliced small
2 eggs
½ C panko breadcrumbs
½ tsp black pepper
1 tsp salt
2 tsp parsley
4 Tbsp mayonnaise
1 Tbsp lemon juice
Pinch of cayenne pepper
3 Tbsp oil

For assembly:
4 Buns
Fresh spinach leaves
Sliced tomato
Sliced avocado
Dijon mustard
Mayonnaise

Directions:
-In a medium bowl, mix salmon, onions, scallions, eggs, panko, salt, pepper, parsley, mayo, lemon juice, and cayenne pepper together.
-Form 4 patties and set aside. Meanwhile, heat oil over medium high heat.
-Cook burgers about 5 minutes on each side, allowing color to form on each side.
-Assemble burgers with desired toppings, spreading Dijon mustard and mayo on buns. Serve immediately

Tried and True - Back to School ABC's – Marcy Lytle

Back to school can be stressful, and it's helpful to know from others what works and what doesn't. It's nice to hear encouragement so that we don't panic with all the new schedules. And it's great to know we're not alone, and that we will survive.

Consider printing out our Back to School ABC's for the family to read daily, at least for the first few weeks when the craziness begins: There are tips for mom/dad and tips for the kiddos, too.

A is just a grade. Scroll down to the letter E to see what counts.

Books are meant to be read. The Good Book is meant to be lived.

Crying is okay, when you really don't feel okay. You're human.

Dream big. Dare to be different. Discover the new. Determine to do well.

Effort is important. Try, study, and do your best. Then rejoice in the grade you've earned.

Friends will come and go, but Jesus is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Grass can grow through cement, so you can emerge through hardship.

Holidays are coming…eventually…so smile.

Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education – Martin Luther King

Jesus loves you, this you know, because the Bible tells you so.

Kindness is always in fashion.

Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere – Chinese proverb.

Mistakes are stepping stones to success.

Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you – Hebrews 13:5.

Oranges and apples…eat your fruit.

Pray about everything…worry about nothing - Philippians 4:4.

Quit comparing yourselves to others. Be proud of who you are.

Remain curious and keep learning.

Stressed spelled backwards is desserts. So have some.

Teachers have stress in their lives too. Thank them and pray for them.

Ugly is not what we wear; it's an attitude we bear, that we can toss.

Volleyball is fun, even with balloons. Take time to play.

Welcome to today.

X-rays happen when we play too hard. You will heal.

Yep, yup, and yo are only for texting…not for answering the teacher.

Zombies are for movies. Get your sleep and stay alert.

HOME

Practical Parenting – In Their Sleep – Mandy Major

Last week, Eve came into my room in the night because she had just had a bad dream.

This doesn't happen often in our house, but when it does, we always allow our kids to sleep on our floor. They get their pillows and blankets and go back to sleep. I know there are lots of different parenting ideas about why this is or isn't a good idea, but for us, this has always worked. I don't share my bed, but there is plenty of floor space if you need it!

Eve spent the rest of the night on the floor.

The next day she mentioned her bad dream throughout the day and in quite a bit of detail, too!

...There were a bunch of kids in a building surrounded by a big fence. This building was surrounded by a place called Dark Mountain. The parents or adults in the dream kept telling the kids to stay inside and not go up on Dark Mountain. There were some kids who kept sneaking out through the fence and going up on Dark Mountain and they were getting eaten by werewolves...

Kind of a scary dream for a 6 year old, right?!

She mentioned the dream to me three times throughout the day before it finally hit me that I should maybe process this dream with her! She was sitting in the bath and I was washing her hair and she brought it up for the fourth time that day... when it hit me...

Maybe God is trying to say something here!

I told her that often when I have a dream and can remember it that clearly, God is trying to tell me something. I told her maybe God was trying to speak to her, and that maybe her dream meant something. She asked me what it meant.

Now at this point I had some ideas and I could have told them to her, but instead I told her **God talks to kids** to and I told her to ask God what it meant. Then I finished rinsing out her hair and left the bathroom.

Later when I was tucking her into bed Eve said, “Mom, I think I know what my dream means...”

I asked her what it meant and she said... “I think it means I'm supposed to listen.”

I was floored! Wow!

“Yes, Eve, I think you're right... God wants you to listen.”

It was such a amazing moment. Such a great lesson for her that I could have missed in the business of my day! **I was so thankful that the Spirit inside of me showed me he was trying to teach her something, and I got to watch the lesson unfold**! It was so much more powerful than Mom just telling her what I thought her dream meant!

God talks to our kids.

He is talking all the time!

It's our job to help them learn how to listen.

To hear in the moment.

To see beyond what is right in front of us.

To not just hear for them, but to teach them to hear for themselves.

Life as We Know It - Unrighteous Authority by Erica Simmons

A *perfect storm* is defined as "a particularly violent storm arising from a rare combination of adverse meteorological factors." How can something that has the ability to bring so much violence and destruction be called "perfect?" Yet personally, after some of the most devastating thing occurred in my life, I received two of the most beautiful outcomes - Jordan and Jerimiah. God has arisen in our lives time after time to create anew the most amazing things, and the ***main fertilizer was our pain, suffering and grief***. This is the essence of Romans 8:28, if we trust God in all things we will be victorious!

The rare combination of factors that lead to Jordan's perfect storm:

7th grade year, my boys and I were so looking forward to it. It was going to be the year they started playing football. Unfortunately, we were not able to play. 8th grade year, because they missed 7th grade year, was not the best experience. I was dear friends with the wife of the 9th grade coach, who also adored the boys. I had the boys transferred to another high school. It was easy, because I worked with the school district and knew the principal. I had my vision and dream of being a football mom firmly in my heart and mind and my boys were going to LOVE football because ***I*** had done everything, to make sure this would be.

The violent storm? Incident after incident about the program (that I had purposely made sure my children would be a part of) painted a picture I was not very pleased with. And the storm culminated with Jordan being disrespectful to the coach, the coach I had seen as the answer to my children having a great experience with football (and for me, being a football mom.)

The destruction? Relationships between Jordan and the coach, and the coach and I, will never be the same, and possibly may not survive. There was also a strain on my relationship with the coach's wife.

As after any storm that causes damage, there is the assessment.

Here is mine.

Eating lunch with a dear friend, the situation with Jordan and the coach was brought up and she said two words that resonated with me, ***unrighteous authority***. I immediately knew that was going to be the title of my next article. At the time, we discussed in the context of how as Christians we have to teach our children how to operate under unrighteous authority, but at the end of my last article I asked,"What other opportunities…have I robbed my boys of…by stepping in and not letting God be God?"

God began to work on my heart about it.

My *life as I know it* moment:

There is no way for our children to live their life and not ever be under unrighteous authority, but God has already made provision for this. I took my children from under ***HIS*** provision when I put ***MY*** play into action.

Oh, but it gets better…

Not only did I take them from under His provision, I then tried to then PROVIDE the provision. I have written about it in my previous articles, trying to set myself up to be the example to follow. It is an unmitigated failure. **The unrighteous authority does not always have to be someone who is not a believer; it can be Christian parents who act outside of the will of God for their children's lives.**

The great part is that as Christian parents we can quickly repent, cede to our Heavenly Father, and quickly place ourselves and our children back under His righteous authority. We have a perfect example in the Bible of how, when we trust in God, he can take the destruction left from our life's perfect storm and bring His restoration:

Joseph's rare combination of factors: he was born to a father who openly boasted about how much he loved him to his other brothers (creating jealousy), he was sold into slavery, became a servant to the top unrighteous authority, was falsely accused, thrown into prison – yet Joseph trusted God and his faithfulness was richly rewarded. God not only restored Joseph, He used him to save not just his family, but a nation.

Does this mean that we are never to make plans for our children?

Absolutely not.

But no plan should be made without including our Heavenly Father.

This is something that I as a single parent have to be very careful about, as I don't have a mate to consult with. I get to make the motion and second it, so to speak, and even though I did indeed talk to others about my plan, I did not submit it to the Lord.

Thank God for Romans 8:28. Because of it, I know my destruction will be turned into something amazing for God and in fact already it has already begun. The wisdom that I now have is a strong foundation God will continue to use to make me a better parent for my purpose of stewarding my young men. Relationships restored may be the foundation of future articles, who knows.

I just look forward to seeing what God can do. I intend to accept his ways, as I know He is perfect and what He has for us was made through that perfection, as I continue to submit to the perfect Righteous Authority.

I Don't Do Teen s - Relationship Rules – by Marcy Lytle

I remember when my daughter reached 9th grade, situations arose that required more help than I could give. No longer was she coming to me with a scratch on her knee, asking for a Band-aid. I had drawers full of those little goodies. She didn't run inside on a hot day and beg me for drink any more, as she could get a drink of her choice all on her own. No, now she was coming to me with friends who hurt her feelings, how to handle her emotions over boys, and things that weren't so easy like it was when I inserted a crayon in her hands and said, "Color in the lines," and she did.

We raise our kids to love God and love others, and then the day comes when we have to let go and let them realize that love all their own. It's a hard thing, this task of parenting teens. It's much easier to open a drawer or a cabinet, to offer a hug and a pat on the back, or to fix the toy that was broken simply by using a screwdriver or super glue. But letting them go to pursue God and to be pursued by God – that's difficult!

It was an afternoon after school, when I entered my daughter's room and we had a talk about how her personal relationship with God. Yes, I had taught her all the "rules" about being a Christian – at least the ones I could explain and demonstrate myself – but now was the time for her to seek, hear, and know for herself what to do.

Without my interference.

Without my thumb pressing down.

Without my wisdom screaming in her ears.

This "time" comes for all of our kids at different ages. And when it comes, our hearts break into pieces as we the parents realize that **we must relinquish the rules in favor of relationship**. The rules are so easy to write, to enforce, and to calculate. But relationship is something our teens must say "yes" to when asked by Him, "Will you follow me?"

Here's what I mean:

- The rules require our kids to make their beds daily or they don't get privileges. Relationship enables our kids to steward all of their belongings well because they know the reward of obedience.
- The rules remind our kids to drive responsibly or we'll take away the keys. Relationship fits our kids with grateful heart for the blessing of responsibility and so safety on the road just simply takes place.
- The rules tell our kids to wait until marriage for sex or mom/dad will most certainly disown them. Relationship gives power to our kids to remain pure because they know their bodies are not their own, but belong to Him.
- The rules say do your homework and pass your classes or you won't have a successful future. Relationship endows our kids with strength to do our best and lean on Him, even when things are tough, knowing their futures are secure.

- The rules scream to be kind to the grandparents, say thank-you to adults, or those people will think bad of you. Relationship whispers love never fails, God is love, and loving others comes natural because of the grounding of that truth.

The best thing we can do when that day comes and the Band-aid won't work is to have that grown-up talk about what it means to be in relationship with Christ. It means surrendering our lives, our will, our hearts, minds and bodies to the Holy Spirit in complete trust in who He is – the savior of our souls – and to make the choice to believe and follow Him.

If our kids have good relationships with their fathers, we can use that analogy. If fathers are absent, we can point them to the word that says he is a Good Father who never leaves us. If the father is abusive verbally or physically, we can point our kids to the Healer, the Restorer, the Almighty One who sees all and comforts like no other.

The relationship with Christ is not a rule. It's a lifestyle and an experience that our kids must know in order to go from rule-following children to relationship-loving adults.

Are your teens facing things you just can't fix anymore? Don't let your heart break in two. Sit down with them and relinquish your control and your lists, as you point your son or daughter in the best direction they could ever go – into His loving arms.

Entrust them to Him, encourage them to listen to his voice, and allow them to love and be loved by their heavenly father.

You'll see your kids do amazing things that will bring tears of joy to your eyes, and you'll be able to shut those drawers full of Band-aids and reserve them to be opened for your grandkids…when they appear on the scene.

Everything Home - Flower Arrangements for Dummies – Mikaela Cain

Summer of Wedding Flowers

Summer is wedding season for many people. One of the most beautiful aspects of weddings—besides the Bride, of course—are the flowers. In my family, we had our full share of weddings this summer. Two of my sisters and one of my brothers got hitched within three months! I helped with the bouquets and flower arrangements for my little sister Glory's wedding. I had a little experience from a friend's wedding last summer. At both, I learned a lot that helped me with sprucing up the vases at home.

While I am far from an expert on floral arrangements, I have picked up some helpful tips for novices. So please enjoy the following: *Flower arrangements for dummies*.

Choosing Flowers

When you do flowers for your own wedding, you start with a big bucket of all of the flowers you've ordered. When you arrange a vase at home, you start generally with a bundle or two that you picked up at a store. You should have some pops of color, some greenery and some fillers. The style of your wedding (or event or home) will determine how many of each category you get.

For example, my little sister's ceremony was out in a field surrounded by trees. She wanted lots of loose, wild looking flowers that were very simple. This would add to the meadow-in-a-forest feel. Because of that, bouquets and vases for the tables were filled with mostly greenery with subtle pops blush. The fillers were small green rose buds.

My friend Rachel got married inside the church she grew up in Gadsden, Alabama. Afterward, we trekked out to a family friend's farm for a deep-Southern reception-a combination of country and elegance. She bought hydrangeas to make a nice, round bouquet. When we got them, the hydrangeas ended up being much bigger than she thought they would be. It took some creativity, but we managed to make them look elegant with her colors filling around the big, white flowers.

Starting Off

Lay out the flowers you think you might use (on the floor or a table). Pull out some of the greenery, some fillers (baby's breath or small roses, for example) and your focal points, or color pops. Put them in piles, but don't cut the stems, yet.

Make a starting side look good. Start with the focal point and build around it. With Rachel's, I started with the big hydrangea. With Glory's, I started with some greenery. Hold the starting flora in your hand. Then, start arranging the bouquet (or vase) so that the side facing you looks amazing. Vary the heights of the flowers. It typically looks best if the greenery is flowing around the flowers.

Turn Continuously

Once you got the side facing you took look balanced, turn it slightly (45 degrees, at the most). Work on that side, until you like it. Then, turn again, and again, and again… You will get back to your starting point and things will have shifted. Adjust and add and keep turning. In fact, keep going around until you like the arrangement!

Back Up and Ask Questions

When I am working on a flower arrangement, I ask myself two questions (especially if it's not coming together): The first is, "What do I not like about this?" Sometimes, I can tell that something is off, but I keep touching it and making it worse. Step back and try to pinpoint the main "problem." Most likely it will be the first thing to pop into your mind. Maybe it's lopsided. Maybe there isn't enough color, or too much. If something vague comes to mind like "It's awkward," ask yourself "What is awkward about it?"

Follow up with the second question, "Can I fix that?" If the answer is "no," take it apart and try again. If you can't pinpoint what the problem is, you certainly can't fix it!

When you're making a bouquet, don't trim the stems until you're completely finished. When you're arranging a vase, you will need to trim as you go, but trim to the longest possible length, then cut shorter. There is nothing sadder than having to throw away a beautiful rose or lily that was just cut too short.

After helping with the flowers at my sister Glory's wedding, I felt inspired to try out these tips at home. I bought three bouquets that were on sale at HEB. I arranged them in the same way I described, and was stunned by the results. Just a few months ago, a friend brought flowers over and I tried to arrange them. No matter how you turned them, they just looked sad! This time, I had a full, balanced arrangement that brought color and beauty to my home for a week.

Whether you are arranging for a wedding or for your home, stick to these basics and you can't go wrong!

A Night to Remember – Beautiful Feet – Marcy Lytle

Feet are interesting parts of our bodies, and everyone's feet are different, and yet the same. Some have long skinny feet, some have short little toes, and some feet are just plain smelly! We have toenails we have to clip, we have shoes we have to wear, and we all have feet that hurt when we're on them too much!

Did you know the Bible has a lot to say about our feet? Let's *dig in our heels* and find out what it is.

Preparation: *Have a large basket or bowl with the following items in it: warm, wet, rolled-up washcloths for each person, a bottle of lotion and a pair of socks for each person. Also place each person's tennis shoes in front of them. If you have time, plan this study so that you can take a family walk afterwards. Have each person come barefoot to this devo time, and follow along below:*

Isaiah 52:7 says that feet which bring good news are beautiful. *(Take time to tell each other how beautiful their feet are when they spread the good news of Jesus.)*

Feet often get dirty, either because of wearing sandals all day, or from walking barefoot around dirty floors. In Bible days, the people wore sandals, so their feet were very dirty by the end of the day.

John 13:5 says that Jesus began to wash his disciples' feet. What a beautiful act of love. *(Take a warm, wet cloth and wash each other's feet.)*

When we see the "walk" sign on the street, we know it's safe to cross. God directs our footsteps.

Read Psalm 119:105 and 133 He knows when we need to stop and rest, he knows when our feet are tired, he knows everything about our walk with him, and he gently guides us along. *(Rub lotion on your tired feet).* Socks are placed on our feet for comfort and covering. *(Put on socks)*

Proverbs 4:27 says he will keep our feet from evil. When we choose to follow Jesus, he protects us from the evil one. Socks feel warm and cozy when it's cold, and staying next to Jesus feels warm and cozy, too.

Psalm 121:3 says he will keep our feet from slipping. **Hebrews 12:13** says he makes level paths for our feet. This indicates that we might sometimes have to walk in slippery places, or climb up hills.

We often wear tennis shoes when we want good traction while we walk, as indicated in this picture. This verse proclaims God's protection over us and how he gives us his strength to do what he has called us to do. We also gain our strength from reading his word and praying. *(Take time now to exercise your feet – rotate your feet, bend them back and forth and wiggle your toes*, *then put on your tennis shoes.)*

Matthew 22:44 and **Romans 16:20** says God puts Satan under our feet. This means he gives us his authority to crush and destroy wrong ideas, thoughts and actions that come into our mind.

We don't have to listen to the devil and his lies. (*Stand up and stomp in your tennis shoes, thanking God for conquering evil).*

The hands, the feet and every part of your body are all important. Your hands are not more important than your feet, and your feet are not more important than your hands. Every part of the body is unique and useful, just like every part of God's body is unique and useful.

Read **I Corinthians 12:21** and see what the Bible says about this. *(Stand up and hold hands with your family, each one giving thanks aloud for the person next to them).*

Psalm 40:2 says he sets our feet upon a rock. When we follow him, stay close to him, stomp on evil and let him cleanse us daily, we will stand firm on the rock beneath us, Christ Jesus our Savior and Lord.

(Take a walk with your family, observing God's goodness in nature and thanking him for beautiful feet)

The Family Practice – Besides Screens – Rachel Toalson

It's been a rainy summer, which means kids have been cooped up inside the house (because there is mud and because there are boys) and everyone is touching me, and what I would give, *what I would give,* for some cable television to distract them.

We got rid of cable years ago, back when the oldest was 3 and we decided we didn't really want to afford the expense because it really wasn't worth it.

Fast forward five years and four additional kids, and now here we are, nearing the end of the kids' summer break, and my boys are fighting constantly, and so much work needed doing but didn't get done because it's summertime, and so many days, honestly, I just want to sit them down in front of the television and turn on a movie just to get an hour and a half of peace and quiet, bought with a single flick of the Apple remote.

A mom can only take so much, after all.

Except I know our values, and television, the passive participation in family life, isn't one of them. Drawing or writing stories or reading books or building amazing contraptions from blocks or painting masterpieces or running wild outside—those all fit in with our values, but they're so much harder.

So much harder on the days I'm already exhausted.

But the truth is, I want my boys to engage their minds and bodies in ways that can't be done in front of a screen, even if we're "sharing" the screen time together by watching a movie.

It's not really shared time for me, because even if I sit down on the couch with them, I know what I'll do. I'll engage in other work. I'll find something else to do besides staring at a screen. I'll write or read or brainstorm or stare at the baby or think about how I should be washing the dishes.

So it's not shared activity like building a LEGO tower or coloring a page out of a Spider-Man coloring book or painting an interpretation of *The Starry Night.*

I grew up with a television and the lure of a screen, but it is nothing compared to the temptation my children face every day in the way of screens.

Our generation of parents is growing up with screens everywhere, with iPhones and iPads and iMacs and Apple TV and Internet and social media. So many opportunities for kids to get lost in screens.

These screens can hijack family life in relentless ways.

Especially for parents. People need to get in touch with us, so we keep our phones on and our email (on the phone) open and our social media channels (on the phone) perpetually logged in, just in case.

We are connected all the time.

Sometimes I get tired of this connectivity.

Because it's not real.
Because it's across a screen.
Because I know what it can do to real connectivity.

Back when we were deciding our family values, we talked extensively about how it's so difficult to listen earnestly to our children when we are constantly connected to our screens.

We miss the important things—the way their eyes shine when they read the last page of that chapter book—the first one they've read on their own. We miss the funny little dance he did on his way to the potty, the one we might have remembered to show him years later, if we'd seen it.

We miss life.

The first step to walking in greater connectivity with our children is disconnecting in the ways that will foster more authentic connection—and being an example for them.

So that's what I choose to do, from here on out. I'll put down my phone. I'll log out of all those accounts that seem so important and urgent. I'll keep the television hidden so its "easy" promise won't start calling.

I'll look at them and be with them and engage fully in their minutes and hours and days.

The life unfolding before my eyes is worth seeing.

Ways to connect besides screens:

1. Read an audio book together. This is such a special, shared experience for a parent and child. There are some amazing audio books at local libraries that rival theatrical productions. My boys will sit, riveted, for hours when we find a good one (and we recheck it as often as we can—because moms need a break, after all!). Some of our favorites: *Peter Pan*, read by Jim Dale. *Hatchet*, read by Peter Coyote. *There's a Boy in the Girl's Bathroom*, read by Lionel Wilson. *The Harry Potter series*, read by Jim Dale.

2. Write a picture book together. We are doing this with the 8-year-old, 6-year-old and 5-year-old the real way—publishing it on Amazon and everything. But, on a much smaller scale: Get 18 sheets of computer paper and fold them in half. Help your child write a story on the pages and then let him/her draw all the pictures that go inside.

3. Have a dance party. Turn the tunes up high and get down. This promises plenty of giggles and fun. Kids love to dance, and it's good for their bodies to get moving. My boys love to dance, and there's nothing more effective for cutting tension in two (at least not in our house) than breaking into a silly dance.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - The Pile-Up – by Marcy Lytle

What if you never emptied the trash can? Can you imagine what your house would be like? Let's imagine together about this gross neglect and the results that would affect your family…

Smells, and not the good ones, would begin to waft through the house and greet visitors when they walk through the front door. However, you would probably get used to the smell over time and not realize the stench unless someone brought it your attention. And then you might get mad.

Precious floor space would be lost, because trash would spill out of the can, and broken glass, slippery liquids, and sharp cans would be hiding under papers where you walk and place your bare feet. Ouch! That sounds painful!

Gnats and flies would appear from somewhere and start to feed on the sweet taste from fruit that was tossed and discarded, but never removed from the can. What a nuisance they would become! And how crazy you might be, trying to swat and kill them all!

How does that picture look, and what emotions are you feeling, and are you totally grossed out, yet?

We get rid of filth, food, papers, liquids, and other household items because we're done with them. We want them gone, out of the way, out of sight, and removed from our clean spaces. And that means we have to at least weekly remove the garbage sacks that have become so full of these things we no longer want in our lives, or we end up with the above scenario…or worse!

And yet, I've come to realize that we often keep trashy discards hanging around in our hearts, minds, and souls that affect our families in just the same ways as physical trash negatively affects our houses.

When we walk with Christ, read his word, and hear great lessons on His love and ways, we want to become more like Him, to allow Him to clean out all the junk in our hearts and minds. I think we all desire to have a clean heart, much like we desire and enjoy a clean house.

However, when we hold on to stuff that he has said to discard, we end up with problems. Big problems. And they don't just affect us. They affect everyone around us.

Those smells from trash that sits for weeks? They become the attitudes that start to emerge when we hang on to hatred, unforgiveness, jealousy, and all of those things that Jesus says to rid from our lives. Yes, he forgives us for our sins, but we have to choose to walk away, throw away, and discard them when they show up in our homes. If we don't take care of them on a regular basis, pretty soon we carry a smell that others don't like and others don't want to be around – because *we simply are not pleasant.*

That floor space we mentioned above? That's the ground we take back when we come to Christ and allow him to wash us and cleanse us from all our sins. We see things clearly, we dance so freely, and we move about across smooth surfaces in our clean hearts. But when clutter starts to build in our hearts, like when we believe lies about God's character, lies about

ourselves, and lies about others, for example – that freedom of movement becomes restricted. We start to lose our footing and find ourselves cut and bleeding, way too often. And we soon become useless, unable to live without being offended, offending others, or *causing those around us to slip and fall right with us – into the pit.*

Those gnats and flies that appear out of nowhere? We can swat them, cover them, and even blow them with a breath like a dragon, and they'll return. Why? Because their eggs are on the dirty fruit and they've hatched. And unless some sort of poison is sprayed, or the sweet gooey discarded pieces are tossed out, we quickly become infested. We can compare this to when we are sweet-natured, full of goodness and mercy, and then we become spent, exhausted, and wounded – and we try to mix the sweet with the salt that's been rubbed into our wounds – only to realize that doesn't work! We have to toss our own efforts to the wind and allow His Spirit to come in, give us rest and comfort, and discard the pieces of fruit (love, joy, peace, etc.) that are now tainted with bruises and cuts – instead of attracting pesky, *bothersome bugs that literally drive us crazy.*

It's absurd, isn't it? It's quite senseless to allow trash that stinks, covers, and attracts pests to sit in our homes and ruin the beauty we've worked so hard to achieve. And unless we want to end up on an episode of *Hoarders*, we take out the trash, we place it outside our homes, and we let those who know where to put it away for good come by and pick it up.

So, how do we take care of the trash problem in our hearts and minds, if it's piled up and running over, and we're a mess for all to see?

- Acknowledge that the trash exists. (Confess it to Him, who listens and loves…)
- Gather it up, tie it in a bag, and give it to Him. (Imagine yourself literally doing this.)
- Place a fresh bag in the can. (Remind yourself of the truth of God's word by reading it and loving it).

It's easy to take out the trash when we stay on top of it, don't let it pile up, and certainly don't let it run over onto the floor. But when it's out of control, we need help. We might need a friend to speak into our lives and tell us that we smell, we might need a friend to aid us in gathering and cleaning, and will most definitely need someone with a potent power to rid our home of the pests that have entered.

That potent power is the power of a mighty God who hands us a broom and says, "Get sweeping." And his big mercy truck is right outside our door waiting to take it all away…never to be seen in our houses again.

Under the Influence - Two Days – by Marcy Lytle

We recently took a road trip, which we like to do often. I'd like to share with you the stories of a few people we met/observed on our weekend getaway, because their stories are just like the stories of people you and I see every day. And once we see and/or influenced by their stories, what are to do with them?

We didn't know what else to do but pray…

We arrived for the fireworks display at a grand park on the river in a little town southeast of Austin, Texas and parked our chairs in a "good spot" for some "good watching." **Next to us** was a young couple with two boys, and the mom caught my eye. She was a very pretty young lady but it was apparent she had led a rough life. Her skin was covered with sores, she was extremely thin, and most of her teeth were black. In fact, I saw her hold her mouth a few times as if she was in pain. I watched them and saw them do things as a family and wondered about their story.

Another mom with five young children sat **on a blanket nearby**, with the youngest child being an infant. The mom struggled to keep up with the other active children, but her next to the youngest wandered off a few times, one of the boys came and asked us for money because he was hungry, and the oldest tried to help him mom corral the others. It was quite entertaining, and we told her often where her kids had disappeared to, as we kept a watch on them, too. We found out her husband had been called into work, so there she sat with these five human beings whose personalities we observed and understood after only a few short minutes (the little boy who asked for money was quite the dramatic one!)

Back at our bed and breakfast, **we dined the next morning with** an elderly couple who in our conversation over excellent French toast revealed to us that their eldest son was in the military and awaiting a kidney donor. They were full of hope, though, and it was clear they had lived a full life and seen a lot of trouble and joy – and they had emerged full of faith and energy and purpose. We ended up hugging these two, as we said good-bye.

We left that town and headed back home to another festival where **we ran into** two couples we'd never expect to meet – old friends – and chatted with both at separate times – while standing in the heat of a June summer day in Texas. What were the chances of running into these two couples who didn't know each other at all, but we knew both of them? And so we visited, we commented, we shook hands and hugged, and we went to our next stop where the AC was beckoning and calling us to come and sit a while.

This next place was **the movie theater**. The movie we saw was itself an emotional one, but when I exited the bathroom afterwards, my husband was waiting by the men's bathroom door. An elderly gentleman was in there with a walker, as he had needed my husband's help. So Jon stood by the door waiting to open it, when the man's wife came out and stood by me, as we both waited. The man emerged, hunched over and barely walking, but his sweet wife took him by the elbow as she nodded to Jon and said, "Blessings on you, sir." And indeed, we are blessed, we thought – because we had the opportunity to help this sweet couple who again had

obviously lived a long life – yet gravity and age was taking its toll and showing up where reaching and youth had once stood tall.

We unlocked our car door, climbed inside in the still of the night, and there we sat. And I cried.

It was too much.

We had encountered all of these people over the last 48 hours and they all had such need of friendship, a hand up, a prayer, or just a door to be opened. And sometimes we don't even notice people. But we did this time. We didn't have little kids tugging at our heels, we didn't have an agenda or a schedule we had to meet, and we had time to sit and observe.

I wasn't sure if we had said or done enough for any of these individuals and I often thought how we all say, "Well the least I can do is pray for you."

Then I shook my head.

That's the best I can do for them! Sure, I can smile, pull out a chair, and even offer a kind word. But prayer coupled with that action is the best I can offer a person – to touch God for them – to come into agreement with His plan and purposes for them – and to cry in compassion for them to find a rescue, a healer, and a provider - the one I call God – the one who rescued me.

I hope I don't forget those people that we encountered in all sorts of places. But over time, I might.

However, the prayers we prayed that night for each one – some by name, and some by face only – were forever recorded in the heart of heaven.

Two days of living resulted in an eternity of knowing…

Healthy Habits – Because it's Safe – by Mandy Major

When I hear the word "Christian" the first thought that comes to mind is, "I don't want to be one of those!" I cringe a little on the inside and want to run the other way.

Jesus? LOVE HIM! Unhealthy Christians? NO WAY!

Christians are *supposed* to be followers of Christ, right? So why do we who call ourselves Christians follow a set of unhealthy beliefs by…

- Following a church
- Doing "what's right"
- Idolizing a preacher

…instead of Jesus? I think it is because following rules, or our church, or what the preacher says is easier. It's safe. And the world is full of "safe" Christians today.

Jesus wasn't safe! Jesus isn't predictable. Even Jesus' own disciples (the guys who spent all of their time with Jesus) couldn't figure out what he was going to do next!

So a healthy Christian might realize this:

- The gospel of Jesus is giving up everything to follow him.
- The gospel of Jesus is "Follow me as I follow my father in heaven."
- The gospel of Jesus is love.

In the bible, the book of I Corinthians talks about if you have every spiritual gift, including the gift of prophecy (telling the future - uh, cool!), the gift of all wisdom and knowledge (sound advice, anyone?) and more, but don't love people, it means nothing! NOTHING!

So a healthy Christian might also know that:

- Love is not safe.
- Love is taking a risk.
- Love is unconditional.
- Love is passionate.
- Love is powerful.
- Love is Jesus.

Christians are (supposed to be) followers of Jesus – and He is LOVE.

So what is missing? Why don't we look more like Jesus?

Too often, we Christians follow religion, not Jesus.

I can't say it better than this:

"Religion is when we take what God gave us and start depending on the gift instead of God... religious people are those who lean more on what they know instead of who they know." - Bob Johnson

It's time to stop being Christians who are safe, comfortable, religious, dependent, needy, and lemming-

like, and start being followers of JESUS!

It's time to start making changes to be healthy followers of Jesus who take risks, who love passionately, who know Jesus, and who follow his lead.

And what an amazing adventure awaits those who do!

Beauty for Ashes - An Orphan Spirit – Pam Charro

I heard an interesting term recently that describes something that I believe plagues many of God's people:

An Orphan Spirit

I didn't know it, but I struggle with it myself. Because of feelings of rejection and abandonment from both of my parents, I learned to grow up fast and be "strong." I felt very early that I was useless unless I had something to contribute and there was no time to enjoy being a child. In fact, children were a burden that was difficult to tolerate, so I refused to consider myself one, even while I was still in elementary school.

I believed I wasn't wanted, and that has greatly hindered my relationship with God.

An orphan spirit doesn't know:

- that she is delighted in
- that she has a best friend looking out for her
- that she doesn't have to worry about not being safe
- that she has a strong defender that no one can overpower.

An orphan can never let her guard down because she is the only one looking out for herself.

An orphan doesn't know that her Father loves her.

That has been me, even during most of my walk with God. Now that I know what an orphan spirit is, I can expose it for the lie that it is.

Jesus promised not to leave us as orphans. He knew we would need to feel the sense of belonging that only his death provided for us. He knew that we would not only need a fellowship of believers, but a heavenly Father in order to feel safe. The world can seem a scary place otherwise.

We have been adopted as God's precious sons and daughters, and that adoption cost innocent blood. **I can't afford to NOT know what I have been given**, and I am setting my mind and heart on receiving what it means to truly be God's daughter.

I know in my head that God loves me. I believe his words about who he is and who I am.

Join with me in praying that we all grow in truly experiencing life as an orphan spirit **no more**…

Created for Life – The Zip Line – by Ginny Hurley

At the end of our school year, of teaching, my dear friend, Marcelle, asked if I would like to join her in an adventure her children had bought for her birthday. She had two tickets to go zip lining on the longest zip line in Texas; and she invited me! In great anticipation, I Googled the place we were going. I have done some repelling and a few small zip lines, but when I saw the video clip of this zip line, I paused a bit in my excitement. I don't like roller coasters!

So I began interrogating my acquaintances about it, "Have you been on this zip line?"

No one I knew had been there…

But after I went, this is what I heard and saw…

The Zip Line

The cliffs were high
Paths rocky and steep
Adventurous spirit
Anticipating the leap

He said, "Come up higher!"
My reply, "I'll be there!"
Joy bubbling up
Breathing fresh pure air

Attached to my hips
Was the harness I wore
Distributing weight
Bringing strength to my core

With every new step
I gasped with delight
My view unobscured
Great pleasure in sight

Heaven is calling
The voice of my King
Calling me up
My heart I will bring

My eyes view the top
I'm out on the edge
With heartbeat aflutter
I sense His sweet nudge

Trust Me, you'll see
My arms are stretched wide
You're ready to leap
I've been by your side

So go on, My Love
My sweet little one
With power and faithfulness
It's already begun

Wildly I leap
Way out from the cliff
Harness secure
Releasing my lift

Arms outstretched
My legs like an eagle
I'm flying I'm flying
Head high and so regal

I find myself suddenly
Flying alone
No ropes or attachments
Just me on my own

A great crowd of witnesses
Viewing the scene
Start leaping around me
To join in with glee

It's what we were made for
A life full and free
To view as an eagle
His promise to me

Not under, but over
The circumstance here
Releasing to others
His Heart so sincere

So come on and join me
There's always more room
He loves us and seeks us
He's coming real soon

Isaiah 45:11
"Ask Me of things to come concerning My sons!"

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road - Fine and Festered – by Lynn Cherry

“I’m fine, really.”

“You are not fine and I know it.”

“I’m totally fine!”

“When you want to talk about how you really feel, I’ll be waiting.”

Ever had a conversation like that with your spouse?

There are a lot of reasons we choose for being “fine” over being open and honest. Maybe we decide our true colors aren’t especially pretty in the moment. Maybe we rationalize that “fine” is better than instigating the inevitable argument – that all, too familiar argument with no end in sight.

I’d like to think it’s okay to be “fine” every once in a while, but I’ve learned the hard way that fine is just another word for denial.

Denial is not a friend to marriage.

Every marriage has issues and denial is like a pine-scented mountain that we plop on top of them.

No problems here, just this lovely mountain.

If we can’t see them, they don’t exist right?

Under the surface “fine” festers. Pressure builds when life heats up. We explode and cover everything around us in two feet of suffocating ash. Our mountain becomes a volcano spewing hot molten words that expose the reality of how “fine” we are.

Fine, indeed.

I was 11 years old when Mount St. Helens erupted in Washington State. 57 people lost their lives in the eruption that caused over 2.88 billion dollars worth of damage. The cloud of ash reached 15 miles into the atmosphere scattering ash across 11 states. My aunt travelled to Washington later that year and brought back a little vial of ash.

Our eruptions always leave a residue, don’t they?

Beware of the blow up.

And when it happens, take time to take a good look under the surface. Relational blow-ups reveal areas of denial. If we can muster up the courage to own our truth and express it in a loving way, our marriages will grow closer.

Intimacy causes short-term instability but long term security.

Life is not either/or.

Life is both/and.

We have good times AND bad times.

We have sunny days AND cloudy skies.

And clouds create a canvas for the most beautiful sunsets.

This is nature’s way of demonstrating how God really does give beauty for ashes.

Date Night Fun - At the Coffee Shop – by Marcy Lytle

We have some friends we meet often, and we try out new coffee shops constantly. I don't drink coffee, but of course I enjoy the aroma from coffee beans, and I love the coziness that coffee shops offer. When we go out, we look for ambience, good flavored coffee, nice pastries, and comfy spots to sit. And a bit of cuteness or weirdness doesn't hurt, either.

August is usually the hottest month of the year, so date nights sitting on patios are not so pleasant, at least here in Central Texas. Sitting inside is the only way to go, AC running high, drinks in hand, and a little treat to eat.

Here are our five ideas for dates "at the coffee shop:"

1. **Games and puzzles**. Games for two are so fun at a coffee house with cup in hand (that someone else has brewed) and a pastry on the side (that someone else has baked!). A great game for two is Yahtzee. It's a classic, doesn't require a lot of thinking, and it's fun to see whose luck wins out. Other games that require skill and time are not good date-night games because date night is a time to connect, laugh, and communicate and chill. While playing Yahtzee, discuss things like your "full house," and share stories about your kids, your family, and each other. *Use this night to encourage…*
2. **Add another couple.** Like I mentioned, we love visiting as a foursome at a cute coffee house. I always want the comfy chairs, but we rarely get them, and we end up at a table for four. This date night is a relatively cheap one, if both of you don't have much money for a full dinner. And in fact, it might be a good night to treat another couple, if you have the funds to do so! Consider printing out these conversation cards, snipping them apart, and drawing from a jar as you sip your brew! *Use this night for connecting…*
3. **Planning trips and dreaming**. Bring your laptop (only one) along on this date, where you sit together closely using the coffee shop wi-fi to plan your next trip or dream about where you'd like to go. Peruse vacation spots, take notes, look at prices, and start a journal of places to go and things to do! Have you been to Mt. Rushmore? What about the Grand Canyon? Maybe you want to get away to New York City! Check out the new concept pod hotels in NY City and consider a stay there. *Use this night for dreaming…*
4. **Drive-thru early**. On a weekend morning, make it a date for two and start with the drive-thru. Get your coffees and pastries and go for a drive with your coffee shop treasures in hand. No errands, no agenda, except driving to see the morning unfold together. And consider purchasing an extra treat at the coffee shop, like a new syrup or mug, or even a t-shirt! Maybe there's a lake where you can park and keep the AC running while you watch the ripples on the water. Perhaps you might want to walk a trail in the morning before the heat of day is unbearable, parking on a bench to sip and listen to nature. *Use this date for relaxing…*
5. **Drive-thru late**. You're on your way home from dinner with the extended family, or a night of running errands, or maybe…the kids have fallen asleep in the back seat! Use this opportunity to make a stop at your favorite drive-thru for a night coffee or tea. Keep the car running while you enjoy this time alone in the dark, parked in the parking lot, with

AC running or windows down – whichever feels the best. This is a great time to enjoy music together – maybe a new CD – in your car. Listen to the lyrics as you sip and find the constellations in the night sky. Here's a great CD we're enjoying at the moment by Lauren Daigle – *How Can it Be.* *Use this night for listening…*

Coffee shops don't have to be boring or mundane, and you sure don't have to frequent the same Starbucks every time you crave a coffee! Look at your local business directory and find a new coffee shop to try, and keep trying until you've visited them all! That will fill your date calendar for sure….

Have a "latte'" fun this month…

After 30 Years - The Routine – Marcy Lytle

He makes our bed and he does it so well. He tucks the sheets in so tightly and makes sure all edges hang perfectly on the sides of the bed. I make his lunch. I enjoy creating new salads and sandwiches and tucking them into his lunchbox before he heads out the door. I also make dinner, when we're at home. It's again a creative outlet for me, and he enjoys coming home to sit down and eat a good meal. Then he cleans up. He rinses all the dishes and cleans the kitchen to a pristine condition. He washes and folds the towels. I wash and put away the clothes.

That's part of our routine, and we rarely stray from it.

There's something to be said for routines, in a marriage.

- Routines grant security, knowing each other will fulfill their duties at home so that the other one doesn't have to do it all.
- Routines ensure that the house and bills are run well and paid regularly, and we can sleep at night knowing our obligations are taken care of.
- Routines speak volumes to each other about care and concern.

Should we ever stray from our routines? Of course! There are times to ditch the routines and do something different, to get away, to rest! But if our reasons to stray from the routines are because of bitterness, anger, or dishonor, we're in danger.

Early in our marriage, there were times when I resented my routine, and I took note if what we did for each other was uneven or not fair. After all, I worked a full-time job, too. When kids came along, I grew angry if he didn't realize and pick up new routines, like making sure the diaper bag was packed with all essentials. I finally inserted a paper list inside so he could pack it without asking me a zillion questions. And when he was running late and asked me to make the bed for him, I sneered and gave *those eyes* that said, "What are you then going to do for me?"

Do you see the pattern here?

Honestly, it wasn't until the kids were grown and gone that I began to realize how silly and futile it was to resent, keep score, and retaliate when his part of the routine-keeping fell off. I sat from the viewpoint of watching his every move to find fault so I could have a reason to ask him to do more – for me. It was all about me and my needs.

Just last night I was in bed, and here he came. He turned on the fan (we sleep with it for noise), he clicked on the ceiling fan (we use it for cooling in the summer), and he turned off the light (I had it on for reading.) He then snuggled up next to me and scratched my back (he does it because he knows I love it and relaxes me.) And I laid there and smiled at the routinely faithful husband I have.

This morning, I got up and started a load of laundry of our clothes. I made a batch of salsa, and then put together his lunch. I had just paid the bills, so that chore was done. He grabbed his

lunchbox and my box of work and remembered it needed to be delivered – so he took it for me. Again I smiled, at how in-sync we've become, like a well-oiled machine that runs without a squeak because it's maintained and cared for so well.

I'm not sure at what point that resentment, keeping score, and finding fault started to wane, but...

- I think it came with gratefulness and lots of prayer asking God to help me see my husband the way HE sees him.
- I think it came with realizing that in giving, I receive.
- I think it came over time and observing the brevity of life, and realizing how important it is to savor the moment.

We will ditch our routines this weekend and head out for fun, leaving behind our normal schedule for much needed relaxation and fun. And then when we arrive back home again, we'll pick up where we left off, catch up where we've fallen behind, and the routine will be back come Monday.

I know there are single moms who have no one to share their routine, there are married women who have husbands who sit and never lift a finger, and there are single gals who are longing for someone with whom to start a routine.

But **this story is for those of us who have someone who routinely shows up and serves, and yet we don't appreciate him.** We're stuck in our own routine of finding fault, pointing fingers, and tallying up marks. This story is to remind you of the blessing you've been given of having a routine that works, one that enables you to have time to sit down and put up your feet, and one that comes along behind and lends a hand whenever you ask.

On any given day when I'm tired or cranky, I can fall into the critical rut again, but I quickly step up out of it instead of wallowing in it for any length of time. I ask forgiveness, I look into his eyes, and I thank him for his help – because he just swatted that bug I saw come in at the front door (another routine gesture he does for me.)

ENCOURAGEMENT

ENCOURAGEMENT – Soldiers with Lipstick – A Work of Art

“Hey, you’re Kirstin’s younger sister, right?”

All my life, I have heard this and wondered, “When will I be noticed as Rachel?”

As a teenager, we want to become our own person and discover ourselves instead of being compared to our older sister or brother. These are the years we find who we are in God’s eyes, not just being known as the *younger sibling*.

We will do anything and everything to be a different person in our family and to everyone around.

I have come to realize this:

It’s okay to be compared to my older sister or brother. They are both doing very well in college and my other brother is my own best friend, so of course I do not mind being compared to him.

Look for the positive things your siblings hold and find out why you are like them. It is an honor to be honest.

When it all comes down to it, it doesn’t matter how the world views us. It matters how God sees and knows us.

Psalm 139:13 says,

“You are the one who put me together inside my mother’s body, and I praise you because of the wonderful way you created me.”

God will always see you by your name and your beautiful mistakes that mold you into the young lady you are supposed to be.

Eventually, people will know you by name.

As humans, we will naturally worry about this sort of thing so that is why I tell you this:

Accept who you are and be grateful about it.

Now, I am known as Rachel to everyone around me. It took a few years, though. But God has always seen me as Rachel, and you will see that God’s eyes are all that matters.

You were created in his image; you are his little masterpiece.

He takes a few steps back and admires the work he has done, with proud eyes. So do not let that put you down in any way. Yes, you are your sister or brothers younger sibling, but you are also God’s work of art.

Moving Forward - God is Bigger – Pam Charro

There certainly have been a lot of changes made in our society lately, some which I am far from crazy about. I suspect I am not the only one who has felt overwhelmed with some of what has been going on. Everyone is talking about it, and there are such strong feelings on both sides. Debate seems absolutely pointless. All everyone seems to want to do is rage against being disagreed with or validate one another when there is agreement.

It's probably just going to get uglier and I can't help wondering what kind of a world my children and grandchildren will inherit. The problems just seem too big to deal with and I have been battling depression just thinking about it.

I have felt a real oppression and heaviness.

Then God gave me a dream one night after a particularly discouraging conversation.

I dreamed I was in training for some type of Asian mixed martial arts, and it was clear there was a spiritual component to it, similar to yoga but obviously darker. I was training so hard even though I knew my opponent was far superior to me, and he was very smug and not the least bit nervous about our scheduled match. I approached him and said, "I know you are a far better fighter than I am and you aren't at all intimidated by me, but God is with me. I may not beat you tomorrow or even anytime soon, but eventually I will knock you out." I wasn't exactly sure what the dream meant, but I knew it had something to do with how discouraged I had been the night before.

I now believe that God was showing me that we are up against a spirit, and spirits are always more powerful than we are unless we put on our full armor that God has made available to us.

It is important that we are aware of who our enemy is, and equally important that we know how strong we are as long as we follow God into the battle.

The Bible says that in this world, we will have trouble. We must accept that and know that we aren't here to be comfortable. There is a real battle and it will get ugly sometimes. But all of God's plans must take place, and that includes our difficulties in following Christ, so that God can be glorified. We aren't against people, we truly are battling spirits, and they seem big and scary; but all they can do is submit to God, just as we must. People are not the enemy, ever, and **we must fight for ALL people, even when they seem to be on the enemy's side, because their souls are just as precious as ours**.

The good news is, we know how the story ends. The path seems impossible at times, but we know that God wins, and that means we win.

He is bigger and more powerful than any situation, circumstance, or evil spirit.

And he is with us!

God, show us how to fight this battle with love and confidence! Give us the right words at the right time to bring you glory on the earth! In Jesus' name, Amen!

Bush Bean Blessings - All of a Sudden...In Slow Motion – by Tammy Morrison

Tilted.
Flipped.
Under.

That's how quickly I found myself swallowing a good portion of the Comal River. There I was sputtering, gulping, gasping for air, bopping up and down, being swept by the force of the churning water. **Desperately, I reached out to grab onto someone, something to stabilize myself...but nothing.**

The current was strong after the recent rains, and for just a second I wondered what the outcome of this quandary might be. It's funny how many thoughts can flood one's mind in such a moment. As dramatic as I sound right now, for a split second my mind raced with the thought of whether or not I might actually drown with so many people around. I was distinctly aware that people saw me because several of them reached out to me from their tubes.

Finally, one woman grabbed onto my wrist and wouldn't let go. She held onto me until we floated out of the swift current and into somewhat calmer water. All the while, she reassured me that she wouldn't let me go. True to her word, she maintained her hold on me until other floats separated us. At that point, two young ladies and a young man helped me stand upright near the edge of the river. Although the current was still fairly strong, I was able to stand on a rock while the young people held onto me and helped me back into my recovered tube.

Needless to say, I was quite shaken. Years before, I'd had a similar experience in a crowded wave pool. I was reminded of that utter panic of being pulled under again and again and again, with seemingly no rescue in sight. Then all of a sudden...in slow motion...the overwhelming sensation of going under passed and the feeling of breath and life reintroduced itself to my shocked system.

There's a whole lot of time to think during the relaxing portion of a 2-hour long river floating experience. During the remainder of my river run that day--and in the days since--I've contemplated how my particular occurrence is a bit like life: It's a wonderful sensation to be excited about what's going on around me. There are moments when I am so acutely aware of circumstances that it's necessary for the focus to be on keeping my head above water. One thing is for certain, though, I must remember that I am not alone. Not only is God by my side, He provides people who are willing to reach out a helping hand to help me find my way until I can get my feet on solid ground once again. **Although there are times I may feel completely overcome with helplessness in the midst of a crowd of people, there are those angels who are more than willing to help me find my way.** I just have to make sure I reach out to accept the extended hand.

It's hard to focus when the current pulls you under. Frankly, I'm not even sure how I managed to get out of it that day. I think that what probably happened is that even though I felt like I wasn't going to make it, the reality is that my experience was par for the course. In the midst of churning water, some people go under, yet some stay afloat. *Who knows why?* The twist of a tube; the flip of a wave; the adjustment of the body in the floating device; at some point, some people just flip and go under. The point to remember is that the rushing water lasts for just a little while. By design, there will always be plenty of people to help when such an event takes place. This particular river current, while potentially dangerous (I definitely don't want to make light of it), serves to move us into the calm water. While it was hard to fathom at the time, I was

actually moving into a more tranquil place where floating along was a welcome reprieve from the rush of staggering emotions.

It is inevitable that we will all tilt, flip, and go under at some point in this beautiful life. We can't stay focused on those torrential times; otherwise, we can't breathe appropriately. It's important to know that **life cannot be lived in a rushing current.** We've got to remember that it is in peace and tranquility that we rest and grow. In order to flourish, we must remain attentive to the calm. God promises that He will always make a way for us to survive. Notice that He doesn't promise we won't experience rough times; He does, however, promise that when we are tossed about in rapids that He will tend to us. He only requires that we utilize the resources He provides: just as that day I reached for help, He had people extending a helping hand to me.

If I could urge you into one specific mode of thinking through my words, please realize that God really is as close to you as the air that you breathe. Allow Him to refresh you, calm you, and speak peace into your frantic spirit. Look around you. Take a deep breath.

All of a sudden...in slow motion...the stillness of life and His unending love will surround you once again.

And there He is.

"But now, GOD's Message,
the God who made you in the first place, Jacob,
the One who got you started, Israel:
'Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you.
I've called your name. You're mine.
When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you.
When you're in rough waters, you will not go down.
When you're between a rock and a hard place,
it won't be a dead end—
Because I am GOD, your personal God,
The Holy of Israel, your Savior.
I paid a huge price for you:
all of Egypt, with rich Cush and Seba thrown in!
That's how much you mean to me!
That's how much I love you!
I'd sell off the whole world to get you back,
trade the creation just for you.'"
Isaiah 43:1-4
The Message

Saddle Up - Just Enjoy – Melissa Critz

Sporting my very “stylish” mud boots, I head out to feed my unexercised equines. Rain has been coming regularly, which is heaven sent, being that Texas has been in such a drought. However, it’s coming in deluges. Due to all the massive amounts of liquid precipitation, riding has become non-existent.

This is quite hard for me as I am one that likes to keep my horses exercised. After all, they have a purpose, right? There should always be a reason or a goal to head towards.

Or should there be? Let me explain.

A number of years ago, I recall a friend stating that she knew of someone that just had backyard ponies. I thought it was crazy to not do anything with a horse, but to just let it be, without having a purpose for it. At this time of my life, we had three horses that we used for speed events at play days and also took to big barrel races in the Central Texas area. We took very good care of our horses in order for them to be at their best. My older daughter and I rode them regularly and kept them tuned up. There was always a purpose and direction for our horses.

And really, what is wrong with that?

But thinking back, I can see how there needs to be a balance of just pure enjoyment as well. When Kirstin, my barrel racer, had her priorities change due to college, barrel racing came to an end and we started to just take the horses to places to trail ride. That truly was glorious, but still it bugged me that their purpose seemed to have ended. Then we had to sell our trailer for monetary reasons, so trail riding ended. But around the same time, we felt the Lord leading us to sell our urban city home and buy a home on property in order to consolidate our lives.

What a dream come true!

We had our two horses in our own backyard! But the days of riding daily truly ended as we had no covered arena, and with Kirstin off to college, I just couldn’t commit to the daily riding routine with my other kids needing to be schooled and taken to activities.

This has been really hard on me as I see that there should always be a goal or purpose for our horses, as there always had been. With the crazy amounts of rain and our five acres turning into a swampland, exercising the horses was out of the question. I heard my riding partner telling me,

“Just Enjoy.”

What?

But I am not being a good horse owner if I am not out there daily keeping them tuned up?

“Just enjoy.”

How do I do that?

Maybe I don't ***do*** anything.

That is not a part of how I am. My personality does not tend towards just enjoying. I can tell you that I have a reason for all that I do. So just enjoy the horses? What would that mean?

The Lord made his creation to enjoy it. All through Genesis 1-2, He says that it was good. On the seventh day, He rested. Don't you imagine that He looked all around at all on the earth and just breathed in the enjoyment of all of His creation? Reread Genesis 1-2 and think about how you would enjoy creating something and also enjoying it.

This made me rethink the point of purposes and enjoyment.

My horses, as with other things in life, don't have to always have a purpose in terms of how the world sets a purpose. **They can be just be there, for pure bliss**.

I am still processing this personally, but my encouragement for you is to reevaluate something in your life that you possibly have set a goal for which doesn't include times of 'just enjoying' it. Refocus and ask Him to give you His eyes for what in His creation is made for more than just a worldly purpose. Find enjoyment in the things that seem to have a mundane purpose.

He created everything not only for a purpose but also for to be enjoyed.

Amen!

Real Stories – Surrounded – by Allison Gephardt

I have struggled with migraines for about 15 years.

It's sometimes exhausting trying to figure out the triggers and finding the balance between lifestyle changes and medication. Neither one is fun, but pain is worse.

When the migraines increased to weekly occurrences, I couldn't deny that my quality of life was compromised. I also had trouble with my ears, and the ENT doctor ordered an MRI to rule out tumors around my ears.

Imagine my surprise when my primary care physician called the next morning to let me know I had a different kind of tumor, a meningioma, a benign tumor, growing in the lining of my brain.

The neuro surgeon was very confident about the surgery. He said the tumor wasn't the cause of the migraines but removing the tumor would definitely help the headaches. The moment he said the tumor was benign and that I would feel better, I was elated. Of course, there was risk involved, but from my point of view, the thought of not having a migraine every week far outweighed the risks.

My family, however, had completely different responses from mine.

Nothing was great about any of this.

This was traumatizing for them.

The surgery and recovery were successful. Family and friends rallied around us to provide everything we needed, including prayers, meals, babysitting me when I couldn't be left alone, driving me to appointments, and providing emotional support.

My testimony is this:

God doesn't just heal us.

We didn’t just have the technology and expertise of medical professionals.

We had comfort from our Father.

We would still be traumatized from the event, regardless of the successful outcome of the surgery. Two of our kids were away at college and couldn't come back for the surgery. It was hard for them. But they had a network of friends around them. I felt caught in the pit of vulnerability, not being able to make everything okay for them.

Experiencing the comfort of so many friends and family is what got us through the trauma.

I don't have words to describe what happens when we don't have the faith or ability to get through something like this on our own. He develops a network of His family around our families that can never be broken. I saw personally that there was never an end to the provision we needed. *It surrounded me.*

It surrounds you.

This situation was also a very real picture of the enemy coming to steal, kill, and destroy.

John 10:10-11 have been two of my favorite verses of all time, because they put life into perspective for me:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

I would not be alive today if the tumor hadn't been removed. I know that for everyone, life is a gift.

A gift that I don't want to take for granted.

A gift that reminds us of his surrounding, abundant provision for all that we need.

Allison has an engineering degree from SMU. After working for a few years, she became a stay at home mom, homeschooling she and her husband's three children. She currently works part time designing water systems and enjoys knitting and gardening. She has participated and volunteered in various ministries including Rally Call Institute, Freedoms Fire, Living Waters, and Discovery. She lives in Dripping Springs with Doug, her husband of 32 years.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME – A Little Bit Louder Now – Marcy Lytle

I get that women need to be empowered. I really do, as sometimes women are obscure and not deemed worthy of being listened to or valued. And I'm all for women taking their place and being heard and being valued, at church, and in the marketplace.

However, I'm writing to present another viewpoint, one of building up our men so that they are empowered.

Some may stop right here and say, "What? They already have all the power."

I beg to differ.

I'm glad I wasn't raised decades ago when women were really "only" seen as baby makers and homemakers. Although, both of those things are such an honor to be, it's just the way they were viewed that made women feel like that's ALL they were. And I personally love that women are blessed to be both of those.

I'm thankful that women are speaking up these days, but what I've seen is that when many speak up, they are speaking down to the men in their lives.

For example, many sitcoms in the past couple of decades present powerful women who are smart, funny, and powerful – married to men who are goofy, stupid, and lame. The story line makes for a funny 30 minute show, but is that really the way we want to live in our homes? Do we really want to shake our fingers at our husbands, roll our eyes at the stupid things he says and does, and come out ahead of him at every turn?

For example, many music videos show women domineering over men, singing about putting men in their place, and more lyrics about not needing a man at all in their lives.

For example, women are getting married but not wanting to take their husband's last name, or make any sort of vows to him, or even be tied to him financially at all, because of the fear of disappearing under the veil of marriage never to be seen again except from behind their husband.

I understand all of those sentiments and ideas, because they're arising out of a generation of women who have seen divorce more than they've seen commitment, they've observed sexual abuse more than they have experienced love and honor, and they've "risen" to realize their worth which makes them feel above all of the men around them. And that feels good.

But here's my viewpoint. It may be old-fashioned, but I don't think so. Old-fashioned would be stepping back into the shadows behind the stove and under a baby blanket. Again, those places are absolutely wonderful, as long as it's our choice, not our prison.

My viewpoint is that we've pushed so hard to be empowered that we have run past the men in favor of getting ahead of them and now putting them in "their" place. It seems we cannot find a balance, but rather we quite enjoy swinging the other way, with ourselves running across the

tightrope and the guys dangling by their teeth, about to fall. And it's all in our hands whether they dangle or we pull them up to slap their silly faces and push them off again.

Men and women have been bickering and pushing each other to make ill-advised choices since the first bite from the forbidden fruit. And blame started too, and then it was all downhill from there.

However, I'm finding in my own marriage that pushing my man beneath me so that I can feel somehow better than him, good about myself, and empowered, really has the opposite effect. I've done all of those things and I didn't quite admire my husband as much when critical words rolled off my tongue, nasty looks of disdain flew his way, and showing him the back of my hand when he wanted to speak.

What I'm finding to be true and good and pure and life-giving in my marriage is this thing called **honor, loving him more than I love myself.** Oh, I'm not sliding backwards, and I'm not lowering my self-worth. Quite the contrary. Jesus said we are more blessed when we give than when we receive, and that we are to love others as we love ourselves. It doesn't work to hate ourselves and become a doormat, and neither does it work to love ourselves so much that we become the lock and key hidden away for him to find, only if he's good and perfect.

Men aren't stupid, and neither are we. Men aren't all after sex, when they're given honor and respect. Men aren't all abusive and only have thumbs that press, when we hold their entire hand in ours out of admiration and love.

I say women need empowerment, boldness, and their rightful place. But I say we don't do this by swinging a bat at the men in our lives hoping to send them reeling over the fence, so that we can run the bases and hear the crowd applaud as we run home.

The way to be empowered is to serve others, as we serve Christ. This empowers us and enables us to rise to the places God has chosen for us to walk, speak, and be heard. And our men deserve honor and love, just like we do.

So when I read another headline, another book title, or another social media post about women rising out of the ashes onto their podiums with mic in hand, I just want to be another voice, present another view, and speak a little bit louder about being careful with our microphones.

Let's make sure we're speaking out of love, and not out of hurt. Let's make sure we're feeling empowered to serve, not to burn the house down. And let's make sure our attitudes are ones of humility so that God exalts us, and we don't put on our own high heels so that we can dig in and cut.

FRESH THYME - Home Free – Marcy Lytle

I'm not a huge baseball fan, as I think it's a rather boring game to watch, especially on television. However, there is one part of the game that I suppose is the play everyone is hoping to see once, twice, or more throughout the nine innings of play – and that's the home run! All of the other plays are able to be stopped at base one, two, or three. But the home run is when the ball goes over the fence, and the batter gets to run the bases without being touched, arriving back at the plate – home free – a run scored. That's when the audience stands up and applauds!

"It's outta the park!" the announcer cries!

I was thinking about life and how I wish I was home free, more often.

For example, on any given day I wake up and hit what I'd call a single. That's where I wake up in a great mood, my day starts out grand, and then I realize I have more work than I can handle and stress starts to build. The stride I was taking towards first base was fast and quick, only I get tagged, "Out!" as I step onto the bag because stress slowed me down.

On another day, I might wake up and make it until noon, fancy free and happy, until I read an email that really burns me up with the attitude from a person I thought was a friend, and happiness soon turns sour. It was a double for sure, until I started sliding onto the second base bag and again was called "Out!" because judgment sent me diving into the dust of anger.

By mid-week, I'm looking forward to the weekend and my day has been excellent, and then late afternoon my husband runs late coming home from work and I can't get him on the phone. So there my mind goes downhill, wondering and worrying if he's on the side of the road somewhere. And that worry and fear swallows me up before I ever even get near third base, and I'm tagged "Out!" midway between the bases.

Oh, how I long for a home run!

I want to run those bases daily, untouched by any of those players on the opposing team who are watching and waiting and looking for an opportunity to catch my flying ball and send me back to the dugout.

And then there are those days when I can't get on base at all. Every time I try, I hit a foul ball, and I walk back to the bench with my head hanging low, because before I ever start my day I've spouted off criticism, listened to the news and wondered where God is, and been discontent with the blessed life I've been given.

Home runs don't happen a lot during baseball games. But when they do, it must be exhilarating to know that your ball exited the playing field; therefore, it cannot be caught, and the opposing team cannot run after you. The rules of the game allow you to run and touch every base without fear of being called "Out!" as you head toward home plate, with the crowd roaring.

For me, a home run day would be a day where I wake up, I go through the morning with a song in my heart, his Word sustains me through the afternoon no matter what I've seen or heard, and his strength gives me endurance to face the dark of the night without a care in the world.

I don't know about you, but I want to keep practicing and keep hitting until I learn how to meet the bat with the ball smack at the right point and send it reeling over every opponent of fear, worry, and doubt to where I cannot be touched by any of them.

And instead of "She's out!" I'll hear "Well done!" as I step on the bag and the Crowd of Witnesses (up there) roar because a run has been scored for the home team.

After all, the team we're on is going to win. It's just up to us whether or not we want to be one of the lead scorers of home runs.

FRESH THYME – The Non-Purpose Driven Life – Marcy Lytle

I'm a counter. I have always been interested in numbers. When I was younger, I paid my tithe to the local church and calculated the percentage to the penny, so that my numbers would be correct "with Him." My degree in college was in math education, so I taught numbers to middle school students for years. When I give to others, I compute the amount, compared to what I spend on other things, and I wonder if I gave enough. When we go out to eat, I'm usually the one who can guess the total of the bill because I add up the total before we order. That's the way my brain works.

But that counting brain gets tired. And that counting brain has a "hissy" fit when there's nothing to organize, no reason to compute, or no purpose behind its function.

A friend of mine wrote about purpose recently, and what she had to say impacted my heart in a good way. The same day, I heard a speaker talk about how God wants us to enjoy life, not count how many minutes we've prayed. That made me chuckle. I don't know how many times I've prayed and looked at the clock to see if it was "enough."

Two things I'm considering, and in fact I'm actually giddy about the possibilities if I really retrain my mind to think differently:

There doesn't have to be a purpose for everything I do.

There are no numbers necessary to enjoy life.

Those two realizations are huge for me.

From the time I rise to the time I go to bed, I find purpose in my day. I work, I clean, I pray, I shop, and even when I sit to rest, I have something on my lap to do – so that no minute is wasted. When I finally crawl into bed at night, I lay open a magazine to read for relaxation for a few minutes – because I feel I've earned the right by 11:30 p.m. to do so, all because I've led a purposeful day of getting stuff done.

From the moment my eyes pop open until they shut at night, I'm counting minutes that I've exercised, money that I need to spend, amounts of bills that need to be paid, and whether or not there will be money for a trip soon – that is also well thought out and planned – so that all monies are accounted for.

There's good in what I do, because many things get accomplished, and our balances stay balanced, but I'm realizing there's also harm in what I do when my mind is constantly churning.

A churning mind stirs up blinding dirt. And blinding dirt closes out any sort of view of beauty at all. And losing sight of beauty in life makes for drudgery and despair.

The idea that purpose can be passed by is as enticing to me as a chocolate chip cookie fresh out of the oven. Dare I take a bite and actually enjoy…without counting the calories I'm ingesting?

The fact that it's okay to press "off" to the numbers that keep appearing on the screen of my mind is scary and super exciting all at the same time…because what will I then think about?

Maybe this sounds absolutely crazy to you, but we all have crazy things we do way too much, that only weigh us down, make us cranky, and skew our vision.

So today is Monday, and I've been busy with my day full of purpose to get my work completed, make my lists, and stay on top. Only I just went out to start the car and it won't turn over. Nothing. Nada. Nil…

My purposeful day is now halted and all that I needed to do while out in my car is delayed. These things happen. And I'm convinced they happen to eliminate and put a kink in the flow of our life, much like a kink in a water hose happens when we're standing out far in the yard, and the water won't flow. We have to walk all the way back to find out where the kink is, straighten the hose, take a deep breath, and go back to watering.

It's okay to have my purposes interrupted, my flow halted, and my plans altered. And it's actually a good thing to have moments, hours, and even days with no purpose at all except to enjoy life without counting, without listing, and without doing.

My life always had a purpose when the kids were growing up – to feed them, clothe them, and teach them – and now that purpose is gone. A new purpose is unfolding.

It's no purpose at all…and to rest and laugh out loud when the car won't start…knowing it's time to either put the hose down and find the kink or turn off the water and sit down.

When's the last time you sat down with no purpose at all except to do nothing?

Maybe it's time we both find that seat and wiggle around until we settle in for a non-purpose driven life…at least for a while...

FRESH THYME - The Week After – Marcy Lytle

Just when you think you've matured, you're finally "old enough" to have that behind you, there it is again. Those insecure feelings, stray thoughts, and even questioning God and his goodness. Again. Right in the middle of those "life is good" moments, when all should be bliss – there they come marching by one by one. And you sort of wish it were ants marching by, because those could easily be dealt with. One spray, or spread of granules, and they're gone.

No so much with the nagging thoughts of the mind.

I just finished a week long prayer time of only thanking and praising God, petitioning him for nothing. And when needs arose, only believing they would be met, I was able to let them go. It was a great week. It was a bit hard on some days, but as the week went along, I found myself noticeably lighter and less weighted down with worry and frustration. I was training my mind, and it was responding. And so was the rest of my brain. I was actually resting in the goodness of my Father to me and mine.

And then the next week arrived.

And I had a choice.

Do I go back to the way it was before, thinking daily on what's in the news, listening to friends and their problems and taking up their burdens alongside them until we both fall over, or keep on training my mind to think on lovely, pure, good thoughts on a daily basis?

I didn't make a decision.

Life just kept going and the decision defaulted for me, back to before the training…

By the end of the next week, when we were on a weekend getaway, I received phone calls, texts, and thoughts about the future and friends. And I arrived home, heavy and weighted down, as if that week of a strong mind never existed.

I know that I have to exercise my body daily or it will fall into unhealthy habits, start to break down, and become sluggish. I know that, so I get up and move. I know that I have to eat often or I will become ravenous with hunger and eat at those around me if I don't get something in my stomach. I know that when I'm thirsty I must stop and drink, and drink a lot, and then drink some more, to stay hydrated. I know these things.

But sometimes I lapse into ignorance when it comes to my mind, and I think that one week of intense training will suffice until next year when I become enlightened with a new idea once again. Only then, I'll have that long year of walking hunched over, looking at the ground, and once in a while looking up to notice the sunset.

A friend's husband had a heart attack this weekend, another friend's baby has been in the hospital way too long, a stranger I met on our trip has a son in need of a kidney transplant, and there are threats and scares to another family by a stranger. Those are just a few things I've heard about and come to know in the past few days.

I swallowed the reality of the situations, and I sat with a sick stomach, and woke up on Monday morning feeling sluggish again, wondering about God and his purposes, and the temporary state of that “life is good” feeling.

It seems the “good life” is always being interrupted by the “real life” out there that surrounds us.

I heard on an advertisement for a television show a little kid make a comment something like,

Prayer isn’t so much to move the hand of God as it is to move the heart of man.

That wasn’t exactly it, but it was something like that.

And then I remembered something I read a long time ago in a book called *Disappointment with God* where a rabbi had lost his son, and he realized that when we pray for miracles, the greater miracle (even more than the healing a sick person) is one of having a content, trusting heart in our God who sees and knows all.

After all, isn’t that what really gets us down? The doubt that God can and wants to help us?

If we KNEW that there was a purpose for suffering, a greater glory around the corner, a healing somewhere in the future, and a hope beyond our understanding, we could settle our souls and be at peace.

We do know that.

We just forget when life gets bad.

I forgot.

But I’m remembering now my hunger and thirst that comes daily, even after I’ve eaten a full meal the night before.

So I must eat. I must drink. I must get up and move. And I must believe.

There is no other choice.

A BUNDLE OF

THYME

September 2015

TIPS

The Dressing FALL TRENDS 2015

Each year, we present to you some of the trends of the fall season, for your enjoyment, and we try to offer places where you can actually buy them to fit within your budget! Fall trends are super fun to observe and even more fun to try, because the colors of fall are just the best, aren't they? I love the fall season as it ushers in a few cool breezes after a long, hot summer. So check these out, try them out, and share with us what you've found that works!

Lady loafers. Remember the old penny loafers from decades back? Did you or a relative actually put a penny in your shoe? Well, the loafer has been upgraded and taken on a new twist, and they look really cute for the fall season! Check out these cute loafers from 6pm.com.

The grey suit. I'm not much for suits, but I really like the monochromatic look of this all one-color outfit. Grey is one of my favorite colors, because it's so versatile and actually goes with so many other colors. Once you've put together your grey outfit, add a pop of one color with your loafers above! New York and Company has grey jackets and pants, and they're always running sales!

Plaid. When is plaid ever out of style? It doesn't have to be the plaid you wear on the farm, with a piece of straw stuck in your mouth. Plaid can be dressed down or up, depending on where you wear it on your body. And plaid, in my opinion, is just a warm pattern to wear that's cozy and comfy as the temperatures start to fall. Why not start with a plaid scarf, one that will go with your grey, over your turtleneck, or to compliment a skirt!

The turtleneck. Some don't like the feel of something constricting their neck, but the new turtlenecks for fall aren't the old roll-down, hot, thick collared shirts of the past. They're classy, simple, stand up version, and they look oh so cute peeking out from your dresses, your shirts, or your jackets. How about a simple black turtleneck (they're available at lots of stores) worn under a denim jacket with another hue in your pants! Or one worn under overalls is really cute, as well! Rue 21 has mock turtleneck tanks that are great under everything…(in stores only.)

Statement Earrings. These have been around, but they're still here for fall. We've focused on statement necklaces before, but now the earrings have all the attention. There's no other jewelry required, or needed, with your ears are adorned with a statement piece that makes your outfit shine! These geometric ones found on Etsy are in a jet black color and will look great with jeans and a cardigan, or dressed up for a weekend date.

Pocket skirts. I love these! They sort of have that school girl look, but they look good on anyone of any age, paired with a sweater or a button down shirt, or one of those turtlenecks above. A flat shoe or even a low heel completes the look, and the pockets are so fun and give the plain skirts of the past an up-do for sure! We like this one from Ruby Clair Boutique!

Burnt Orange. This IS the color of the sunset, after all. And it's a color that looks great on most everyone of any hue of skin. It's another one of those colors that goes with so many other things – from denim, to white, to navy, and even brown! Try out burnt orange this fall in one of your pieces, and then look in your closet to see what you can wear to go with it! Check out this

orange concert top with a plaid pocket and button details down the back – comfy and flowy – from Modcloth.

There are so many fun trends this fall besides the ones listed above. It doesn't take much to make one change or add one piece, to give ourselves a whole new look to our wardrobe. And I, for one, will be so thankful when those cooler breezes blow and we can actually start wearing some of clothes with sleeves and warm fabric! Will you?

Seven for You – Kindness Hacks – by Marcy Lytle

"Random Acts of Kindness" used to be the catch phrase, referring to the act of doing something nice for another person on a whim, just whenever, hit and miss, as the mood hits you. But now, the word "hack" is used everywhere, referring to a "clever solution to a tricky problem." In other words, to change something ordinary into something else in an extraordinary way is to hack it. There are all sorts of hacks, but for this column, for this season, we're going to list seven ways to offer kindness – that ordinary act that comes from a grateful heart – in an extraordinary way – that sends it over the top. There's really no better feeling than to be kind to another, expecting nothing in return, except the satisfaction of knowing your thankful heart passed it on…

1. **Babysit a single parent's children so she can have a night/day to herself**. Single moms and dads have it hard. I think it's hard parenting children with a mom *and* a dad, so I can't imagine having to do it all…alone. Think of a friend (maybe a teacher or a neighbor) who parents alone, and don't ask – just state that you are available for a babysitting evening while he/she enjoys the night out with friends, or to do whatever they'd like to do. *And to place it over the top, slip them some cash so they can enjoy their time away and buy themselves a treat!*
2. **Invite a newcomer out to dinner**. Look around at your church or on the soccer field and pick out a couple you don't know, and be brave – ask them out to dinner. Think of a few conversation topics, plan a fun place to meet, and then set the date. Don't expect them to reciprocate, to ask about you and yours, or to do anything at all – because you are the host, the entertainer, the interested party in them. *And to place it over the top, don't let this be just one mercy date, but the beginning of a relationship so that they feel wanted, special, and welcome to their new place.*
3. **Do the chore for your spouse that he normally does.** Does your spouse always take out the trash, make the bed, or mow the lawn? Pick one of these mundane chores that he does, and surprise him by doing it yourself. It may require sacrificing your own spare time or putting aside a project for a bit, but if he arrives home and sees that this chore is complete – he'll jump for joy! But even if there is no jumping for joy, complete this act because you love and appreciate this person in your life – not because he deserves or doesn't deserve a break. *And to place it over the top, write him a handwritten note of thanks for all that he does – and leave it under his pillow to find as he lays down to rest at night.*
4. **Bring home a surprise treat one night to eat (what a great rhyme!).** Be sure to check ahead of time to ensure there is not already someone baking a treat, but be sensitive to a night when the family is tired, everyone is stressed, and dinner is barely served – and stop by on your way home for a warm box of freshly baked cookies, or a hot apple pie from a nearby bakery. *And to place it over the top, pick a night when the entire family is sitting around in the evening looking tired, bored, and/or restless – and invite them all to hop in the car for a late night run for ice cream! I bet the kids will scream!*
5. **Take five, to email an encouraging note to a friend.** This is a kindness that takes very little time, very little space, and very little thought – but it means a whole lot to the person receiving. Think about a friend who recently got a job promotion, who's going

through a difficult divorce, or who's health has been challenging – and email them a simple "I'm thinking of you," or a "Congratulations!" and then hit SEND! What a great surprise to open your inbox and find a personal note amid the sea of spam! *And to place it over the top, add an online gift certificate to one of many choices of stores – Amazon is easy to do!*

6. **Give your kids some cash.** Okay, we make our young kids earn their allowances, we push our teens to get a job so they can learn the value of a hard-earned dollar, and when our kids are grown and gone, we expect them to make their own way. But what about just slipping some cash into our son or daughter's hand, just because we love them? What a treat! *And to place it over the top, hide the cash under a pile of cookies you baked just for them – for no reason at all*!
7. **Be kind to yourself by giving yourself a break.** Lay aside the to-do list for a few hours, take a nap, go shopping for an hour, sit on the porch and sip hot tea, or even indulge in a dessert without guilt. We are the hardest on ourselves and sometimes we need to be kind to us before we can be kind to others. *And to place it over the top, give your entire family a break. Require nothing from any of them on a given evening, at least for a few hours –where everyone has a chance to do what they want to do – or nothing at all.*

It's true that kindness should be an everyday occurrence, a way of life, something we all do often, purposefully, and gratefully. But unfortunately, we get so busy and caught up with the demands others place on us, and ones we place on ourselves, that we go way too long without giving to ourselves and others.

Be kind.

To them.

To you.

Selah's Style – Back to School Basics – by Selah Irwin

School is in session!

It's time to make sure you have all the fashion basics in your closet.

Why?

To avoid a wardrobe mishap, that's why!

The first basic you need to start every school year is a decent pair of shoes. These tennis shoes are so comfy on my feet. If I have a heel ache, they make me feel "fabu!" They are stylish and they can make any school uniform shine!

You always need a good pair of jeans. Mine happen to be jeggings. They can go with pretty much anything. Whether it's going to school or out on the town with your friends, they can sustain your fashion needs.

The weather is starting to change! The crisp air is upon us. Jack Frost lurks in the near future. The solution is a cute jean jacket. It can be worn with anything and everything. Just because you're cold does not mean you can't be stylish

Many of us have to wear uniforms to school. No matter the pain you feel from lack of fashion and flare, beware, there is style everywhere. It is a good idea to have a few pair of beautiful leggings to add color and personality under your uniform.

With these few basic pieces in your wardrobe, you are set for the battle of school.

School may be hard but your clothes don't have to be!

The Fearless Kitchen - Spectacular Sandwiches – by Christina Vetter

Whether it's for lunch or dinner, sandwiches have been a long standing favorite in many families, and mine is no different. I love the versatility of them. There are limitless flavor combinations ranging from an elegant pear, gorgonzola, and prosciutto masterpiece all the way to the simple bologna classic. Just about any ingredient can be slapped between two pieces of bread and with a little tinkering be made into a wonderful sandwich.

That's why this month I want to share a few of my favorite sandwich recipes. This list is not exhaustive in the slightest, and I have many, many more favorites that aren't mentioned, (croque monsieur, chicken salad, meatball sub, sausage and peppers, Cajun po-boy, grilled panini, etc…) but these are some that I thought could be fun for your family to try. As with most other sandwiches, these are not difficult to make, but fresh ingredients are an absolute must.

Join me this month in serving Philly Cheese Steaks, Grown-Up Grilled Cheese Sandwiches, and Muffalettas. All are weeknight crunch time approved and are a cinch to throw together.

What are your favorite sandwich concoctions? Share them in the "Comments" section below. Have a fantastic month and as always Happy Eating!

Grown Up Grilled Cheese Sandwich: Buffalo **Difficulty:**
Serves 4

In the very early and more financially stretched days of our marriage, I had to get very creative with inexpensive ingredients: Hence, the grown up grilled cheese. This recipe is a buffalo chicken version, but there is plenty of wiggle room under the grilled cheese sandwich umbrella. Mozzarella and pesto chicken with minced sundried tomatoes for example is one of my favs! Play with a bunch of flavors. I haven't had a bad combination yet.

Ingredients:
1 lb chicken, diced very small
¼ C buffalo sauce, more or less to taste
8 slices mozzarella or white American cheese
8 slices bread

Directions:
-Heat chicken over medium heat until cooked thoroughly.
-Add buffalo sauce.
-In a separate pan, over medium low heat, place: bread, cheese, chicken mixture, cheese, bread, and toast both sides until desired darkness.
-Cut in half and serve immediately.

Muffalettas **Difficulty:**

Serves 6-8
Recipe courtesy: Giada De Laurentiis

Mufullettas are a New Orleans classic. And for good reason. They are simply delicious. If I had to pick one sandwich to be my absolute favorite, the choice would be difficult, but these would have to be it. The ingredient list is long, but don't let that scare you away. It's a breeze to put together. The recipe says it can feed 6-8 but I'll be honest, there have been times where it hasn't gotten past my husband and me.

Ingredients:
¼ C red wine vinegar
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 tsp dried oregano
1/3 C olive oil
10 large pitted green olives
¼ C chopped, pitted Kalamata olives
¼ C chopped roasted red bell pepper
Salt and black pepper to taste
1 (1 lb) round bread loaf
4 oz thinly sliced ham
4 oz thinly sliced mortadella
4 oz thinly sliced salami
4 oz sliced provolone
½ red onion, sliced thin
1 ½ oz arugula leaves

Directions:
-Whisk the first three ingredients together in a large bowl.
-Gradually blend in the oil, olives, and roasted peppers. Season to taste with salt and black pepper.
-Cut the top 1" of the bread loaf. Set aside.
-Hollow out the bottom and top halves of the bread and spread some of the olive and roasted pepper mix over the bread bottom and cut side of the bread top.
-Layer the meats and cheeses in the bread bottom.
-Top with onions, then arugula. Then, spread the remaining olive mixture on top of the sandwich and carefully cover with the bread top.
-Either serve immediately or wrap in plastic and refrigerate overnight. Either way cut sandwich into wedges before serving.

Philly Cheese Steak Sandwiches **Difficulty:**

Serves 4-6

There is no other food more iconic to Philadelphia than the Philly Cheese Steak, and the fact that I love the sandwich while living over 1600 miles from its hometown had me in a culinary predicament. That dilemma birthed this homemade version. I don't claim to compete with the authentic streets of the historic town, but I know when I get a hankering for the sandwich, this recipe doesn't disappoint.

Ingredients
4-6 sub rolls
2 green bell peppers, sliced thin
1 large yellow onion, sliced thin
2 lb lean steak, sliced very thin
8-12 slices provolone cheese
Salt and black pepper to taste

Directions:
-In a large sauté pan, over medium high heat, sauté vegetables half way.
-Add steak and sauté all together, stirring often until vegetables and meat are cooked through. Season with salt and pepper to taste.
-Place two slices of provolone on each sub roll; then fill with vegetable and steak mixture, including any juices over the top.
-Serve immediately.

Tried and True – Toddlers in the Room – by Marcy Lytle

Taking little kids out to eat is sometimes a challenge, as is taking them to church or other places where quietness is a must. These places require them to sit down, be still, and stay quiet – none of which comes easy with children. However, there are a few tricks of the trade that do work (most of the time) for helping ease the pain of dining and worshiping with kids. Actually, it's not a pain – unless they're unruly – then yes, it's a pain. It takes planning, just like it does preparing a diaper bag for an infant – but it's worth it when the meal is done, the service is over, and everyone's enjoyed themselves without losing a hair…

The Dollar Store is your friend. When we have large family gatherings, I visit this store knowing that I can get five things for each child, and only spend $5 per child! We have five little ones in our extended family nearby (two more approaching seat status) and $25 is worth the investment for the occasional family dinner out at a restaurant. I make sure each item is an activity item – like something to color, a book to look at, a baby to hold, a light to click on, etc. – without the aid of a parent. These items are best used during the waiting time for the food. When the food arrives, all is well…we hope.

A snack bag doesn't hurt. Most churches have nurseries and kids' classes, but there are occasional times where children need to sit quietly beside us because they've had a cold and don't need to be around other kids, or they just want to be near us for some reason. Treats to eat will still a child who's wiggly in her seat! Treats that take a while to eat are the best – like popcorn and pretzels and M&M's thrown in. Pack a snack bag for a kid, along with a few items from above, and the kids will love you forever and sit still for a few minutes.

Creativity occupies. If kids can create with their hands, somehow their minds and mouths stay quiet (again, we hope). Play Dough is great for this, and easy to carry along. A glue stick, torn tissue paper, and a coloring page are fun to use instead of crayons. The kids can glue colored tissue on the pictures instead of filling them in with crayons or markers (that they might decide to mark with on the carpet or their skin.) Cotton balls are fun to glue, as well! Just hang a small tote bag near the front door full of creative pieces, and grab it when you know the kids will need it (and you will need it, too.)

Phone puzzles mesmerize. Did you know there are toddler puzzles that can be downloaded on your phone? Many are free. Just search for "toddler games" or "toddler puzzles free online" and find a few that are easy for your children to do. Show them how at home, so they know what to do when they get the chance to play. Make sure your phone is charged up, the sound is OFF, and hand them this electronic device and let them move the pieces with their tiny fingers into place. It's quite rewarding, and they enjoy the challenge! And kids are amazing little geniuses with these things!

Participation might be the key. We recently were at camp with our kids, watching Ayla – age 2. She pointed and wanted to go inside when the kids were worshiping, because she loves music. It's a good idea to have your smaller children actually participate in worship for small increments of time so that they grow up loving and demonstrating their love for God. It's also wise to involve the kids at the dinner table in conversation and ordering, and being still. But

both of these take effort on *our* part. We have to be patient, we have to actually include them IN the conversations, and we must realize that they do enjoy being with adults – *if* adults seem to enjoy being with them.

There will be days and times when none of the above works because our kids are too tired, other kids around them cause them all to stir it up, or we're cranky ourselves and agitate our own children. But there are tricks to try that do work, do make our life easier, and do help us manage adult/kid activities in a pleasant manner, so that all are pleased when the event is over. It does require shopping and preparing things ahead of time, but oh the reward, when you're headed out the door and the bag is ready, and all you have to do is grab and smile – even with toddlers in the room.

HOME

Practical Parenting – What They Wear – by Mandy Major

The year was 1990. I was 10 years old. My mom came home with a factory outlet bag of the most beautiful dresses I had ever seen. bold prints. Puffed sleeves. Pleated in all the perfect places. I was in love. I couldn't wait to show them off to the girls on Sunday.

"Is that a Laura Ashley?"

These were the words I heard as I walked in with my new dress. As if placing a brand on a piece of clothing somehow makes it more desirable. But it does. Or it did.

"No."

And so it began. I learned at the age of 10 in that beautiful dress, that somehow the tag mattered. Or mattered to them. Or mattered to me?

When I later asked my mom if I could get a Laura Ashley dress she took me to the Laura Ashley store and showed me the dresses and the prices. And I saw dresses just like the ones my mom found at factory outlet that I loved… And somehow in the midst of all this I learned to love what I love because I love it and not because of what is written on a tag. My mom never said no to Laura Ashley exactly, she just helped me learn to love what I had and not what I didn't have.

Once I had my own children (and was still in control of dressing them, I should add) I again had a similar experience.

Parents were buying name brand high end clothing for their babies. And I wanted to dress my baby boy in brands from head to toe too! I wanted the cutest best dressed baby on the block. I wanted my babies to look like a walking magazine ad. And until they were 2, they mostly did. No I didn't dress them in all branded clothing but I did dress them like mini Blake and Mandy (my husband and I.)

And then the day came when they started picking out their own clothes. (This day came sooner than I thought, too - around the age of 18months or so!) Some of the outfits they came out in! Eve constantly came out in stripes and polka dots. Caleb in blue on blue. And I realized I had a decision to make about what kind of fashion I wanted to instill in my kids. Did I want to force them to match and wear the right outfits? Or did I want to help them develop their own sense of style? What kind of 10 year olds did I want them to be? What did I want them to be like in high school?

So I helped them learn about blending colors.

I separated outfits into items of clothing.

I let them dress themselves!

Some days yes, I am in public with my child in a Batman costume, or rainbow colors from head to socks. And today, Eve still wears rainbows and Caleb still wears blue on blue. But each of them have their style.

They wear what they love.

And the tags?

They cut them out.

Life as We Know It - Smoke and Mirrors – by Erica Simmons

As a parent I know that my children are not going to make the right decisions all the time. When they don't, I feel this overwhelming burden to handle it is in such a way that allows my boys the opportunity to learn a valuable lesson, tempered with a level of wisdom that our Heavenly Father uses when dealing with us.

This month's "life as I know it" moment came to me, courtesy of Jerimiah. A few months ago, I shared that we were gifted a car. When this happened, I was so excited and quick to call it a blessing. I have since heard the story of a Portuguese man who had a horse he cherished and a series of events occurred around the horse, good and bad. After each incident, his fellow villagers were quick to judge each one as a blessing or a curse. He wisely said after each occurrence that it is either a blessing or a curse…only time will tell. Since receiving the car, I have lapsed into the villager's mentality going back and forth between it being a blessing or a curse.

June 26th I am in bed, it is after midnight, and my phone rings. It is Jerimiah calling me from Georgetown! He has taken the car and was pulled over because one of the brake lights did not work. He was fortunate that the police allowed me to come get him, but Jerimiah may not have felt that way, riding back home with me. I was furious, the car was being towed back home at the cost of $195, he had two citations totaling over $500, and he had no idea how much danger he put himself in. He was a young inexperienced driver and anything could have happened.

In came the burden of teaching him a lesson and using godly wisdom:

The lesson: he was working and would in turn pay all the expenses incurred, he lost so many privileges, and people in prison had more freedom than he did.

The wisdom: he is young and the young make mistakes, let's not focus on the things that could have gone wrong, but be grateful that nothing did.

Fast forward to maybe a week and a half later. I run home for lunch, I turn on my street, and I notice the car is missing. My sister is there and Jordan steps out and tells me Jerimiah has taken the car! I am mind-blown and angry.

Let it suffice to say there was more lesson teaching than wisdom in the way I handled it this time.

When I got home from work, my son was all happy and tried to talk to me. I remember telling him this time was not going to be so easy, that I was still angry with him, and I needed him to feel that and understand it and make better choices. *Seems rational, right?*

The problem: this is not how my Heavenly Father deals with me even though I had a mother who did. I was determined to not to play emotional mind games with my boys.

It was a few days after the second incident, I was sleeping with the keys under my mattress, and I was worrying that Jerimiah still had not learned his lesson. The next day, I was outside working on the pool and these questions were in my heart:

What am I going to do?

What can I do to get him to understand?

I remember this sense of revelation, where all I had to do was simply pray. As I began to think, it dawned on me that the enemy wants to keep us chasing solutions to keep us distracted from **the ultimate solution: prayer.**

As I started formulating how I wanted to share this in my article, I remembered a scene from *Castle.* In case you may have forgotten, that is my favorite show ever. There is an episode around magic, and Beckett and Castle are questioning a magician about using C4 to create an illusion. The magician replies they rely a lot on smoke and mirrors to misdirect the audience. It was so poignant to me because this is what the enemy does. He wants to distract us, create mind illusions, play on our fears and weaknesses to keep us off our knees, out of the presence of our Father, away from our power source. As with magic, this is not real. Satan has no power or authority in our lives. So we must not get so focused on the problem that we lose sight of the solution.

There is something I have put into practice many times since learning. As with all things, I don't go into the other ditch. When my children make wrong choices, they will continue to receive consequences. I will deal with them as the man in the story did. I will focus on the facts, I will not judge, get distracted, or give place to the enemy, and most of all - I will pray continuously.

Lastly, I want to share a video that I saw on Yahoo that sums up what I want to say. Notice at the beginning how the mother duck looks like she is talking to the baby ducks. It is like she is preparing them, telling them to stay focused on her, follow her, and trust her. As you watch, also think about what would have happened if the ducks had stopped, changed direction, or otherwise been distracted.

Consider this:

We are the baby ducks, our Father gathers us close, and He tells us we are about to face a difficulty. He tells us that if we trust Him, follow Him, and stay focused on Him, we will make it through safely. Think of the dangers as the enemy's smoke and mirror attempts to distract us. If we can be as focused on God during trials as these ducks are, He will protect us…and our children.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kNIkNCmNjs&feature=player_embedded

I Don't Do Teens - Before They Leave – by Marcy Lytle

Being a parent of a teenager is quite an emotional ride, isn't it? There are days when we think they'll never grow up, and other days when we can't believe how grown they've become! We can't imagine life without them when they leave for college or get married, but we can't stand their messy rooms, their backtalk, and their independent ways while under our roofs. Training them to drive, and instructing them on dating rules is nerve-wrecking, and yet watching them serve others, give speeches, and make goals is heart-soaring.

Now that our kids are grown and flown, there are a few things I remember that we either are glad now that we taught them or wish we had remembered to teach them, because we soon found out they needed to know…

1. When dusting a plugged-in lamp without a bulb, don't use a wet rag. Yikes, that was a close one!
2. Cornstarch is not the same as cornmeal. Glad they asked…
3. You must allow more than $25 a week in your grocery budget. Food is expensive.
4. Student loans are a heavy load to carry into adulthood. Don't pick up this one.
5. Schedules might restrict your style now, but they'll be your salvation later.
6. Labels on clothes need to be read before purchased, if you hate ironing.
7. Labels on clothes need to be read before washing, if you want them to fit tomorrow.
8. Going to church isn't a rule. Being the church is a privilege and an honor.
9. Every part of the driver's training is for a purpose. Yes, they need to know it all.
10. Dating in groups is for their protection, not for their punishment.
11. Life is not an entitlement. It's a gift.
12. Saying thank-you never goes out of style.
13. Finding that "perfect" job or house isn't what's important. Seeking Him first, is.
14. God is love. Period. Anything else you might think is a lie. Even when bad things happen.
15. Cable television isn't a necessity of life.
16. Making your bed really does set the day's tone, even when mom is not around to see it.
17. Playing club ball or not playing club ball. That's not the main question.
18. Candles can burn the house down, so be aware…
19. Sex on the big screen is not a picture of love. One spouse. One love. One covenant. Is.
20. Parents are still here when you leave. But if you want their advice, you need to ask.
21. You can learn to count back change without the aid of a computer.

That's 21 things…and hopefully, by age 21 they're maturing into an awesome, think-first, adult who is ready to start conquering the world.

I thought my heart would break when the last one left and it did. I thought I'd missed the mark in some areas of training and this was true. I thought the teen years would never end, but they quickly were over.

And yet my heart is full again, God took up where I left off, and I realized that my best was just a catalyst for His guidance and love for these teens that are now adults having families of their own. They don't do everything like I would, they don't obey all the rules I laid down, but I pray daily that they realize His great love for them and others.

Got teens in your home? Train them in the important stuff, be a good example in front of them, and make sure they have a suitcase full of clean underwear (that they know how to wash) when they leave…

Everything Home – Imperfect and Uncouth – by Mikaela Cain

“Lord, I get to worship you on my own keyboard,” I smiled.

I sat at the Yamaha S60, our first big purchase as newlyweds. It was nestled into the mostly empty spare bedroom our little townhouse. I switched the piano on and ran my fingers over the plastic keys. Because I had always lived with my family or roommates, this was my first time to worship in my own space.

Dong. Dong. Dong.

The notes sounded choppier and flatter than the upright piano I played growing up. I held the notes a little longer to make it sound smoother.

I started singing, “I will give you all my worship. I will give you all my…”

I paused.

“Is that a ‘B’ or a ‘D’?” I wondered, squinting at the chord chart on my iPhone that I propped on the top of the keyboard.

“Oh ‘D,’” I resolved.

Dong.

“… praaiissee,” I continued. “You alone, I long to woorrsshipp….”

Dong. Pause. *Dong.*

“You alone are worthy of my praise. I will worship…”

I stopped.

“Wow, that’s low!”

And I fiddled with the settings, trying to figure out how to transpose the chords.

“‘Note Shift.’ Cool. Let’s start again!”

The rest of the time continued in the same fashion. My voice failed. The timing fluctuated. The chords surprised me. I decided to let go of those mishaps and just thank God.

I was thrilled that my home was better set up to be a place of worship.

“Thanks, God, that I can finally worship you in my home!” I said aloud.

As soon as the words left my mouth, I thought of countless moments when I worshiped God with just my voice.

“God, thank you so much for a tool in which I can use to I worship you,” I corrected myself.

Even though the worship was imperfect, it was still worship because I did it for God.

I looked at my phone again, and rushed to the bathroom to get ready to go to work. I grabbed my eye shadow brushes from a ceramic vase sitting on the counter. I had made the four-inch tall vase with vines, flowers and leaves twisting around it when I took a wheel-throwing pottery class in college. My professor had scoffed at my vase because the flowers made it too “cute” for his artisan taste. I didn’t care. I loved this vase.

I feel close to God when I create pottery; in fact, closer than I do when I play worship songs on the piano. He has used this craft as a tool to teach me so much about Himself as a creator and about life process. God will use so many of the things that we love in life to reveal Himself to us. That is one of the reasons I love putting the different pieces of pottery around my home in various places. God gave me the taste that I have, and sticking to my honest expression in decorating welcomes His presence. When that happens, my home becomes a form of worship to Him.

Oftentimes, things that I love draw me closer to God, because it helps me get in touch with the parts of His nature that He put inside of me.

Embracing imperfection and personal expression have become two of my guidelines for home living.

I want everything to be an authentic representation of what I love.

I want it to be in alignment with my taste, even if it’s imperfect, like my keyboard playing, or uncouth, like my vase.

I guard against the exhausting pursuit of coming off perfectly and the worthless opinions of others when setting up home. It’s not easy. Living by these two core values require a lot of purposeful moments in IKEA or Target, reminding myself to stick with what I like. It requires purposeful decisions during small group to offer my piano play, as unpolished as it is. I really pray about how to include God in my decisions and honest in how we present ourselves. My goal is that our house is full of worship and encounters with God.

Worshiping is not playing instruments, or even singing songs. It’s indefinable act of elevating something or someone. It’s a posture of the heart that invites God in.

We don’t need tools to worship God. We need hearts that will worship God with any tool, perfect or not, popular or not. My hope is that I will create an atmosphere in my home in which everything becomes a tool for worship—even the home itself!

A Night to Remember – Big Words – by Marcy Lytle

School is in session, and at school our kids are always learning new words. And the big words are often hard to spell, difficult to pronounce, and such a pain to define! It can be the same with the Bible. There are some big words used in the bible that our kids might hear but never comprehend. So why not spend devo night learning them and having fun while doing it? All of the words in this lesson have nine or more letters, but they are good words to know, as we all learn and grow!

Preparation: *If you have whiteboard, bring it out and use it for this lesson, as well as a white sheet or towel or tablecloth.*

Transgression – *Read Psalm 32:1* – When we do something against God's word, that's a transgression, or a sin. But this verse says we are blessed when our transgressions are covered and forgiven. Jesus forgives our transgressions and erases them from our lives. (*Let each one come to the board and make a mark and confess something they've done in the past that was against God's word – i.e. lying, gossiping, disobeying parents, etc*.) Sin marks up our hearts with dirt and makes us a mess. That's transgression.

Atonement – *Read Hebrews 2:17* – Once we have sinned, something or someone has to make it right. For example, if we have stolen something from our neighbor and we are truly sorry, we return it, we bless them, and we give them something to assure them of our love. Jesus was our atonement for our sin. He made things right between us and God, because he was perfect. We are not. (*Let the kids cover the entire whiteboard with markings, making it messy*.) Sins, transgressions, make our hearts dark and covered and dirty. And we cannot do anything to make our hearts clean again, because sin stains. But Jesus, because he was perfect (without sin), was our atonement – he made things right. (*Clean and erase the entire board*).

Reconciliation – *Read Romans 5:11* – When we are restored or joined back to our family, after being away because of hurt, we are then reconciled to each other. So when we transgress, or sin, that sin separates us from God. It's the same when we disobey our parents. We feel shame and are uncomfortable when we are hiding and lying about what we've done. Once we confess our sin (voice it), ask forgiveness for that transgression, we are then reconciled (restored) to each other! Isn't that cool? (*Use the board to put between you and your child as a barrier – which is what sin does – then remove it and hug them – demonstrating reconciliation.)*

Crucified – *Read Mark 15:15* – To be crucified is to be nailed to a cross as punishment. How would you like to be punished that way every time you sin? We don't have to be, because Jesus was crucified for us! When he was nailed to the cross, he died, then he rose again, and that act of kindness and love reconciled us to God, forgave us our transgressions, and the atonement was made! (*Let the kids draw crosses on the white board and give thanks for Jesus' love)*

Righteousness – *Read II Corinthians 5:21* – Because of Jesus, we are then righteous – right and perfect in the sight of God. We cannot be perfect because we are human. Therefore, Jesus was our perfection for us. And when we believe in Him, we are then right and perfect as he is. He is our righteousness even when we feel so wrong, sometimes. When we feel ashamed for messing up, disobeying, or doing something wrong, Jesus' work on the cross makes us right again – perfect and holy in his sight – without sin. Wow! (*Cover each child with the cloth*). We don't ever have to be afraid or ashamed to come to Jesus when we've sinned and asked him to forgive us. He not only forgives, he clothes us in his righteousness!

Immortality – *Read II Timothy 1:10* – to be immortal is to live forever! Our human bodies will grow old and pass away, but our spirits – the part of us that loves Jesus and lives for him – will live forever! We don't have to fear death, and death is not final, it is not the end. When Jesus rose again, he conquered and beat death – so that we can live forever with him! (*Clap together at the goodness of God!)*

These are some big words we learned, but don't they tell a great story? We sin and mess up by transgressing, but Jesus is our atonement and was crucified for our sins – to erase them for good. He places us back into the Father's arms, and our Father then covers us in his beautiful robe of righteousness, where we are clean and pleasing in his sight! And to top it all off, he brings us into his family to live forever with all of those who believe!

Pray together as a family, giving thanks for these big words that describe big things our big God has done for us!

The Family Practice - Feet on Dreams – by Rachel Toalson

I've just finished reading him the project we decided on this summer—a picture book they've all written and will illustrate—when he looks at me and grins.

"Are we going to sell it, Mama?" he says, because he's 8, and he's always looking for ways to make money, this little entrepreneur.

"Of course we are," I say. "But we still have to do a lot of work from here."

"Okay," he says.

And he gets back to work, poring through all those picture books to see how many pages are in them and how many pages his book will need to have and how we'll break up all that text to match with pictures.

It all came about after a school's-out **dreaming session**, which we do every summer, to talk about what we will do with our summer and what projects we'll create in the free days we have.

All three of our older boys chose to write books (which made their mama so happy).

I knew it was a lot of work, because I do this on a daily basis, and so we sat down to have a dreaming session, talking about what our projects would look like and how they would be completed and how much time we would need from start to finish. We planned how to put feet on our dreams—feet that will run and jump and play and accomplish what is in our hearts to do. We do this often with our children.

The practice began back when we chose our family values and added "We unveil dreams" as an important one. We had our first dream session where we dreamed about what we wanted to be when we grew up (parents included). And then we made a plan of pursuit.

We conduct Dream Sessions with our kids periodically during the year, to evaluate whether our dreams have changed and whether we're still on a path of pursuit or we've gotten a little sidetracked. **We share our dreams with our children, and they share their dreams with us. We dream family dreams.**

Dreams are important to our children. Dreaming together is important for our children. The time we take to engage with them this way shows them that we believe in them, that we believe they can become what they dream they'll become, with enough hard work and effort. Dream Sessions show our children that they have the potential to change the

world. They communicate our knowledge and our expertise and, most importantly, our belief that they have it in them.

The first dream session we had, our oldest (who was 5 at the time) said he wanted to be a cinematographer. Since that dream has not changed all these years later (he's 8 now), he continues to study videography. He reads biographies about people like George Lucas and Walt Disney to learn how to animate. He reads every comic book he can get his hands on because he knows that a foundation in story and pictures is what it takes to be a successful videographer. He studied a screenwriting book to learn the techniques necessary for writing a good screenplay. It's not unusual that I will find original comic books he's written and left on his desk or my bed or the kitchen table, because he set down a dream and he is working toward it.

Our kids are natural dreamers. They don't know the limits of possibility and impossibility. We can learn how to dream by watching our children. **We don't tell them what's possible and what's not, because we don't ever know, either. Just because it wasn't possible in our life doesn't mean it's not in theirs.** Because something else dreaming does is it teaches kids that dreaming takes hard, intentional work. Anyone who puts in the work can achieve a dream, but the work must be put in.

Jesus dreamed of a church that would meet needs and take care of the people and love them for who they were and wherever they were in their faith. So he did the work, keeping his disciples close, teaching them, helping them see the work they would have to do when he was gone.

Jesus was a dreamer. He was a teacher. I want to be like him.

How to hold a Dreaming Session with young children:

1. Get the crafts out. Have them draw pictures of what they want to be when they grow up. Sometimes kids need a little help with this one, but if they say "Batman," which is what my 3-year-old wants to be when he grows up, see it for the spirit behind it. He wants to keep the city safe from bad guys. Help him learn how to do that.
2. Start a dream folder for your child. Put snippets of newspaper or magazine clippings or a list of links and resources to help them learn more about their dream. If you know how to do what they dream about doing, share your expertise.
3. Periodically evaluate with your children what they're doing to achieve their dreams. Dreams aren't worth much without a plan. Help your children make plans and constantly adjust plans as their dreams change. We hold Dream Sessions once a quarter.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - I Almost Tossed It – by Marcy Lytle

I have this lovely shirt that I bought at a not-so-cheap store that I couldn't wait to wear when I bought it. It's a small green and cream-colored print that is gathered at a couple of spots with elastic, has a cute waist, and floppy sleeves – a great piece for summer! I spent more than I normally do on the top, but I had a discount coupon in an email, so I went for it!

The first time I wore the shirt I loved it – it was cool and summery and pretty, just like I knew it would be. Then came the wash…

The instructions said to hand wash, so I did. When I took it out to squeeze it dry and hang it up, the green color had collected into dark lines and left streaks throughout the shirt – much to my dismay! So again, I washed it, this time in another sink of cold water, swishing it around. Some of the streaks were gone, but new ones appeared.

I finally washed this shirt (that was now greatly losing its appeal) for a third time in the washer, with a load of jeans, because I knew if it faded again – it wouldn't discolor anything.

Finally…the shirt came out looking normal, only not as vibrant in color.

But, wait, there's more!

It had to be ironed! And all of those gatherings and elastic made for a heck of a time ironing it. It took me a long, long time. And you can bet that I may wear that shirt several times in a row now, before I wash it again. And the store where I purchased it is also going to be less frequented by me, as well!

I almost tossed the shirt…but after lots of care and effort…it's finally presentable to wear again.

As I was ironing, I thought about my own life and how God created me to be this beautiful piece of imagery – one that reflects Him – and how much work it takes to get me to that place. He washes me clean with his blood but sometimes because of my fleshly make-up, there are spots and lines and "collections" of things that are still unsightly.

So into the wash I continually go, day after day, as I walk with him, and he gets the coloring just right.

After I've matured in many areas and my colors are starting to even out, I'm still a wrinkled mess from wounds, swishing back and forth in life's ups and downs, being squeezed by life's demands, and the twists that occur in life from unfulfilled dreams. However, he applies his warm love and takes exquisite care to iron out every wrinkle that time has set into place. He doesn't mind the process, the length of time it takes, or the meticulous care He has to use to get in every place and make me presentable.

Finally, one day, we are all going to be washed, stains removed, wrinkles gone, and prepared like a bride for her wedding day. He's not going to toss us in the discard pile, because he created us. He won't throw us away, because he gave his life perfecting each thread and color

in our gown of righteousness that he's now fitted perfectly to the image we now reflect so beautifully.

That shirt gave me grief. I was totally disappointed in how much care it took to wear this one piece of clothing. And I did think of tossing it, more than once, while I was washing, rewashing, and ironing and ironing.

But God will never toss us out or hang us in a back corner until He has the time to work on us.

He's constantly excited about the purchase he made when he sent his Son to die for me, and he sees me as no trouble at all – only as the apple of his eye – the joy of his heart – the image of his Son.

And that makes me happy and pleased and comfortable to let him work on his creation – me!

Under the Influence - Away from the Cluster – by Marcy Lytle

Sitting in church one Sunday, I suppose I was either bored or daydreaming, or I happened to look out the window – but what I saw was so pretty. There was a cluster of pink blooms hanging together from the branch of a crape myrtle tree and it took my breath away. I even nudged my husband and whispered, "Isn't that beautiful?" It was as if they hung in the center of the window to be framed just for my viewing!

My husband then nudged me back and quietly commented, "Look at the one up to the left." I had completely missed it – but there it was - one small pink bloom in the top left corner of the frame. The beauty and size of the cluster had overshadowed that equally pretty bloom that hung alone, off to the upper side. The lone bloom was just as beautiful; it just wasn't with the group.

Right then I thought of how often I, and others I know, feel as though we aren't seen, we're never the center of a framed picture, and we go unnoticed and unappreciated, and end up feeling unloved. And it's not until someone "sees" us that we come alive and realize our beauty and worth.

So who are these individual blooms and why are they away from the cluster of other blooms?

Maybe we are one-of-a-kind. Some of us are just unique and don't go with the flow of the "norm." There's one young man at our kids' youth camp who always sits alone at lunch, away from the crowd of kids, but he is in that spot year after year. Sometimes we end up alone because others have shunned us, but then there are some who prefer standing alone. We don't fit in, and we're okay with that. Whatever the reason, each one of us is beautiful in our own way and we shine…just maybe in a different color of sparkle!

Maybe we are shy or timid. Some people don't have the boldness to join a group of others because they're quiet, and they don't know what to say. Therefore, others rarely notice them. The loud ones always are heard. The bold ones get the spot. The vocal ones hit the mark. And the silent ones stand away, looking in…but never fitting in. If we're shy and timid, we shouldn't be influenced and swayed by the boisterous ones just so that we can be heard. I have a son who is quiet, but when he speaks…people sit up and listen. Shy ones are not late bloomers or any less beautiful than the cluster of flowers that hang together. And often, the cluster breaks up and seeks out the lone one, when the crowd becomes too much to bear.

Maybe we are blooming right where we belong. Did you know that there are all sorts of clusters of blooms on plants, and that the ones that bloom in a bunch are no different than the single bloomers? The fact that they're all connected to the branch, and the branch is connected to the water source, and they all receive the same sunlight makes them equally bright and glorious. Another thing is that when photographed, a stand-alone beauty is just as breathtaking as a cluster of color that fills the frame! Both are equally fragrant and gorgeous, as they represent their plant name. Just because we are not surrounded by a group of others just like us in no way means that we are less than, not as important as, or missing something that we

need. Blooming where we belong is so much more important than worrying about those blooms "over there."

I happened to notice the cluster of color in the center of the window frame, but my husband's eyes were drawn to the lone bloom up in the corner. And once my attention was drawn away from the cluster, I then too was equally attracted and impressed with its beauty.

As women, our lives are influenced and shaped so much by what others do, from the time we're able to first walk and talk. Other groups of girls exclude us because we dress differently or look odd, and we realize at an early age that we're not the norm. If we are quiet and reserved, we soon realize that books and corners become our friends more than clubs and parties, and we only have one or two people around us who really know our inner selves, and see us for who we are.

But as we mature and grow, with the Lord becoming our identity as we walk with him day after day, we soon begin to reflect on his goodness in our lives and we become content with who we are, even if we've bloomed away from the cluster where others seem to congregate and grow. And that's not always a bad thing. Wounded flowers don't bloom – they turn brown and the petals fall. Flowers that have been cut off don't stay attached to the branch – they hit the ground hard and disappear. So the fact that we're still sitting on the branch in full bloom – although alone – means we're good. We're whole. We're healed. And we're steady.

Are you a person who always feels away from the cluster? You know you're different, you realize your limitations and reserves, and you're starting to feel perfectly fine with who you are in your own skin?

Jump up and down and spin around!

Hooray for you!

Just like that breathtaking moment in the middle of a church service when I and my husband caught a glimpse of beauty out the window, you too are seen and marveled at by Him. He has you framed in his hands, and your beauty falls within the protection and care of his purposes for your life. You are a gorgeous offshoot of the branch to which you're connected – Jesus – and you shine for him.

No longer let your attitude be of looking at the cluster and longing to be a part of something that "appears" to have more than you do. It's just not true. No longer waste your time yearning to scoot to the middle of the frame when you fill up the corner and draw the eye away, up higher, to see His beauty shine in you alone – in a whole new way.

Dirty House? Clean It Up!
4 Easy Ways to Become Toxic-Free

Healthy Habits – 4 Simple Swaps – by Ashleigh O'Connor

Three years ago, my husband and I decided to start taking an all-natural, toxic-free approach to our household, hygiene routines, and overall wellness upkeep. We both used to suffer from terrible allergies, he'd grown up with asthma, and I'd suffered from headaches off and on for years, for no firm reason or another (all of which have subsided or been drastically reduced – more on this in a future article!). In an effort to slowly begin swapping out a few simple household items with DIY items, I stumbled across a few blogs that had quick, easy recipes for cleaning solutions and hygiene products. It was amazing. I quickly became obsessed with blog after blog, article after article. Three years later, and the obsession is still going strong and I hope to get other people just as obsessed as I am. Pinterest became my best friend and so did the **Wellness Mama** (even though we've never met, I pretend like we're besties that share household DIY projects and giggle over gluten-free cookies and hot tea).

Before you read this article any further, think back to the last household cleaning product or beauty/hygiene product you purchased. If you can, I want you to go grab that product and find the ingredients label. Got it? Good! Now let's continue…

Read aloud the ingredients list, if you dare:

- Can you pronounce half of the ingredients?
- Do you know what each of the ingredients listed are and what their function is in that particular product?
- Do you know the effects that those ingredients could have on your skin, **lungs**, and overall health?
- Are they doing more for your health or making it worse?

You may not realize this, but the majority of ingredients in everyday household items, cleaning supplies, and beauty products are toxic and harmful for your health. Do they clean that greasy stove up in a matter of seconds? Sure. Do they make your bathtub tiles sparkle and shine? Yep. Do they leave your hair silky smooth and full of volume? You betcha! BUT… is it the only option and even more importantly, the ONLY option? Absolutely not.

I have **4 easy, quick, and safe solutions** for you to implement and I know you'll be amazed at the difference a toxic-free home can have on your overall health and well-being.

Household Cleaners

Instead of reaching for that bottle of 409 or Scrubbing Bubbles, reach for these cheap, all-natural items for a quick and affordable alternative for an all-purpose cleaner:

- all-natural distilled white vinegar
- baking soda

- essential oils for fragrance (lavender oil, lemon oil, and orange oil are my go-to oils for cleaning solutions)

This is one of the easiest, cheapest ways to clean your counters, sinks, tile, cabinets, and practically everything! In a glass spray bottle, mix equal parts of warm water and vinegar, a couple tablespoons of baking soda, and 15-20 drops of essential oil. Be sure to slowly add in the baking soda, as it foams up when mixed with vinegar.

Lemon oil is a great anti-bacterial oil, so its use in the kitchen and bathroom is powerful. Keep this spray bottle handy whenever you need a quick wipe down of the kitchen, or when you need to hunker down with some elbow grease for a deep spring-cleaning.

Air Fresheners/Candles/Plug-Ins

If you thought the swap-out above was easy, this one will be even easier. Unplug those Plug-Ins and try to avoid spraying Febreeze everywhere (these products can release toxic VOCs into the air, causing lung irritation, inducing asthma attacks, headaches, and allergy attacks). I used to get terrible headaches after I would light certain fragrance based candles or spray air fresheners, and I believe it was due to the high levels of artificial ingredients and chemicals in these products.

Using water and essential oils is much more effective to brightening up the air in the house and keeping those headaches at bay (side note, peppermint oil is also known for headache relief…more on this in another article). Grab a small glass spray bottle, fill with water, and mix up a blend of your favorite essential oils (12-20 drops per oil, depending on what you want your scent to be – get creative!). For a refreshing blend, I use peppermint and lavender oils. For a clean, bright blend, I use lemon, lemongrass, and a little bit of lavender (this is great for kitchen air freshener, especially in the summer!).

Deodorant

One of the best swaps I believe we've made in our household is the deodorant swap! The first Wellness Mama blog I ever read and tried out was her homemade deodorant recipe. I knew I didn't want to keep slathering on aluminum-based deo, due to aluminum being a known carcinogen that can lead to breast cancer. This was a very conscious swap for us. The recipe in the link above is simple and effective for most people. If you find your skin being irritated by the baking soda (like my husband did), try purchasing an all-natural brand like Tom's (aluminum-free) or Crystal (mineral salt based).

Face Cleanser/Moisturizer

Here's another favorite of mine! Put that $37 bottle of brand-named skin cleanser down and grab a bottle of fruit/plant based oil for a fraction of the price instead.

Coconut, apricot, grape-=seed, avocado, and olive oils are some of the most skin friendly oils you can use. They cleanse AND moisturize; so no need for 4 or 5 different skin products to add to your daily regimen. I keep a small bottle of grapeseed or coconut oil in the shower to wash my face and neck. Pour an amount the size of a nickel into your palm, slather on your face and neck, and rub with a warm, soft cloth to cleanse your dirt and makeup right off. For an extra boost of exfoliation, use a pinch of

baking soda to deep clean your pores. If you want to take it to the next level, use a drop or two of tea tree oil, mixed with your carrier oil, to combat oily skin or acne prone skin. Tea tree oil is known for its anti-bacterial, purifying, cleansing, anti-septic properties that are great for treating those pesky flare-ups.

I've tried various concoctions, and to be honest…some I have loved, some I have hated. **Finding what works best for you and your household is the most important end result.** My desire is to encourage you to take the very first step at cleaning up your house – for good – and to empower you to educate yourself and your loved ones on how to take control of your healthy habits!

If it seems like a daunting, overwhelming task, don't be discouraged. Take one product a month and swap it out with an all-natural or homemade product.

Before you know it, your cleaning supply closet and beauty bag will be full of products that are safe and effective for everyone in the house.

Beauty for Ashes - Entrusted – by Pam Charro

Do you have a person in your life that tests your patience on a regular basis?

I definitely can think of a few.

These folks consistently seem to bring out my worst and ugliest parts, and I find myself wondering at times what the purpose of them being in my life could possibly be.

I was recently wrestling with God in my thoughts toward one such person. I knew God could help me to feel less frustrated, because this was not a new request. I also realized that even that frustration was an answer to prayer, since I had asked him not too long ago to show me my own need for grace so that I could more easily give it to others. He, in turn, began to show me how angry, unloving and impatient I can be (often at the drop of a hat!).

…Rude awakening…

So I sat in the dark and waited for my peace and freedom to come.

He was, of course, so faithful and kind in his response.

He said, "Pam, I know that neither of you is perfect here, but I must use imperfect people and circumstances to make myself known. I know it is difficult but I have entrusted you to one another because I don't want just anyone in this particular situation - it needs to be you and this other person. You are, for this job, a perfect fit in an imperfect world."

He didn't say anything about the mess I am.

He wasn't at all focused on my own need for forgiveness.

He only said that I am useful right now, just the way I am. That it is actually an honor to have to work through tough things with others because those others are precious to God.

I was instantly humbled and calmed.

Who else sees us like our God?

Such beauty,

Such kindness,

Such glory…

to walk with him.

Even when it's for a tough job.

Maybe even especially then.

Created for Life – The Encounter – by Ginny Hurley

These are the BEST days to be alive!

For all of my life, my two favorite scriptures have been, Acts 4:13 and Psalm 16:11. I want to share them with you right now, because I believe our Father is releasing this message in this day. I know He wants us to have this settled in our hearts as we live life in this culture and time.

Acts 4:13 says,
"Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus."

In a time of great tumult in Israel, where education was highly valued, along with position and placement in society, God raised up fishermen, servants, foolish, poor, uneducated nobodies to carry the most incredible gift to mankind. Of course He had followers in every level, rich tax collectors, and some prominent people in the cities, but his closest followers were mostly everyday people like you and me. I have a degree from a prominent university, yet it doesn't qualify me for teaching or leading in the Kingdom. It actually has nothing to do with the power of God in my life, or how He operates in me. I have no disdain for education at all. I am an educator and have true value for it. Yet, my ONLY hope in sharing the gospel and heart of the Kingdom is in BEING with Him and KNOWING His Presence. I can preach, teach, and even sing praises, but my true purpose must be found in being with Him and carrying what He carries.

An agenda to promote the gospel must flow from an encounter with Him.

Our world demands degrees, titles, accomplishments, and more in order to be recognized. Even Christians run to conferences chasing after knowledge, or to hear the next word from important people. These things are not wrong. I do them myself. But if I haven't spent time with Him alone, just to BE in His presence, these activities can actually take me away from Him. When I look at the power that Peter carried and the wisdom and anointing that flowed out of him, I can only realize that his greatness was from having been with Jesus. It astounded a society when they looked on!

Psalm 16:11 says,
"You will show me the path of life; In Your Presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

The idea that my understanding of His extravagant grace, love, and freedom would cause me to sin because I can is ludicrous. I sin. I hate it and repent. I am back in His arms before the blink of an eye. My focus is not on how bad I am and how much I need to work on my issues. My focus is on the One who has already brought me into His presence where there is abundance of every kind! Sin is no longer an issue in my life because I know he already took care of that on the cross. Conviction comes quickly in this atmosphere. Condemnation and self-absorption melt in the presence of the Lord!

This is my life verse! All direction, purpose, and joy in my life come from His presence! My source is always available, always listening, always good, and always looking out for my best interest. Most of all, He is always loving me completely unconditionally. He

doesn't withhold any good thing from His children. His timing is always perfect. His wisdom surpasses all knowledge, so if I am in Him, then that knowledge is available to me 24/7. It causes me to love Him deeply and have a great desire to bring Him pleasure.

I am no longer a slave but a daughter who desires His presence more than anything else in this world.

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road – Arise and Sing (or pout and cry) – by Ginny Hurley

It's true.

I had an angel show up in my dorm room, awakening me to walk in the hallway. The beauty and presence was so electrifying that I can only say what she spoke. I say *she*, as the angel was gorgeous and incredibly lovely. She said that John was the one I would marry and that we would have a ministry with young people. There was more, but those are the words and things I remember the most.

It was my freshman year, and John and I had only been dating for a little while. I didn't share that testimony until years later (as it was so personal) and of course I surely didn't want John to hear about it! However, I *knew* I had heard from God. **Encounters change everything!**

Now, after 40 years, I sit here in complete AMAZEMENT and WONDER! Oh the goodness of God knows no bounds! I don't in any way think we have to have an encounter with an angel before we know who to marry, or hear thunder and see lightning. That is just how my Lord dealt with me. And let me tell you, HE KNOWS each of us so personally and individually!

John and I are polar opposites in many ways. My friends call me White Lightning, and John is the Rock of Gibraltar or Peaceful Tortoise, unaffected by circumstances, patient, and so gentle. I am the one sitting in the car, honking! I like my meat scorched, while his is barely dead. I am washing the dishes before his second bite. He gets up at 4:30 A.M.! Yes! Can you believe it? I am still one who has to set the alarm for 9:00 if I have something to do on Saturdays!

Early in our marriage, I found out that John was a complete football fanatic! I'm talking Friday night he played flag football. Saturday morning he played flag football. Saturday afternoon throughout the day, someone in college was playing, especially those Baylor Bears! Then we had to rush home on Sundays to catch the pros. There was Monday night football and Thursday night football. No kidding! I was a football widow.

So I had a choice: pout, scream, whine, sing the "poor me" songs, or what?

Somewhere along the road, I had buried deeply within my core; John is not my hope. God did not give him to me to make me happy. I KNEW within my spirit that when I married that Hurley guy, **he was not the answer to my life's happiness.** He was the Lord's man, and He could surely deal with the issues of his heart without my preaching (well, most of the time, anyway.)

Now after 40 incredibly fabulous years of love, tears, great sorrow, hardship, loss, fun, delight, and joy beyond expression, I can say,
"It's a choice, ladies!"

Every day we get to arise and sing, or pout and cry. I have found the most wonderful treasure on this side of heaven, just for me. My John! Yes, he was actually delivered from an obsession with football! But that wasn't because I removed my love from him. It was because our great Father DOES answer our prayers! He is always good and cares more for us than we can imagine.

Yes, John still loves football. But it no longer has a hold on him. Our lives have grown beautifully connected in the way only a great God could ordain.

We are two opposites attracted by the gold in each other.

We must call it out, in order to obtain all the treasure hidden inside.

Love never fails.

Date Night Fun – Hands Required – by Marcy Lytle

Date night should be a time when you and he hold hands…a lot. After all, date night is the time to reconnect and recall those things that drew you to each other – back when you could never get enough time to hold his hand! Holding hands is sometimes hard to find time to do, when there are kids holding on to each hand every minute of every day. Or maybe you've not realized how holding hands has become a lost activity (yes, it requires movement toward each other) and you'd like to get it back. Sometimes, without realizing it, we quit holding hands because of hurts and wounds that have festered over the years.

This month, the first month of the fall season, we're sharing date ideas that require holding hands. Holding hands is one of the most romantic gestures we can offer our spouse, when our heart is pure and in a lovely spot. So why not go after it, five times, this month?

Reach Out. There are so many playful activities that require or are accentuated by the holding of hands. Hiking is one of them, especially when there are inclines to be climbed or creeks to be crossed. Pick out a trail ahead of time and REACH for his hand to assist, or to be assisted, as you go on an adventure together. After the hike is achieved and enjoyed and you're walking back to the car, grab his hand (yes, it will be clammy) and hold it tight, and swing your arms. *Sound silly?* It's not. It's healthful, and fun. Need some cute clothes for your hike? Check out this website.

Sit Close. Instead of sitting across from each other over dinner, sit beside each other on the two corners of the table, or even on the same side of the booth. Slide in right beside him, and tell him you want to be near him so you can hold hands. Or lift up the arm rest between the two of you at the movie theater, and let him hold the popcorn and you the drink, so that your hands are free to clasp. Finally, now that dinner and the movie are over, hold his hand and compliment him as you linger over each finger. *Sound silly*? It's not. Admiring and taking the time to feel and hold is helpful in renewing your relationship with each other.

Remove the Gloves. Wait! Most of us don't wear gloves in September! That's not the issue here. We all wear gloves at times of hurt, anger, irritation, or busyness, and we aren't interested in holding hands with him. Date night is not the time to stew and withhold affection. In your mind, and in your heart, remove these gloves that keep your hands covered, and set them free. There's a quote by Jared Kintz that says, "I can tell if two people are in love by how they old each other's hands, and how thick their sanitation gloves are." So once you've removed your "gloves", grab his hand with gusto and lead him on this date night of adventure. Blindfold him, or ask him to close his eyes, right before three specific stops, taking him by the hand to lead him to the fun. Take his hand and seat him behind a video game at an arcade, playing a few of his favorites with him. Take his hand and lead him to a dinner for two at a new place with good food and charm. Take his hand into a shop of fresh aromas, like baked bread, cookies, or coffee and ask him to guess where you are. Be creative with this one! Or bake him this treat at home and lead him by the hand, placing his first bite into his mouth with your hand! *Sound silly?* No way!

Nothing Said. Have you ever been on a silent date, one without words? Make it happen! The only communication will be with your hands! Write a note of your destination, which could be on a blanket beside a lake, under a tree, with books and snacks and drinks. Hold his hand on the drive there, take his hand as you walk to set up your place; then read together, holding hands, without speaking. From time to time, point to that ripple in the water, to a bird flying by, or to each other's feet. And the only sound allowed is laughter! Use only your hands to caress, rub, touch and point out, and see what kind of date it might be – one you might want to repeat over and over again! *Sound silly?* A silent date night may end up in the best communication you've ever experienced.

Creative Touch. Find an activity to do together that requires both of you digging in, together, to use your hands. It might be sand castle building by the beach. Maybe it's forming cookies together out of dough, placing them on a sheet, waiting for them to bake, and then serving them to each other with your hands. Or perhaps it might be sculpting one piece of clay together – he on one side – you on the other – and then turning it to complete each other's beginning. Wouldn't that be an outstanding evening of creating something together other than chaos, arguments, or friction? *Sound silly?* Creating together is intimate, it's sweet, and it's exciting to see what comes out of time spent using your hands for a common purpose.

Hands have fingers, and those fingers bend, and bending results in clasping, and clasping is a hold that speaks volumes to each other – especially on date night – if we purpose to use our hands for holding and not scolding.

After 30 Years - Pick Your Battles – by Marcy Lytle

If you want to test out your communication skills in your marriage from time to time, just plan a day for cleaning out your garage. It's a sure-fire way to stir up more than dust. Garages become catchalls for everything from sports equipment, tools, games, projects that could have been, and home décor that someday might be. And somehow two people working together to decide what to toss, where to place things, and how to place them brings out the worst...

"Here, you can throw this away," I said, as I handed him a game of checkers (you know, the checkerboard rug with giant plastic pieces.)

"I'm not throwing that away," he snapped. "I'm going to play that." (I roll my eyes, stating that he hasn't played it in 20 years).

I'll organize this big tub over here with our lawn chairs, I think to myself, and mention it to him, as he starts a pile in the driveway of discards. Only, as soon as I get the chairs in the tub, he is behind me rearranging them to make room for his golf clubs.

"Dust these things off, first," he instructs me, as he sees me just placing some things back hurriedly, because I am getting hungry for lunch. I take a wet rag and start wiping, thinking this is going to be an all-day affair if I don't speed things along.

Does any of this sound familiar? Before too long, we are arguing over what is valuable to him/me and he's asking, "Where did this come from?" and "Are you really throwing away this?" and I'm tossing, hoping he won't notice this, and pointing to that particular area where he's placed his tools that's been there for decades, as I again roll my eyes at the pain they've become.

Eventually, a morning of togetherness reminiscing over fun finds on our garage shelves, turns into one of us going inside while the other one finishes, or we both learn to quit battling over a mug he wants to keep that says "Grand Canyon" on the side, and a box of Christmas items I want to keep that we might use "one year."

Is it really ***that*** important to wage a war over this stuff?

As we were cleaning, we came across a pile of games and jigsaw puzzles. It seems we did agree on tossing many of the games and most of the puzzles, as we both realized their time was over and gone. We also smiled at a couple of games, including a cool battery-operated train track that we could now play with our grandson, so it went back on the shelf. And I opened my eyes and shut my mouth when I saw how clean everything looked after he insisted on dusting before replacing. He was so gracious to pile the discards into the back of his pick-up to take to the dumpster next week, and fill up boxes to take to Salvation Army later that day. I felt grateful.

We finally, after our original skirmishes, decided to cease fire and enjoy the process, noting the end product – a clean garage – and feeling good about accomplishing a task together. So what

if an extra game stayed on the shelf? Did it really matter that he rearranged what I had just arranged, or did it just hurt my pride?

Any household task a married couple decides to tackle together can quickly turn into a power struggle, a blame game, or an instruction course on how-to, given by the one who thinks they know best. And something simple can morph into a complex event with words said, eyes rolled, and doors slammed – if we go into the task with our own agenda apart from him. The simple task then becomes a raging battle that we're determined to win because we're now backed into a corner with our boxing gloves on.

However, as in the case of the garage cleanout, wouldn't it be so much nicer if the only battle we picked was playing one of the games off the shelf when the task is done? Wouldn't that be a fun end to a hot chore? A nice relaxing time sharing a glass of cool refreshment while strategizing over our next move?

Pick your battles, but make sure they're mostly on a game board with pawns to move, rather than in your house with a spouse to spurn. And if you do, you'll find that he is way more likely to say "yes" next time you ask him to help you clean out your closet…or the game room…or the car…

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – Significant – by Rachel Critz

Significance,

A pretty big word.

It was the word for my volleyball tryouts I just experienced. We have a daily devotion we do and the word we as a team repeatedly got was *significance.*

You know how in school, you feel like you want to be the popular one? Or you want to be known by everyone? You want to be singled out and be your own person in everyone's eyes? You want to be *significant?*

Well, you may not achieve that status in the world, but **you have significance in God's eyes.** You are your own beautiful art piece in His eyes, since he created you with his own hands. He crafted you with his mind, his brilliant mind that he has.

Never believe the trap that…

- No one cares,
- You're not beautiful.
- You're not wanted.

I can tell you right now that those statements are lies, bitter words from Satan.

You are awed in God's eyes as well as the angels around you. Do not worry yourself in wondering if you are the "class clown" or "have the prettiest hair" in school or wherever you may go, because does that matter? No, it really doesn't. If you see a girl who is the most popular one, be kind to her even if she may make you feel insignificant. You are wanted, you are loved, and you are needed.

Needed?

Yes. You hold your own wonders and a special gift God has presented you with.

Over the weekend at a youth retreat called Encounter 15 that I attended, we were all given a word. My word was to discover where I fit in, in God's kingdom and in the world, with my gift. I was told I have the gift of exhortation, meaning: encouraging words. That is how I am significant in this world.

It took me 15 years to figure out where I fit in, how I am significant. And you know what? My gift may change as I grow older.

However, once we receive a word, we must pursue it and not stop until we see our lives changing into something significant.

In Song of Solomon 4:7 it says,

“You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you. “

That's God telling you that, that your life is perfectly formed.

Again I say, *significant.*

You are one of a kind, because God made you, in His own eyes.

Moving Forward - The Presence of Joy – by Pam Charro

Most children know Joy. She is so wonderful to have around. She is free, lighthearted, and fearless in sharing of herself, radiant, confident, and beautiful. She loves to make herself the center of attention and she is difficult to hold back. It seems natural to see her around certain people, particularly young ones who have not yet experienced much of life's hardships.

But Joy left my home when I was very young. She was not wanted, or, at least, it seemed that way. She could only take so much rejection; then she pretty much stopped coming around at all.

I used to believe that the natural default for most people was happiness, and I often wondered why I was not happy, even as a child.

Where did Joy go?

I have since come to believe that it is not necessarily natural to be Joy-full and happy, even though it often is for children. We seem to come into the world with a kind of Joy bubble around us, but it is only a matter of time before that bubble is popped and the sadness of hurts and disappointments seeps in. Loved ones die. People sin against us with no explanation or apology. And we let ourselves down with our own weaknesses and poor choices. If it is unpleasant, it can happen; and, when it does, Joy leaves if we don't know how to keep her around.

So how do we get her to come back? It takes time because she wants to be sure she won't be evicted again. Joy didn't leave overnight and she doesn't come back to stay without patience. But, once she is back, it is hard to get her to stay away.

The key is to practice her presence.

Practicing Joy involves kicking out sad, negative and self-defeating thoughts which have often become what we naturally fall back on when life is less than perfect. I have noticed that if I am not careful, I can start out a perfectly good day with negative, gloomy and fear-filled thoughts - and nothing has even gone wrong yet! But when I intentionally start out the day with Joy-filled thoughts, words and songs, it is nearly impossible for her to stay away. Reading God's word is a great way to do that, or just spending time thinking about how good my life is and how wonderful God is. There is always something to be happy about, even if life's circumstances are less than ideal, because thinking about who God is always brings a smile. All of these are great Joy fuel.

I also have to be very careful regarding what I watch on TV or listen to on the radio. Even sneaky little messages that others say don't affect them can be offensive to Joy. She is often quite sensitive and I have learned that if I expose my mind and heart to something that isn't positive, it is often more negative than it appears. Joy often leaves if I allow an even slightly "yucky" message in, so I look for music and programs that are intentionally positive.

Then I leave the house. What is the next thing I can do to keep Joy hanging around? It helps me to look for someone I can bless while I am out. It doesn't have to be a huge thing, maybe just a smile and a "Good morning!" or "I really like your earrings!" Helping others to feel good, from the heart, seems to keep Joy by my side. I have also found that when I encourage myself throughout the day, it is more natural for Joy to be there with me. Whenever I make a good

choice, I try to remember to tell myself, "You're doing a great job," or "I'm proud of you." It really has made a difference for me where Joy is concerned.

Joy and smiles go together like peanut butter and jelly. So when I make a habit of smiling a lot, Joy often shows up for no other real reason. Smiling is also usually contagious; it makes others smile more, too. And it just feels good.

Inviting Joy means practicing her. Look for the good, praise God, love others, and smile!

Let Joy out recklessly and unashamedly and she will never want to leave.

Bush Bean Blessings - Plug into Freshness by Tammy Morrison

There's an excitement that fills the air when a new school year rolls around. Sometimes it's nervous energy, but mostly it seems to be from the eagerness that we experience because the newness begins again.

By the time summer ends, most parents are usually ready to launch their kids back into the structured rhythm of school. And, as crazy as it sounds, most kids are even more ready for it than their parents, although they might not admit it.

Take a moment to stop and consider the refreshing freshness of a new school year--and what all that entails--when everything begins again. Ahhh...the newness of it all:

Fresh goals for a great new year
Fresh clothes and shoes
Fresh perspectives/outlooks/thoughts/attitudes/mindset
Fresh lessons and learning
Fresh approaches/engagement
Fresh friendships
Fresh classroom decorations
Fresh backpacks/lunchbags
Fresh school supplies
Fresh students/parents/teachers/staff/administration
Fresh buildings

As physically taxing and emotionally draining as the first week or so of school can be for everyone involved, it's still fresh. My goodness, no one's exhausted or spent at the beginning of the year. The only thing anyone's tired of is the long, hot summer, so everyone is open to the next new thing...SCHOOL!

It's not until several days, or in some cases several weeks, before most of us begin to lose that fresh enthusiasm. Our beginning-of-the-year excitement wanes just a little bit. And it usually happens so gradually that we're not even aware that our freshness has been sabotaged. By the time we reach this stage, we tend to exhibit reactionary behavior to anything we perceive as negative. This is often manifested in outbursts of frustration. Instead of purposefully maintaining a proactive approach to keeping things fresh, we have literally allowed ourselves and our energies to steadily decline. How do you boil a frog? Put it in a pot of cool water on a burner set to simmer.

Oh, what a wonderful world it would be if we were all as mindful of preserving our fresh perspective as we are of our cell phone maintenance. Imagine if we self-monitored our optimism and positivity with the same vigor that we actively monitor our phones. Check out the following declarations regarding cell phone treatment and compare these same measures to self-care:

~Almost all people hold their precious device close at hand. It is so dear to us that we keep it near our heart, if not in our hand (as if it were Velcroed there). If it's not in hand (literally), it's likely touching our body in some manner (front pocket, back pocket, dare I say...stuffed in upstairs underwear...sheesh). The point is that most people almost always keep their cell phone within reach.

~We "check" our phones every 2.5 seconds. Or so it seems. What on earth are we doing? Looking at the time. Making sure no one texted. Or wait...we've got to make sure no one called. Maybe there's a missed call. We swear we felt it ring or vibrate. Oops...gotta check it again to make sure we didn't miss anything. Hold on...there are notifications. We've just got to investigate those. Whew. You get my drift. Maybe the shoe doesn't fit. Or does it?

~Heaven forbid that our phone battery runs low. If it indicates anything below 87%, for Pete's sake, it must be charged. Now. CANNOT. LIVE. WITHOUT. CELL. PHONE. We are adamant about maintaining the battery life for continued usage.

~If, for some cockamamie reason, we find ourselves without a phone charger to re-juice this lifeline, we desperately grope for someone to loan us theirs. Some people are even frantic enough to ask complete strangers if they can borrow a charger. I have personally heard this request more times than I can count and--get this--I personally overheard a man offer a group of people--complete strangers--to pay anyone if they had a charger he could use for a few minutes! Think about that.

~People-watching is an extraordinary pastime. One of the most interesting places to people-watch has always been a hospital waiting room or the airport. Since the advent of cell phones, it's even more interesting because people are magnetically drawn to the electrical outlets like moths to a flame. It is quite the wonder to witness: clusters of people huddled together, waiting their turn for two little holes to maintain connection to "life." Unfortunately (although interesting and somewhat mesmerizing), I've seen people nearly come to blows and have heard some incredibly flavorful language, not fit for this article, because someone jumped the plug-in line.

As ludicrous as it seems to make such comparisons, I want to challenge you to ponder these observations. It is crucial to purposefully activate self-care. Exercise mindfulness in order to maintain quality of life (not necessarily cell phones, although, trust me, I love my cell phone as much as the next person). **We should all make strides to stay plugged in to freshness.** If we don't proactively self-monitor, our fresh perspective will subside. It's inevitable...it will happen, just as if we leave our cell phone off the charger. When we allow that, our battery will run low to the point of depletion, and it will take longer than necessary for a power reboost. Don't wait until it's too late. Stay plugged into freshness.

"Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new (fresh) every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.' The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him..."
Lamentations 3:21-25 (NIV)

Saddle Up - The Waiting Game – Melissa Critz

It's that time of year – the annual visit from the vet. Since we sold our trailer to help pay for our kids' college, the vet comes to our property to do the annual work on the horses. Dr. A and her assistant administer all the shots, clean their teeth which means filing them, and various other items.

Domingo had one of his typical tumors start budding on his eyelid about two weeks before Dr A. Therefore, Dr A, excised it and froze it with liquid nitrogen which is the typical treatment. The horses were given a 'goofy' shot so that they would be good boys while all this work transpired. Due to the sedative, the horses had to wait for an hour before eating their dinner. Therefore, I tied them up and headed in to make dinner.

Upon returning, I saw that they were back to normal and ready to have their pellets and hay. I have had Domingo react to his shots in the past so I knew that I needed to keep a close eye on him. He appeared well that evening.

The next day was a slightly different story.

My typical day starts with taking care of all the animals – the norm on any ranchette with a variety of animals – animals before humans! When I got to the horses, I noticed Domingo to be labored at his breathing. Yes, he had a fever. I administered bute (basically, horse Tylenol). I hosed him down with cool water for a good while and tied him in the shade by the trough. His fetlocks on all four legs (area just above the hoof) were quite swollen and he was stiff at the walk. Yes, he was reacting once again but this time it was more pronounced in his legs. Once the bute took effect, he was ready to go back to grazing.

Over the next few days, his chest swelled (this I expected, as this happens every time) due to the shots given at that location as well. He was also rather lame (this was unexpected). It took him a good two weeks to recover from this vet visit. It took MUCH patience and prayer, of course, to make it through this episode. I was concerned with this lameness but knew that this could happen due to the fact that he foundered last year – he is much more susceptible to this now unfortunately.

Times like this try my patience.

But I know that there are times where we just have to wait it out.

It takes patience… and trust… and prayer.

Domingo's lameness on his front right was most pronounced at the beginning but got better, rather slowly, by the second week. I decide to ride him at a walk. He did just fine on the soft ground and was still a bit tender on the rougher ground. Again – the waiting game – patience.

Okay riding partner, I am listening (although I would like to be RIDING and listening.)

There are times in life when things happen and there is absolutely nothing a person can do to make it better faster, at all, period. It's called the waiting game, which requires patience, trust, and prayer. I think part of this process also requires the person to realize

that she has NO control.

Who is in control? Well, God of course. He is always in the know.

Once the control issue is realized then we can turn the situation over to Him, and I do believe this is a constant process. When the problem at hand wraps itself around our brains and buries itself in our heads, we want to figure it out or stress over it.

RECOGNIZE that and give it to Him
KNOW that He is in control and will be resolved in His best timing.
SEEK His word.

Read these verses and soak them in:

Luke 8:15 *"… As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience."*
Romans 2:6-7 *He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life…*
Romans 8:24-25 *For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*
1 Timothy 1:16 *But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.*
Hebrews 6:11-12 *And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*

It's not in our strength that we can achieve the patience that is needed for such things in life where true sacrificial patience is needed. We must cling to Him and His promises and let His strength gird us up with the ability to wait on Him, knowing that His timing is perfect. We can then not just make it through the Waiting Game but gain more knowledge of who He is and grow in character that reflects Him. We can rest in knowing as well that He is our Father, we are His children, and He only wants the absolute best for us.

Patience, trust and prayer will help us with the Waiting Game.

Let the Saddle Partner show you all He has for you and let His love flow in you and lavish all over you.

YOU are His!

And He is your Father!

Amen!

Real Stories - My "Me" Mission – by Evelyn Hanson

"If you don't like my apples, honey, you don't have to shake my tree."

My 300 lb., braided hair, Pentecostal preacher momma instilled that mindset in me from childhood.

I learned early that I was a leader, not a follower.

I was the head and not the tail!

I was above and not beneath!

I worked diligently to follow her example.

However, one thing was missing in my quest to be like mom…my self-esteem. I never felt like I did anything quite good enough. I only saw myself as fat and ugly. "Hey, hey, hey…it's 'Fat Albert'," was the skinny, runt 8th grader's daily rant. Well, until the day I had enough, and this fat chick told him to stand up when the bus stopped, and I knocked him clear to the front of the bus…(he never bothered me again.)

It seemed as though my mother never let her weight get to her. But, it did to me. She was always helping others, no matter what they did to her. People used her and abused her, but she helped them anyway. Dad was always there loving and working right beside her.

For 35 years, I have been fortunate to minister God's grace to the indigent elderly and disabled in the long-term care profession. I often questioned why we didn't focus our attention on the affluent residents.

My mother's words ring in my ears to this day,

"Sweetheart, God didn't call me to those people."

To which I replied, "Well, I guess I will be buying underwear and cigarettes for the rest of my life."

And to this day, I work with the disadvantaged and discarded.

There are still days when I feel fat and ugly… and now old! But**, I don't have time to listen to my pathetic self-pity**. God has placed in me the ability to be a blessing to the lost and dying.

It is not only my duty, but also the love of my heart.

My "Me" Mission:

- Give myself a break. Even Jesus struggled in the wilderness with his own temptations before setting out on His mission.
- Be authentic. Avoid religious stereotypes. I talk to folks in a way that is natural for me – I don't copy someone else. Be myself.
- Be the best me I can be. This means my best attitude, ability, and action. Jesus Christ gave His best for me (John 3:16). In turn, I am called to give my best for Christ.

- Realize that true happiness is found in Jesus Christ.
- I have in my hands what I need.

God calls people in each generation – people like you and me, not just our grandmothers – to stand in the gap with Christ and bridge the separation between people and God where the grace of Christ needs to be made real.

God has put in our hands the keys of the kingdom – the power to bind or loose people (Matthew 16:19) by how we share or withhold the grace God has given us.

To a person in pain, the words “God loves you,” or “You are forgiven,” or a simple prayer, can be a Word from God.

To someone drowning in difficulty, the touch of a hand on the shoulder, the company of a friend, or an offer of help can represent the presence of God.

Decide your mission for you! Be active in your life. Too many people today are passive. Don't be afraid to speak up for your convictions. God has ***not*** given you the spirit of fear or inferiority! And don't worry if your friends and loved ones don't agree or fit in your religious box. Neither does God.

He specializes in "out of the box" relationships.

And he specializes in raising us up, out of self-pity, into the Apple of His Eye.

Evelyn Hanson is a pastor at Redeemed Outreach Center in Luling, Texas and has been a nursing home administrator for 35 years. She has also taught school and served on the Luling ISD School Board. She hopes to write a book called “My Silver Spoon was only Plastic…or Was It?” Evelyn is married, has 9 children, and 4 grandchildren. You can find out more about Evelyn at Linkedin.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Fear or Faith? – by Marcy Lytle

Is it faith that prompts us to keep our kids home for school because we believe that's the best thing for them, or is fear keeping us from sending them out in the darkness to be salt and light?

Is it faith behind our giving to the needy and to our local body, or are we afraid that if we don't give, we ourselves won't be blessed?

Is it faith that calls us to serve, volunteer, and show up for an outreach in the park among our fellow churchgoers, or is it fear that if we don't show up, "What will they think of us?"

Is it faith that sends us to our knees to pray over our children while they sleep at night, or is it fear of the dreadful night terrors that visit our homes, sending us into a panic?

Is it faith that calls to lead a group, teach a class, or even pastor a church, or is it fear that motivates us to work extra hard for that extra favor?

Is it faith that enables us to leap out in that venture, step over a hurdle, or believe for that miracle, or is it fear and trembling that pushes us forward, hoping we will make it big?

Is it faith that causes us to wake up at night, praying for that sick friend, the dying neighbor, or the wayward child, or is it fear that something awful is about to take place?

Is it faith that reminds us to pray for the lost, those who don't yet know Him, or is it fear that they might all die in their sin and go to hell?

Is it faith that leads us as we plan our weeks, our months, and our years of achieving this status, and purchasing that house, and accomplishing those goals, or is it fear that keeps us looking for the next secure move?

Is it faith that calls us higher, to believe for that which we cannot reach, to claim that for our family because we know it's ours, or is it fear that we might not please or be accepted by the ones we admire?

The bible says our faith can move mountains, and that without faith it is impossible to please God. But it also says that we are to cast our anxieties on him, to fear not because He is with us, and to do nothing out of fear.

These questions are worth thinking about, because although every one of those prayers and actions mentioned above are good things to pray for, and great moves to make, if our motivation is fear, these things may follow:

- We will still feel heavy after we've prayed.
- We will wonder if he heard us when we're through.
- We will be disappointed if what we asked for doesn't happen.
- We will gauge our worth on the outcome of our "faith."

Very often I ask myself what it is that's motivating me to pray, act, or give, and sometimes I realize it's not faith at all – it's that old monster of fear. And I have to remind myself that the relationship between God and me is not supposed to be one of fear and dread, but one of love and relationship – and rest.

Is it faith…or fear?

FRESH THYME - God on Trial – by Marcy Lytle

There's a movie out right now, one of those films that will be judged as being another cheesy Christian movie or not…called *War Room*. Just the title and the preview drew me in, because in the trailer we see an elderly woman in her closet, literally, praying a most powerful prayer. So of course I wanted to see the film, not knowing what else the movie was about…

There are no spoilers in this article, only a general synopsis, but there are thoughts that came out in the discussion between my husband and me, after the credits rolled. I suppose that one thing alone is the mark of a good movie…or is it? We both cried several times during the movie and the audience applauded at the end, because the story is about the power of prayer, and the power of obedience in prayer.

The movie *War Room* is mostly about a "perfect" family that's crumbling and a little old lady who prays for them and encourages the wife to pray as well, to "take back" her marriage that is in the middle of crisis. We immediately fall in love with the prayer lady because she is funny as much as she is a powerhouse of a prayer warrior. We're then drawn into the family's drama, a mom and dad who are busy making a living at the expense of integrity, and at the expense of spending time with their young daughter, who is a double-dutch jump rope champion. The story pulls at heart strings because the family represents many families we all know or have been a part of, sometimes with our own spouses.

Here's what we talked about after the movie was over. We both agreed the movie was absolutely awesome…and would be seen as such by many. But we also agreed that for those of us who have suffered through divorce, prayed endless hours for a loved one to be healed and they died, or have dealt with the same problem for years (although we prayed and had others pray with us), we might leave the movie feeling a bit disillusioned and condemned. We might ask these questions:

- If I pray an hour a week, fervently, will my outcome be like theirs?
- Did I fail in the area of prayer, because my life didn't end up wrapped with a neat bow, but instead fell apart?

In other words, when we pray, we often sit in the judge's seat, with God on trial. Here's what I mean:

God says to pray, to pray without ceasing, to pray effectively in faith without wavering, to believe in his goodness and mercy, and that our prayers will be heard and answered. So we do it, and the outcome isn't what we expect. And we react much like a tenant in an office building when the lease is signed, things are promised, and the landlord doesn't come through. We take the landlord to Small Claims Court.

God, did you make these claims about prayer?

Yes, I did, and I still do.

God, are you guilty of not coming through on your end of the promises?

I AM.

There's that answer that God gave way back in the Old Testament, when he was talking to Moses.

We can read that answer as an admission of guilt, or we can read that answer as we should be reading all answers to our prayers.

We are in a dangerous position when we sit in the judge's seat and place God on trial. I myself left that movie feeling sad, because I have friends and family members who have suffered through great loss…even though we all prayed, claimed, and believed. I wondered if we had prayed enough, if we had prayed long enough, and if we could have done more. And I found myself feeling a bit jealous of the family of actors on the screen. Their lives came together so neatly. But life isn't really like that. Or is it?

I AM.

God bellows that declaration out again, as I write this piece. He is the righteous judge, and no one else can take that chair, and we must be careful when we ask him to sit on trial, while we question him about his character.

I know that prayer works. But it doesn't work because we say the magic words, stay on our knees the allotted time, or shake our fist and claim that the keys to the kingdom are ours. It works because it's part of being obedient to the Father's directive to pray. It works because God said to pray and believe and to say to that mountain, "Be removed," and it will.

But sometimes…the mountain we're speaking to isn't the mountain that needs to be removed…*first.*

Do you have an unbelieving spouse who is causing you grief?

Did you lose someone in a most horrific way, and you're still stinging over the loss and now bitter?

Does your heart ache for healing for a friend or for yourself; and you've cried and prayed… only the healing hasn't come?

There's one part of the movie where the little old lady makes a confession, and if you go see the film, you'll want to listen closely.

Her confession involves an admission of disobedience.

I don't want to sit in the judge's seat, because there is only one Righteous Judge. It is I who was on trial for sin. And he already took care of that and set me free. I don't want to sit in the judge's seat and place God on trial, because I don't have all of the facts and figures, and I am limited by my finite mind and flesh, and he is all powerful, good, and holy. So I have no business judging Him.

The movie *War Room* did stir what I already know and have experienced in my life. Prayer is a privilege, an honor, and it's extremely powerful when we do it out of obedience and in faith in the One who hears us and does answer.

Sometimes he answers with a "Yes!" to our petition and we stand amazed at the miracle he gives us.

Sometimes he moves us out of the judge's seat and holds us in his lap while he says, "Wait and see," and asks us to trust him while he arranges amazing things for good.

And we then have a choice to believe…or become bitter…and place God back on trial.

The little old lady chose to obey and believe, and that's why she's the one we admire and hope to be like when we too become little old ladies, because she was an absolute joy to everyone she encountered. And because she totally believed in the One who asked her to pray…

FRESH THYME – Higher, Higher – by Marcy Lytle

He was jumping on the bed. We told him to stop.

Little sister climbs up behind him, and he disobeys.

"Slam!" His head comes down on her head, because he disobeyed and flipped anyway.

Crying ensued.

Kids were swinging back and forth.

We had warned, "Don't walk in front of someone swinging. You'll get hit."

He forgot. He walked in front. He got hit.

Sobbing started up.

She was swinging and holding on tight.

We said, "Don't let go!"

She got distracted and looked back, and let go.

"Wham!" Her head hit the ground, and we all panicked.

Screaming took place.

All of those things happened at camp recently, with Gideon, age 3 ½, and Ayla, age 2. Little kids get hurt, but I had forgotten how often they get hurt, and how miraculous it is that they grow up at all, with their heads intact.

I too get hurt in life, but not from jumping on the bed, walking in front of others, or letting go when I'm swinging back and forth on a swing. But I have gotten hurt for some of the above same reasons. And I've blamed others, or God, and not my own immaturity or lack of wisdom.

Jumping on the bed was a fun activity, so why wouldn't it be allowed? Why was I being so mean to ask him to stop? It was because I knew what could happen, and he didn't, and he needed to trust my word – as his authority. God is never about making us NOT enjoy life. But he is about protecting us from slamming our heads into others when we enjoy an activity at the expense of others. For example, maybe we enjoy playing on the edge of our emotions by indulging in a dirty novel from time to time, because it's just an escape, and no harm done. However, if we're not careful to close the book when emotions run amuck, our husbands may

be the ones who get hit hard with our judgment and accusations…and ultimately a wound that doesn't heal.

Walking away from the swing set was a simple activity, but because the warning had been forgotten, Gideon got hit in the ear from the feet of a girl still on the swing. And it hurt and stung. Bad. There are times when we will grow tired and weary of the same routine, like serving for years in a church, or giving of oneself to a cause over time, and we need to walk away to do something different. And we know there are folks still swinging nearby, still serving and giving, and yet we start complaining, blaming and gossiping to them – forgetting the harm we're causing – and the collision happens. One is sorry, and the other one is hurt.

Distraction in little kids is one of the main causes of injury. They don't think when they cross the street, they get up and run after a dog not realizing he's headed for the woods, or they sit right on top of their plate of food because they're playing and not thinking. We all get distracted. Ayla looked and pointed, and let go of the swing, and off she went – right on top of her head. Distraction among Christians is common, as well, when we're not focused on the activity of the moment. I've gotten distracted by what others are doing or not doing, by the why's of life and the disappointment of hopes unfulfilled, and I've let go of my trust just for a split moment – and I've fallen. I've hit the ground hard, and needed to be scooped up and held, until the pain from the landing subsides.

You see, we aren't that much different than our kids.

It's just that instead of a swing set or a bed, we're playing on the game board of life, and we still have to listen, obey, remember, and focus.

And this requires staying in the Word.

We have a loving God who knows the best places to jump, the way to exit and rest for a while without hurting or causing hurt, and He enables to hold on when he wants to swing us with a big push – up where we can almost see above the trees – and smile as we exclaim,

"Higher, higher!"

Gideon and Ayla won't soon forget the pain; and that pain will be the memory that causes them to obey, remember, and focus next time they're on the playground.

And they will soon learn how to play safely and yet freely, as they enjoy every piece of the playground equipment.

And we too learn from our pain, and our pain sets us free, free to enjoy all that He has for us, as well!

FRESH THYME - Me. Prejudiced? – by Marcy Lytle

I grew up in Austin, Texas and went to an integrated high school, and I feel like I don't discriminate against people because of their ethnicity. I've always been so proud of that fact, and happy that my kids also were raised in a school where all races were present, and they too never noticed color first. This has made me quite happy with myself and my family.

However, one definition of the word prejudice is a "feeling, favorable or unfavorable, toward a person or thing, prior to, or not based on, actual experience."

And by that definition, I've come to realize that I'm still prejudiced in many areas, and I bet a lot of us are. I was walking with a friend recently, and we were passing by a few stores which I love – clothing shops. She made the comment, "Why do some of these stores carry nothing but *cheap* stuff?" and she said a bit more, but that's all I heard. I knew she was on a higher status economically than I was, and her comment sounded condescending, in my opinion. I stayed quiet, but I wished I had told her that I shop in those stores and love what I buy there. I felt like she was prejudice and didn't really know what she was talking about. But then, I too was judging her as being haughty.

It works both ways…in so many areas:

Weight. It seems prevalent that many who are fit and thin (and quite proud of it) look at those who are overweight and automatically assume these folks overeat, have no discipline, and are quite frankly, slobs. And I suppose it goes the other way as well, where those who are extremely skinny are talked about and whispered about, stating, "She must be anorexic." But then we go further. We aren't drawn to those that we judge, because we don't feel that we are like them. Therefore, we aren't really interested in associating with them. That's being prejudiced.

Economic status. Those of us that live in medium-income houses and drive regular cars, without realizing it, can find ourselves only inviting and hanging out with those of our same "level," but not really being comfortable in the homes of those who have more than we do – because we feel jealous. And those with meager means, or who have suffered a great loss, feel totally uneasy sitting at the table of those who have "it all" because of comments they hear about travels, art pieces, etc. , none of which they have the money to experience or purchase. There's some prejudice there.

Age. In our society, getting old is taboo, especially "looking" old. And hanging out with the elderly for pleasure, to learn wisdom, or to just honor the aged is non-existent in many areas of our culture. The aged are seen as having nothing to offer, being irrelevant to current life, and not "fun." Therefore, as folks get older, the younger crowd separates, and both are missing great blessings! And often, the aged and elderly begin to criticize and point fingers and put down the young, so why would they want to hang out? Isn't there some prejudice going on, here?

These are just three areas where I feel I have myself have made unfavorable assumptions towards others prior to knowing the truth, not based on anything but my own thoughts of self-

worth, and without giving myself the chance to experience differences, learning to thrive around them.

- We don't want others judging us for what we eat or don't eat, so why do we do that to them?
- We sure don't want to feel uncomfortable in our blessings that surround us, so why do we allow ourselves discomfort in the surroundings of others?
- We are all going to age and there will always be younger ones around, so why can't we bridge the gap with a little bit of honor?

Prejudice at its root is really based on dishonor. When we dishonor another person because of what we see with our eyes, think with our minds, or judge in our hearts, we're deeming another human that God created in his image to be below us…or above us…and neither is healthy or wise.

I don't think I'm a person full of prejudice in the skin department, but I've got some maturing to do in other areas, when it comes to relationships with people around me.

After all, when I'm standing in line at the store waiting my turn to be checked out, I don't want to look at her and shake my head at what's in her cart, judge her as being self-absorbed by the amount of work obviously done on her face, or turn the other way because she's a young know-it-all who wouldn't possibly want to talk to me.

Preconceived ideas are not ever good ones. The good ideas we have are those that are based on His word and what he says about our neighbor. We are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And most of us love ourselves a heck of a lot…

Me, prejudiced? Yes, I am at times. And the first step is admitting I have a problem.

The Silent Door

I pass by
Chores unending
The door stays shut
The signal that he has moved on

I pause
My eyes water
Memories of childhood
Of the door wide open
Music blaring
Lights flooding the hall
Sweaty baseball clothes

Are no longer

This manchild
Has moved on
To bigger things
To life

I linger just a bit longer
Hoping that sweet one will come tumbling out in my arms
Yes, I know...
He is learning and growing beyond our care

The heart aches for a bit now and then
But what such glorious thoughts of a life that once was housed 24/7, now is out serving Him
Following His calling
Learning to hear Him solely
Answering to Him with all his heart

Truly this is what a parent seeks to attain
But pain of what once was does linger
But for only a bit

My son...pride swells daily for you
For who you are in Him
For who you are becoming
For the love you have for others

My love is now complete

Go and follow Him

I love you, son

FRESH THYME -Train Derailed – by Marcy Lytle

Oh, the way the heart and mind maneuver in the course of one day's time…

Have you ever loved and despised someone all within 24 hours? You wake up thinking highly of her, giving thanks for this person, and then by the time the sun sets, you're sitting with thoughts of disappointment, anger, and judgment at the same person you just adored a little while ago?

Have you ever been completely grateful for your life, your job, your blessings…only to find yourself discontented and restless, wishing for something other than what you've got, and despising the very blessings you've been given…all in a matter of a few hours?

Have you even opened your eyes, giving praise to the One you adore, you love, you need more than life itself, and then because of circumstances or thoughts or just for no reason at all, you find yourself by evening's end shaking a fist at Him for that thing you prayed for and didn't receive?

We are quite a piece of work, aren't we?

The heart and the mind are like little train cars on a track, similar to the ones the kids play with. If they're set correctly on the track, in alignment with the grooves beneath them, when the switch is clicked "on," they run smoothly in one direction to their desired destination – the little train station up ahead where they come to a stop for the night and rest peacefully. However, if the mind train has even one wheel off track, or the heart skips a beat because the energy source is getting low, the train won't get very far before falling completely off the track! And oh, the frustration that sets in when the little kid tries to set it back on track, finally slapping the train across the room, stating it's a "dumb" toy – when an hour before he was enthralled with his "cool" gift.

I ran across Jeremiah 17 as I woke up this morning, having had my own heart and mind derail yesterday. Verses 9 and 10 say this, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I, the LORD, search the heart and examine the mind…" Yes, that's how I felt last night. My loving heart had turned sour and the thoughts in my mind certainly needed examination!

I continued to read the rest of Jeremiah 17 and saw that it ended with a stern reminder to rest. The verses mentioned the Sabbath day and how great blessings will come to the city for those who rest from their labor. Interesting…

So what does that have to do with me? How do those verses relate to the train derailment in my own heart and mind, the days when I wake up praising and go to bed moaning?

I was tired. I had overfilled my day. I worked non-stop for 12 hours, by choice, not by necessity, so that I could "get things done," mark off my list, and accomplish more than I needed to, because I was determined to do it all. And my heart and mind suffered the consequences.

My battery had run low. My wheels slid off the track and I crashed and burned.

When my daughter's little boy plays with his train set at our house, he is so thrilled and all smiles when he gets it on the track correctly and around it goes, and he claps his hands. But he often has trouble setting the train on its course, because it requires the skill of an adult hand, one who knows how to line up the wheels and insert a new battery. He asks, and of course we help, and when he receives it – off the train goes again – steady and straight.

We are going to get tired. We are going to run down. There will be years of drought (like these verses also mention). And there are days when we might derail simply because we've run out of steam.

But there are two things I learned from reading this chapter:

- The good God that we serve is faithful to sit down, heal our hearts, restore our minds, and carefully and skillfully set us back on track.

- One way to keep ourselves from derailing is to rest when it's time to rest, when the station's up ahead beckoning us to stop and unload (verse 21).

We all have days where we think, "What just happened to me?" We go from bliss to being burdened, happy to hating, and joyful to judgmental in a moment's time.

However, we don't have to sink into the pit of despair and stay there. His loving eyes see when we're about to give up our course, and he's sitting faithfully nearby if we just call out his name and say, "Father, I need help. I can't seem to make this work."

And he gently checks us out, aligns our wheels, instructs in his life-giving ways, and sets us back on course, with the joyful whistle blowing once again…

A BUNDLE OF

THYME

October 2015

TIPS

The Dressing - All about that Plaid – by Marcy Lytle

I LOVE plaid, but only if it's worn so that I don't look like I've just emerged from a barn (although I know that can be pretty, sometimes, too!). This fall season, plaid is everywhere, showing up in lots of places in the fabrics we wear. It doesn't just have to be a simple plaid shirt, tucked into a pair of jeans. That's super cute. But it can be so much more! Let us share with you some ideas of wearing plaid proudly and loudly, in beautiful colors of the fall season…

On your legs – Look at these super cute tights, worn under a denim skirt and tucked into some awesome booties. These sweater tights are from Urban Outfitters and come in two different color combos. I love this berry and navy color, don't you?

In your hand – Modcloth has this super cute plaid journal to carry with you this season, to record all of your lists, notes, and reminders! It includes 150 pages and is a size that will fit in your purse to have with you always, wherever you go! What a great idea for a Christmas gift, too!

Over your jeans – What about a pretty sharkbite hem tunic in plaid this fall? This one from New York & Company is so cute over jeans and heeled boots. It can be worn open as a jacket or buttoned up, and you can add a turtleneck underneath for warmth (turtlenecks are in this season, too!).

Tucked into your jeans – The colors on this shirt are just beautiful! This pocketed button up shirt is from Maurice's and is a pretty choice for the season. It's easy to add a cardigan, a jacket, or a pullover sweater. Plaid shirts can be dressed up or down, depending on your mood!

Around your waist – This plaid skirt from Old Navy is so cute, especially with that tee tucked in, and those peep-toed shoes on the bottom. From head to toe, this outfit speaks fall, and the skirt looks so comfy and flowing! (It has an elastic waist!)

On your feet – I think these are so cute for fall – and would be so cute with a short skirt or peeking out from under jeans. They are a new take on the penny loafer with a thicker sole! This pair is from Target, or shop around for your own shoes with a bit of plaid on top!

On the bottom – The mid-rise ankle pants from Old Navy in a pretty red plaid look comfy and inviting for the new season. (They come in a green plaid too!). Pair these with a solid sweater or long tunic, a pair of loafers, and you're good to go!

Plaid is a staple, a classic, and something you've worn since elementary school, but it doesn't have to be boring and old-school! Shop around and find that plaid piece that suits your fancy and wear it out this season, around town, and enjoy!

Seven for You - It's Fallen! – by Marcy Lytle

…and I can't pick it up!

I realized a long time ago that gravity is not our friend, when it comes to skin and so much more. Time takes its toll as well, and pretty soon all that was up, perky, tight, and poufy is now limp, dragging, sagging, and well…fallen! Maybe you feel the same and are wondering how to get a lift in all of the areas that are being pulled down by age and time.

Here are some hints on how to pick up that which has fallen…

Eyelids – Those taut eyelids of youth aren't mine anymore, and they need a bit of a lift, but I'm not willing to fork out money and effort to undergo some sort of "procedure." However, I have found that spreading a bit of white or off-white shadow just under the eyebrow and in the corners of my eyelids gives light back to my skin, and creates the illusion of a lift!

Bra straps – For some of us who are heavy on top, the bra straps start to slip off our shoulders and fall right off, as we age. There are these things called Happy Straps that work wonders for pulling the straps back to their position, and giving us a frontal lift as well. And they come in four colors – so you can choose the one to match your *underneaths* for the day!

Skin – It starts to hang loose from our bones, and it's not a pretty sight, is it? I only have an idea for the face (not the arms) and it's called "face food." I love it so much because I can actually feel it tighten my skin after I smooth it on my entire face. It also smells really good (I have the cucumber spearmint.)

Hair – Menopause and aging does a number atop our heads, as well as around our waists! Hair gets thinner and just falls too flat, and we feel frumpy and less bouncy than usual. One thing I've found to help get that lift back into my hair is when blow-drying, I gently pull up a section on top of my head and blow dry the roots. Sometimes I spray a bit of hairspray at the roots, and this helps lift the hair so that it doesn't lay so flat anymore!

Knees – Have you taken a look at your knees as you age? They're falling south! But instead of crying over fallen knees, consider wearing tights this fall – pretty colors that look great underneath your shorter skirts that hit above the knees. I'm not going back to wearing pantyhose, but I will don a pair of patterned or solid tights!

Lips – Our puffy, pouty lips that we had when we were young-er start to fall into narrow thin lines, and I've found a great lip treatment by Sally Hansen that tingles and plumps your lips! It glides on smoothly, and you can find it online or at the drugstore.

Feet – The once cushiony balls of my feet are now compressed and all I feel when I wear heels is pain because it's bone against asphalt when I walk! However, I enjoy heels, especially in the fall season, under jeans. There's one particular heel that's not too high that is super comfy, and I actually wear my booties with type heel all day long, with no pain!

I'm not completely fallen, thank goodness. But the falling process starts to show up too soon, in my opinion. There are all sorts of tricks to defying gravity and the effects of aging that require

big bucks and scary outcomes. But there are also ways to get by with a little help that we find along the way…

What ways have you found to “pick it up?”

Selah's Style - My Own Room – by Selah Irwin

For October, I am taking a little detour from fashion to show you something different.

Along with my love of clothes, I also love to decorate.

My family moved to a new home and I finally got my own room.

It is awesome! Let me show you around.

I decided to devote pretty much half of my room to the American Girl Doll. We bought a huge closet and turned it into a dollhouse. In it there is a sooooo cute red kitchen and the most adorable little bed. The rest of the closet is used to store my other toys.

The doors to the closet are mirrors so I can use them to practice mad dance skills and karaoke. There is also more storage in the hanging cabinets. Check out my rug!

In case I am feeling artistic and decide to make a masterpiece, we put together a desk out of inexpensive parts from Ikea.

Here is my beautiful bed. We painted a piece of metal gate the color white and hung it on the wall for a headboard. The cheery blanket of choice and pillows were purchased from Target.

We found this vintage metal cart at a flea market to use as a night stand. We threw some ribbon and pom poms on an old lampshade to make it look more like me.

I am so joyful about my room. I am glad i got to share it with you!

The Fearless Kitchen - Meal Planning 101 – by Christina Vetter

I can't even count how many people have asked me how I manage to plan our meals to a T every week. And I do. I plan what we're going to eat for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and even snacks. I know it may sound a little like over kill, but it has saved me so much time, money, and stress come meal time. As with many great habits, it started out of necessity…

It was a particularly tight financial season in our marriage when I started. Our budget didn't allow for any groceries that weren't completely necessary. No fun splurges, no spur of the moment craving satisfactions, nothing extra. We could only afford to buy what we absolutely had to eat. This forced me to plan ahead. I had to plan out every ingredient we needed for every single meal, write it down, and buy only that. Praise God we are on the other side of such an insanely difficult financial situation, but I have kept the habit going. Truthfully, I don't even know how I would grocery shop without it.

To the meal planning novice, I know the opposite seems true. I know meal planning sounds time consuming, nitpicky, and difficult. But with these guidelines and some practice, not only is it possible, it makes meal time much easier. Here's how to get started:

1) **Get a cute notepad**. I know it sounds ridiculous (and no, it isn't vital to the process) but it makes me happier to sit down with a cute design on my paper than a half crumpled piece of scratch paper. You can find some really cute ones at Walmart for $0.88! A chalk board or dry erase board is very helpful, as well.
2) **Set a budget.** This part is crucial. You can plan every morsel you put in your mouth, but you need to know what league of meals you're fiscally able to play in. For example, if you only have $30 dollars to feed a family of four for a week, Veal Scappolini, Salmon en Croute, and Filet Mignon may have to wait for a special occasion.
3) **Count your meals**. How many dinners are you going to need until you go grocery shopping again? How many lunches, breakfasts, etc.? *Word to the wise:* it's easier to go every week when you're meal planning. Break it down even further by looking at your family's schedule. How many nights are you going to need a dinner that can be thrown together in a hurry? How many breakfasts or lunches need to be grab-and-go?
4) **Open your pantry**. Once you're ready, survey your house as to what ingredients you already have. I start with proteins. It's easier to think of meal ideas when I know what main ingredient I'm dealing with. For your first couple attempts at meal planning, you may need to write them down to organize your thoughts. Repeat with starches, vegetables, that random can of chicken broth in the back of your pantry, etc. *What can you make with what you already have?*
5) **Think with your stomach**. This part can be time consuming. Once you've exhausted the options in your pantry, think of what meals you'll want during the week. Some ways to jog your creativity are to ask your family members what they would like, look through cookbooks, look at your favorite food websites (*Cooking Light, Bon Appetit, A Bundle of Thyme*, just to name a few), or grab a shiny new food magazine. One of the things I do most often is try to think what I would order if I was at a restaurant and research how to duplicate it. That usually proves to be the most effective.

6) **Multi-task.** Write down meals you're going to make, one at a time. As you do, write down the ingredients you need to make that meal on your shopping list. For example, I'll decide that I want to make Spaghetti and Meatballs one day this week. On my menu board (yes, I have a chalkboard hanging in my kitchen) I'll write "Spaghetti and Meatballs" under the Dinner category, and immediately write down what ingredients I need to make it on my blue chevron printed shopping list. This will keep you organized and makes sure you don't find yourself having to make a HEB trip every other day.
7) **Mass produce.** This is for those families, including myself, that may be on a more limited budget. To have a delicious arrangement of meals throughout the week, you'll probably have to make a lot of it from scratch. Buying little or no pre-sliced, pre-cooked, or "heat and serve" items will save you tons but will cost a little time. Every Sunday I make breakfast and lunch for the week. For example, I'll make a dozen muffins for the family to munch for breakfast and a double portion of sausage and pepper hoagies for my husband to take to work for lunch. This eliminates eating out when work or school are reeling you back in.
8) **Practice.** I'll admit I can do this process start to finish during one of my 6 month old baby's 30 minute naps. But I have been doing this for over three years now. Give yourself time to get fast at it. For the first couple times, set aside a good hour or more to *do it right.* Even if you have to do it after the kids go to sleep or during Saturday morning cartoons, I promise it's worth it.

For many of you this may seem overwhelming. And I'll be honest, for the first couple weeks you may feel like you're *snailing* your way through it. But rest assured, if you stick with it you will get faster at it, and it will get easier. The time it takes is worth the stress and money it saves throughout the week. Check out some dinner options below for a few freebees. I believe in you! You can do it! Happy planning, and happy eating!

Buffalo Chicken Pizza **Difficulty:**
Serves 2-4

Usually I'm a pizza naturalist in that I don't get too carried away with toppings. However, this recipe really hits home. The flavors really go great together. The premade crusts make for a fast dinner to throw together, but of course homemade crust is just perfect as well.

Ingredients:
2 large premade pizza crusts
3 C shredded mozzarella cheese
¼ C buffalo sauce
¾ C ranch or blue cheese dressing
½ medium red onion, sliced thin
1 large chicken breast, cooked and sliced very thin

Directions:
-Preheat oven to 450 F (or per crust instructions)

-In a small bowl, combine buffalo sauce and ranch dressing together. Spread desired amount of sauce on each crust.
-Divide cheese in two and sprinkle evenly across both pizzas. Add chicken breast and red onion on top of cheese.
-Bake 10-12 minutes (or per crust instructions) or until cheese is melted.
-Allow to cool for 5 minutes before slicing and serving.

Dijon Chicken over Egg Noodles **Difficulty:**
Serves 2

Dijon chicken is one of my favorite meals to make for company or even a weeknight. It's easy to double or triple depending on how many you need to feed, but doesn't require logging away long hours or a million dishes to do so. The white wine flavor in the Dijon mustard is an absolute must for this recipe. Regular mustard or any other substitute will not get the desired flavor.

Ingredients:
2 medium chicken breasts
2 Tbsp butter
½ small onion, small diced
½ C sliced mushrooms
1 T flour
1 C chicken broth
3 Tbsp Dijon mustard
½ C peas
1 tsp fresh parsley
Salt and black pepper as needed
¼ lb egg noodles

Directions:
-In a tall sided skillet, cook chicken thoroughly. Set aside and keep warm.
-In the same pan, add butter, onions, and mushrooms and sweat together.
-Once onions are translucent and mushrooms have released their moisture, add flour and stir together. Continue stirring constantly for about 3 minutes to allow flour taste to cook out.
-Slowly stir in chicken broth and bring it up to a simmer. Stirring occasionally, allow to simmer for three to five minutes, or until liquid has thickened.
-Add mustard and peas to sauce. Simmer until peas are warmed through.
-Return chicken to pan and turn to coat with sauce.
-Add parsley, salt, and black pepper to pan according to taste.
-Meanwhile, cook egg noodles according to package directions. Season with salt and divide between two plates.
-Top noodles with chicken and sauce and serve immediately.

Oven “Fried” Chicken Tenders **Difficulty:**
Serves 4

The true Southern girl that I am, fried chicken tenders are my absolute favorite go-to indulgence. (Thank you, Golden Chick). This however is not conducive to my post baby regiment, so I had to come up with something different. Thanks to the wonderful Japanese bread crumbs, Panko, my dreams of healthy chicken tenders came true. Thankfully, these bread crumbs are becoming more and more popular, and are widely available at most supermarkets.

Ingredients:
2lb chicken tenders
2 C buttermilk
2 C Panko bread crumbs
1 C grated mozzarella cheese
1 tsp paprika
Salt and black pepper

Directions:
- In a gallon size ziplock bag, place chicken tenders in buttermilk. More or less buttermilk may be needed depending on the size of the tenders. Just make sure tenders are coated. Allow to soak for 30 minutes to an hour in the refrigerator.
-Preheat oven to 400 F.
-Meanwhile, in a separate Gallon ziplock, mix bread crumbs, cheese, paprika, and generous amounts of salt and black pepper together.
-Remove chicken from buttermilk, shaking off any excess liquid, and add to bread crumb mixture.
-Seal bag and shake until all chicken is coated.
-Remove chicken pieces and place on parchment paper lined cookie sheets.
-Bake for 20-30 minutes, or until chicken is cooked thoroughly (165 F internal temperature at the thickest part).
-Serve with ketchup, honey mustard, or desired dipping sauce.

Mexican Shredded Pork Tacos **Difficulty:**
Serves 6-8

This pork is one of the recipes that I’m most proud of. I always dreamed of duplicating the street tacos sold in so many wonderful restaurants and I think I’ve finally got it. I’ll admit this recipe isn’t necessarily quick to throw together. If you want to make this a quick dinner, you’ll need to make the pork ahead of time. But, it freezes very well, so go ahead and make a large quantity. That way you can just grab it out of the freezer whenever you’re ready.

Ingredients:

Pork

5 lb pork shoulder or dump roast
3Tbsp chili powder
1 ½ Tbsp paprika
2 tsp black pepper
2 Tbsp garlic powder
1 ½ Tbsp salt

Sauce

1 ½ oz (about 5) dried chili pasilla
2 C chicken broth
4 large cloves garlic
1 C pork drippings
1 tsp cayenne pepper, double if spicy is desired
Salt and black pepper to taste

Taco Assembly

16 flour or corn tortillas, whichever you prefer
3 avocados, sliced thin
1 large red onion, diced small
3 limes, wedged

Directions:

Pork

-Preheat oven to 275 F.
-Meanwhile, mix seasonings together in a small bowl, and generously rub all sides of the pork with mixture. Double amounts if needed.
-Place seasoned pork in a shallow baking dish (a 9x13 works well) fat side up.
-Cover with foil and bake until pork easily falls apart, about 5-6 hours depending on the fat content.
-Remove from oven, reserve 1 C of drippings, discard remaining.
-Using two forks, pull pork apart to shred.
-Cover pork back up, turn off oven, and place in warm oven until sauce is ready.

Sauce

-Remove stems seeds from chilies, and place them in a medium sauce pot.
-Add garlic and chicken broth to pot and over medium high heat, bring up to a boil. Turn heat down and allow sauce to simmer for 15 minutes.
-Puree sauce together.
-With a fine sieve, strain sauce into a bowl to separate liquid from pepper pulp. Discard pulp.
-Add cayenne pepper, salt and black pepper to liquid.
-Add sauce to pork, mix together, and adjust seasonings as needed.

Assembly

-Fill tortillas with pork and top with sliced avocados, diced red onions, and a generous amount of lime juice. Serve immediately.

Tried and True – Wait! Keep It! By Marcy Lytle

There are so many things we toss in the trash that we can use for a great purpose! I'm one who doesn't like clutter, so I'm not talking about saving every piece of paper and string piled high in a closet. I am talking about, however, a few things that are really useful to have around instead of getting rid of them. You might be surprised, and decide to hang on to a few of them yourself!

Bacon grease. Let it harden, then scoop into a small container and keep it. I just saw an episode of a cooking show where Ree Drummond used bacon grease in her fresh spinach dish! It looks amazing, and I can't wait to try it. So next time you fry up some bacon, don't toss out the grease – keep it!

Newspaper bags. You know those clear plastic bags your newspaper arrives in? If you take a few and store them for your next trip, they make great shoe bags for keeping your shoes off your nice clean clothes in the suitcase! So next time you unroll your newspaper to read, don't toss out the bag it came in – keep it!

Mason jars. Maybe you have a jar of jelly or jam and it's all used up. These jars are great for mixing salad dressings and keeping them in the fridge. Just place in your ingredients for your favorite dressing, say it's cumin lime dressing, whisk and then put on the lid and shake. So next time you're scraping the bottom of the jar, don't put it in the recycle bin – keep it!

Large purchase bags. Maybe you've purchased some large items and arrive home with them all in a huge shopping bag. These are great to fold and store in the closet for when you do a clean out from one season to the next. Fold and place your discards in the large bag and you're ready to head out to your local drop-off spot to donate them! They hold a lot! So next time you're unpacking your purchases, fold and store the big bag – keep it!

Newspaper. It's getting close to Christmas and that means lots of wrapping. If the budget is tight, why not start now by saving your newspapers for wrapping? Use a red marker for the "to" and "from" and these will look pretty under your tree – black and white and red. So when you're finished reading the daily news, place the paper in a basket and you'll have a pile of wrap in no time – keep it!

Towels. We have towels that just unravel after years of use and I've been tempted many times to throw them away. However, my husband likes to fold them and keep a few in the garage for car work, water spills, washing the car, etc. This way, we're not using our good towels for messy jobs. So next time you spot a threadbare towel - keep it!

Beach buckets. Summer's over and those buckets have been cleaned and stored in the garage, and maybe you know next year the kids will be too old to play with them. These make great lunch holders for indoor picnics – which are great when the weather turns cold. Place individual lunches in each bucket, or fill one bucket with chips, one with slider size sandwiches, and one with cookies – and let each one serve himself! What a fun idea – keep the buckets!

Picture frames. These seem to collect and multiply over the years and it's so tempting to set them out to get rid of them in our next garage sale. But what if…you use them as individual

placeholders for your next dinner party, or placed in the center of your Thanksgiving Feast with the menu printed up and framed, or spelled the name of your next birthday star with their initials – one in each frame! There are endless uses for old frames, even if they don't match each other – keep them!

Tree branches. You've trimmed the trees, you've cut the branches, and they're piled up by the curb awaiting pickup. But wait! Go grab a pretty one full of leaves and bring it inside and place in a large clear vase for winter décor! Seriously, it's pretty! So next time you're pruning away, don't toss every branch – keep one!

Scarves. Sometimes I have too many of these and I know I won't wear half of them, so I'm tempted to toss them in the discard bag. However, did you know scarves can be great wrapping "paper?" Take your odd-shaped gift and place in the center of a square scarf and bring the four corners up and tie in knots. Or if it's a rectangular scarf, use it to wrap boxes, and just pull around the box, fold and tie with a fat ribbon. Don't toss those old scarves – keep them!

What things are you about to throw away that you could keep and repurpose for something useful? Don't just keep things to be keeping them, but think of cool ways to reuse, and share with us your own ideas! We'd love to share with our readers!

HOME

Practical Parenting – Why We Celebrate – by Mandy Major

October 31st for me, as a child, meant blacking out our windows with blankets and black paper.

Hiding.
Avoiding.
Ignoring.

As the years went on, “alternative” Halloween events started popping up on our radar. Harvest parties, trunk or treat, and fall carnivals, events hosted by churches where kids were encouraged to dress up like bible characters. Picture the scene with me: Moses fishing for candy, Queen Esther playing ring toss, John and Matthew standing in line for popcorn...

Does this seem odd to anyone else?
Doesn't this seem to miss the point?

While we were at church dressed up as Queen Esther, playing ring toss... the people from the neighborhood were walking right past our front door. I can't seem to picture Jesus and his disciples playing ring toss while a world of children walk the streets.

What an opportunity my family missed all those years!

Matthew 22:39 says the second greatest commandment (after loving God!) is to love your neighbor as yourself. I find it is easier to love my neighbors genuinely when I know who they are, when I enter into their world, and see their lives. It starts with knowing their names!

So many Christians, like my family growing up, miss an amazing opportunity every time October 31st rolls around. This is the one night of the year your neighbors come out of hiding. Front doors are open, and people are out!

Thinking back to Blake’s and my first Halloween after we had kids, I remember being amazed at the street coming alive. Neighbors we'd never met were out on their front porches! Caleb, almost 1, was a caterpillar and crawled around on the porch as we passed out whatever I could grab. After we ran out of treats, Blake and I walked up and down our block meeting and chatting with our neighbors.

**I went to sleep that night grieved over all the Halloweens I'd spent hiding,
instead of being the light in the neighborhood!**

That night changed Halloween for us. We now love Halloween! I do not love all of the candy, or some of the aspects of Halloween, but I love seeing my neighborhood come alive. Walking up and down my street meeting neighbors, hearing their stories, inviting them to come rest in my front yard and eat chili while the kids run…

We have been in the business of meeting our neighbors on purpose, every year since Caleb was a crawling caterpillar. This year I'm making a map and filling in the names, and as many other details as I can learn, of every single person on my entire block!

The deepest desires of our hearts are:

To be known.
To be loved.
To love God.
To love others.

This is what life boils down to. This is what matters in the end.

So instead of hiding when October 31st rolls around, we go out and walk our streets with purpose.

Life as I Know It – The New Norm – by Erica Simmons

Revelations: Lessons, or God moments, that are so profound that I can no longer live my life as I did before I experienced the revelation, lesson, or God moment. These "Life as I know It" parenting moments have been the basis of my articles every month.

This month's life changing moment began months ago when I began to notice the fruit of honoring these whispers God was giving to me. I was sitting in a movie theatre watching the movie *War Room* when the God-inspired impact of **surrendering my burdens to my Heavenly Father and hitting my figurative knees** in prayer hit me.

You see, writing this article began to expose the huge flaws in how I was parenting my children.

There will always be things I cannot change. I can't change the fact that I am parenting my boys without their father. I cannot change the hole or impact that has on them. What I can do is turn every fear, doubt, worry and concern, (including those that may be the result of my own actions) over to someone who loves them more than I ever will and who has a perfect plan for their lives. I can honor the role of being their parent, single or otherwise, by surrounding them in prayer.

The following is a text stream between my son Jordan and me, after I got a call from his teacher.

Jo: I guess you are mad.

Me: Not at all.

Jo: Are you disappointed?

Me: No baby, you are growing and learning. You have to find your way and be willing to live with the consequences, good or bad.

Jo: What does that mean?

I did not reply, but it means that as his parent, **I am to war for my son, not with him.**

Writing this article helped me realize that ***I,*** no matter how much, preaching, pleading, yelling or deal making, cannot change my children. On the other hand, no one can stop the power of God when I do my warring in prayer.

This is the simplest yet hardest truth I have learned as a parent.

From the moment they are born, I am doing, taking care of them, and providing for them. But there is a line that ends the things I am able to do and begins the things that ONLY God can do.

And. It. Works!

The more time I spend praying for my children the more I see the work of God in their lives for the things I am in prayer about.

Jordan is my stubborn and arrogant one. There is a shirt that says, “I am not arguing with you, I am explaining why I am right.” That was Jordan. Notice, I said *was.* I have been in prayer for him that the wisdom of God would fill his heart. His actions do not *always* reflect the answer to this prayer, but they are starting to…more and more.

A few weeks ago he had an episode, and in the middle of it, I simply said to him, “You are wrong, you are headed down the wrong track, and I am not going to argue with you about it.” I said it calmly and quietly, and got up and left the room. And as we parents know, an arrogant child, IF he apologizes, it takes him a while to get around to it. Jordan came to me not 15 minutes later and his entire demeanor was different, he was no longer defensive, and he was humble and apologetic.

I have learned to war against the enemy, not against my children.

The bible says to “resist the devil and he will flee.”

I want to point out that the devil fleeing is the result of the first part of that verse in James 4:7, which tells what we have to do to get those results.

We must submit ourselves.

I am learning to submit myself. This is harder for me as a single parent, because I’m one person doing it all and that’s the norm for me.

However, I am starting a new norm.

I’m submitting, praying, and enjoying watching the devil flee from my life and from the lives of my children.

I Don't Do Teens - Scary Movies – by Marcy Lytle

This time of year, Halloween movies come out, and scary movies actually hit the theaters all year long, inviting and luring our teens to watch and be shocked, scared, and entertained, all at the same time. But these scary movies aren't like the scary movies we enjoyed decades ago. *Wait until Dark* is one of my favorite movies, starring Audrey Hepburn, playing a blind woman. In fact, we saw this scary movie when our kids were teens, and the theater where it was showing turned out all the lights in the part where her intruder enters her home…it was awesome!

There are what I call "good" scary movies, and those that are "bad" scary movies. In fact, the bad ones can have lasting negative effects on our teens, if we are not the parents and say "No," after we've made informed decisions regarding the movies our teens need to avoid.

Good, scary movies:

We're scared by noises, sound effects, and the unknown.

We're following a mysterious plot.

We're entertained by daring acts of bravery, escapes, and capers.

Bad, scary movies:

We're introduced to the world of witchcraft.

We're watching people possessed with demons flail and speak horrible things.

We're being draw into acts that require complete evil doing, and the images are extremely graphic.

There are differing schools of thought on what our kids should see on the big screens, and some parents feel if the movie is rated PG-13 and our kids are 13 and older, then what's the big deal?

Here's the big deal:

Witchcraft is real. I had a young teenage boy come in my room (when I was teaching middle school) and tell me that his parents were part of a cult that he wanted no part of. He was afraid because in order to exit the cult, he had to fight the high priest – and yes – this was in my city where I live. The boy didn't come back to school after that day, and I never found out what happened to him. But witchcraft is now portrayed as something fun and appealing on the big screen, because it's the practice of manipulation. Manipulation is not a healthy trait for any person, and witchcraft can be downright murderous to our kids and their spirits.

Demons are real. Those who open their spirits and minds up to the world of the occult then open themselves up to all sorts of evil thoughts. I know of another young man who saw the

movie *The Exorcist* and some of the visuals and actions in the movie became part of his psyche, and he ended up with all sorts of emotional problems. We just do not know the makeup of our children, sometimes, and their spirits are tender, impressionable and open to receive – while they're young. It's up to us, as their guardians while they still live at home, to protect their minds and eyes and ears.

Graphic Images stick like glue. You might ask a kid, years later, what they remember about a certain movie, and the most vivid images will be still there, embedded into their memory bank, to be recalled at any time. Just because as an adult, we might be able to dismiss something we see, telling ourselves it was "just a movie," we cannot place that burden of responsibility on our teens. Acts of senseless murder and horror with the graphics that are used in movies today are hard to watch. And if our teens have to close their eyes, then why let them go? Why send them with a $20 bill in their pocket to pick whatever appeals to them?

Here are a few interesting quotes from WebMd on the effects of scary movies on the brain:

When people watch horrific images, their heartbeat increases as much as 15 beats per minute…Their palms sweat, their skin temperature drops several degrees, their muscles tense, and their blood pressure spikes.

In surveys…nearly 60% reported that something they had watched before age 14 had caused disturbances in their sleep or waking life.

As people become more desensitized to violence in the media…we may also be becoming more desensitized to violence in real life.

Scary films need to be age-appropriate, and some scary films are probably not appropriate at any age. If you're concerned about a film your teen is invited to see, go see it yourself first. Look up the film and see the specifics on why it's rated the way it is. And finally, don't go just by the rating. Be informed, pray for your kids, and most certainly guard them from all of the evil that you can – and that includes scary movies. (For a great movie review resource, check out pluggedin.com, and we provide movie reviews here on our site, as well…)

Everything Home - Faux Bookshelf – by Mikaela Cain

A bookshelf is an important piece in a living room.

But, in a small space, a large piece of furniture can be overwhelming and make a room feel claustrophobic.

Our living room isn't tiny but it has three entry points. One wall is four feet wide with a stairwell on the left and hall on the right. I wanted to decorate it with something with the height of a bookshelf, but without the bulk.

I found an idea on Pinterest that was exactly I wanted. It had floating bookshelves above a painted vent. Surprisingly, the whole look went together so well. It was modern and light, adding just the right amount of color to the space without being overbearing.

I borrowed the faux book self idea but with a cabinet that we had instead of the vent. It was very easy to create. And, it saved us a lot of money!

Here's the breakdown of the pieces and expenses:

1. Cabinet – Already Had – Bought on Craigslist for $30
2. Floating Shelves and Brackets – Purchased from IKEA – The shelves were $15 each plus $4 for each bracket, making the total $46
3. Router – Already Had – Hiding a router in books made it incognito and the most expensive part of this look
4. Black Vase – Already Had – Purchased from Goodwill for $5
5. Center Picture – Already Had – See note below**
6. Other Display pieces – Already Had – The frames were wedding gifts, various coffee mugs, pot and espresso cup were gifts from friends and family, books were either gifts or purchased throughout the years

The only thing I purchased new was the shelves and brackets. All it took was a little *Pinteresting*, some creativity, and 46 dollars to find the perfect fit for a compact space!

***The picture that I used between the floating shelves and the cabinet is an old frame with a piece of scrapbooking paper taped in it. Yes, you read that correctly; it's scrapbooking paper! I put it in the frame just to fill the space until I found something more meaningful. But, I actually really like it. I'm keeping it!*

A Night to Remember – Changes – by Marcy Lytle

October is the month of change, from the clothes we wear, to the length of daylight outside, to the temperature of the wind that blows. We all have seasons of change in our lives, too, as we grow and mature. Just as a butterfly emerges after the changes it goes through, so we are constantly changing. Our legs grow, our bodies mature, and we become adults…one day. But there are other changes that take place, as well. We can change the way we look, make a change in the places we go, and we can even change the way we talk, but none of these things will change who we are inside. Let's peek in on a week in the life of a young kid named Chris and see what changes he makes…

Preparation: *You will need a shoe box or gift wrap box for this study. With a black marker, on one of the short ends of the box, draw a cross. On a long side draw double doors with "SCHOOL" written above them, inside the box on the bottom write "AL'S GARAGE", on the outside bottom of the box write "HOSPITAL" and draw one window, on the other long side draw several windows (with the box standing on end, like a high rise), on the other short end write "THEATER" and finally inside the lid of the box draw an oval racetrack. You are making the box to be turned and used throughout the study. Finally, you will need a small figure to move throughout the places indicated above (an action figure, tiny doll, whatever you have.) You will be moving the little figure around to the different places by turning the shoe box on all of its sides, making it change from one place to the next.*

Chris was on vacation with his family and they were visiting all sorts of places. At each place, Chris dreamed of what it would be like to be someone important, someone people respected, someone people adored, someone who was happy all the time. Chris was a sad guy, always acting out and trying to get attention. He wanted to change and be different…

Chris' family drove through a neighborhood in a really nice school district and they stopped to visit the school. (*Turn box so SCHOOL is facing you.*) Chris got out of the car and thought to himself, "I bet if I went to school here I'd be the smartest in the class." *(Place figure by front door*.) Chris had never opened a book or completed an assignment, but he thought if he changed schools, he would **all of a sudden become smart.** He took a big marker and wrote A+ on the wall by the front door (*write A+ with the marker on the box).*

Chris' family drove on down the street, past a hospital. (*Turn the box to view HOSPITAL.)* Chris noticed how nice it looked and thought he **could probably be a doctor some day**. Doctors make lots of money, he thought, and all they have to do is listen to hearts beat with their cool stethoscopes. (*Turn figure to face the hospital window*.) I bet if I just watch these doctors work, I could be one, Chris thought. (*Draw a heart on the box with a smiley face inside.)*

That afternoon Chris and his family attended a track event at a huge arena (*place lid upside down so that the track is seen),* where lots of people came to see their favorite athletes compete in the hurdles, the 100-yard dash and even pole vaulting. Chris sat and watched how everyone clapped when the athletes finished each event. "That's so cool!" he thought. "If I get new running shoes**, I bet everyone will cheer for me**. If we move here, I'll be a great runner, too." *(Run the figure around the track.)* (*Write "champion" in the middle of the track*.)

After the track event, Chris' family drove downtown. (*Turn box on end with windows going up the side*.) Chris asked his dad about the skyscrapers, and his family stopped and went to the top of one of the buildings and looked over the city. (*Stand figure on top of box.)* Chris looked

out and **felt so powerful.** If he were rich, he could live up here. That would mean he was important! (*Write $$$$ along the side of the box*.)

The rental car Chris and his family were in needed a quick tune up, so they pulled into a garage. (*Turn box on side with opening of GARAGE facing you.)* There was a fancy car in this garage right next to their stall. Wow that car has **everything – it's perfect!** (*Place figure in garage*.) I'm going to get that car when I turn 16, Chris thought. *(Write "perfect" on the wall of the garage.)*

In the evening, Chris and his family attended a musical at the theater downtown (*Place lid sideways so it over hangs the end of the box, like a roof overhang. where "THEATER" is written*). Chris was impressed with the actors' talents, and was more impressed with the clapping of the audience at the end of the show. (*Have the figure jump up and down*.) He would be **famous like that one day**, with his awards, his money and his car. (*Write "fame" on the box.)*

Chris' family flew home the next day, and on Sunday, Chris and his family attended church. (*Place Chris near the cross*.) Chris thought he was a "Christian" because he went to church every week with his family. However, just like all the other places Chris had visited on his vacation, church was no different. Chris just sat and looked around at others and compared their clothes with his, judged the kids who whispered and passed notes, **and dreamed** of how nice it must be to be a pastor and only work once a week….(*Write ? by the cross.)*

Chris didn't understand anything!!!

(As you review the following, have someone turn the box around to show the different "changes" Chris was hoping for…)

Chris thought by changing schools, he could be smart *(show school*). He then thought he could just watch doctors work and be able to perform surgery (*show hospital*). When Chris observed the runners (*show track)* he thought if he just changed his shoes, he could win the race! Chris only wanted to live in a high rise so he could be appear to be rich and powerful (*show high rise*). In the garage (*show garage*), Chris dreamed of having the "perfect" car. He also wanted fame when he saw everyone clapping at the theater (*show theater*). Finally, Chris assumed that since he went to church every Sunday, this made him a Christian (*show church).*

Change does not happen in our hearts and lives without Jesus. (*Read Ephesians 2:8, 9*). He is the one who gives us skill and wisdom to do well in our jobs and at school. He is the one who makes us strong so that we can run the race of life! He alone is powerful and mighty, and worthy of our praise. It is for His glory that we live and breathe. Change in our hearts comes from asking for forgiveness of our sins and receiving His life into ours. Real change comes from Him, not from the places we go, the people we hang out with, or the things we see. (*Read II Corinthians 5:17.)*

Read John 3:16

Have you experienced change in your life?

If you have, give thanks. If not, ask Jesus to come into your heart and change you so that you become richly blessed, strong and mighty in His power, full of his love, peace and joy! Don't spend your life going from place to place, observing the good life. Experience the good life now!

Experience Jesus and see what awesome changes he has for you…

The Family Practice – The Routines – by Rachel Toalson

We are settling into earlier mornings and sleepier breakfasts and homework instead of free play in the after school hours. We are settling into shorter bedtime windows and showers in the morning rather than at night and schedules that line up with when they need to be at school and when they can come back home.

Though it means 5 o'clock mornings, I always look forward to the month after school starts, because it means we have begun to stretch into those familiar routines that we left behind all summer.

I enjoy those summer days that are not bound by places we need to be or a clock that rules us or tasks we need to finish before the deadline, but there is something about getting back into a routine of carefully measured activity that feels refreshing.

Routine is life-giving to me.

I used to think this made me boring. I wanted to be the fun, spontaneous type who could make plans or drop them with no more notice than a call. I tried to be her for a while, but I was miserable.

That could be why, when we had children, I slipped so easily into routine. Feed the baby, let him play, put him to sleep, do it all again. Feed the toddler, read to the toddler, put the toddler down to sleep, repeat. Feed, play, feed, play, feed, bathe, read, snuggle, sleep.

My life runs like one great routine. My boys know exactly what's coming and where they are in their days because of the routines we have practiced since the day they were born. They could do it with their eyes closed.

It's no secret that I have a large family. Six children is four more than what most people consider the norm. Which means we often get interesting questions about our large family—but the most frequent one I hear is, "How do you do it?"

Usually, when people ask this question, I tell the truth: I don't do it. I don't even come close. My house hasn't been cleaned in you don't want to know how long. The laundry is still sitting on the banister like it was three weeks ago, so the kids have gotten used to living out of a pile instead of a closet. The yard has more weeds than grass because there's just no time to tend.

But another truth is routine.

Routine helps me do it.

Every Monday morning I water the plants. Every Tuesday I do laundry. Every Wednesday I shop for groceries (and hope they'll last all week).

Routine helps my children do it, too.

Something I've learned in my eight years of parenting is that routine has a way of settling children. It has a way of making them feel more secure in their constantly changing lives. It has a way of communicating love and intention and joy.

Routine has a power that pulls families closer together.

What I remember most from my childhood are the every-evening stories my mom read to us. I remember getting dressed every morning for school and inevitably opening my closet to find my sister asleep on the floor, still in her pajamas. I remember riding bikes and roller-skating the bumpy road out in front of our house while my mom whizzed past on skates of her own.

What my boys will remember in the years to come is not how crazy this household was or how often a brother made them angry or how much food they swiped from the fridge when we weren't looking. They will remember the routines. The chapter books we read together during our read-aloud time. The flower we stood in the middle of the table and told everyone to sketch, and how each of those drawings came out looking completely different. The snuggle time, just before lights out.

Routines offer us stability and structure and sanity.

Mostly routines offer us love-filled memories.

How we can incorporate routines into our daily lives:

1. Establish a time when everyone sits down at the table together for at least one meal a day. This doesn't have to be dinner. It can be breakfast or lunch or dunch (a cross between dinner and lunch—which might work for older kids who have crazy evening practices and games). It doesn't matter what time. Just sit down at the table together and open conversations or play dinner games or name your gratitudes. The family that eats together stays together.

2. Before you leave the house, breathe. We do this with our children in the mornings. Before walking to the school down the road, we stop at the door, take three deep breaths and then get on our way. Sometimes we say a mantra, like "I breathe in love. I release love into the world." Sometimes we just breathe silently because it's been a rough morning. This routine helps us slow down and think and claim just one calm moment out of the many rushed ones.

3. Read a story together. Kids love the routine of reading together. People ask me all the time when I think my boys will stop enjoying this time. The answer is never. Mostly because we read long, involved chapter books that take months to finish. I don't think kids every outgrow stories read by their parents.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - All those Verbs…and More by Marcy Lytle

Prayer is one of those lifelines that really sustains us, if we let it. When we pray with faith, knowing He hears us – that's just the best antidote to a bad day – it really is. And spending part of that prayer time giving thanks for all of those verbs – action words – that God does for us is quite astounding, heart-changing, and might just be the catalyst to send us out for an awesome day ahead…

He **carries** us when we are too weak to walk because we're simply tired and exhausted from the cares of the world.

He **hides** us when there's trouble all around us and we're fearful of a heavy downpour that will drown us.

He **forgives** us when we mess up again…and again…and again.

He **reaches** out for us when we have our head turned the other way, because he always **wants** us.

He **envelops** us in his arms when we're feeling alone and afraid.

He **listens** intently to the cries of our heart when we are pouring out our concerns for his ears only.

He **receives** every praise we offer to him and **enjoys** every song we sing.

He **lives** forever so that we have no fear for our future and where we'll end up…

He **teaches** us ever so gently and thoroughly when we choose to sit down and be taught.

He **calms** our spirits when we're in a dizzy because we're too busy.

He **sends** his comforting Holy Spirit when life is too much and sadness is wetting our faces.

He **loves** without condition because he actually enjoys his creation – us.

He **meets** every need when we present them to him, because he **cares** for his children.

He **heals** every disease of the heart and of the body and of the mind.

He **helps** us when we're sinking and we cry, "Help!"

He **lifts us** up and **sets** our feet on a rock so that we are steady and sure.

He **makes** a way when the mountain seems too high for us to climb.

He **notices** us and thinks we are just the apple of his eye!

He **offers** us living water when we're thirsty and **provides** us good things to eat when we're hungry.

He **gives** to us liberally, all things to enjoy.

That’s a lot of action from a living God who **breathes** in us daily his life to live.

Under the Influence – What's the Matter? – by Marcy Lytle

It doesn't seem to matter that we've just watched a documentary on the sex trafficking going on in our own cities, here in America. An hour later, we've forgotten the images and the stories, and we're home watching cooking shows to learn how to make cheesy nachos.

It doesn't matter that we just scrolled down the Facebook feed and saw pictures of friends with babies in the hospital that have been there for weeks, fighting to live. We said a quick prayer and then scrolled down further and LIKED a funny quote that slammed the president.

It doesn't matter that we see a lady in wheelchair with only one leg, so that she has to sit sideways and use her only leg to move around. We wince and shake our head, and complain down the road that our back is sore from working in the garden yesterday.

It doesn't matter that we have single mom friends who never get a break, have to work two jobs, and go to bed exhausted nightly. We still find fault and point the finger at our loving husband who was just trying to help when he placed the garlic mincer in the wrong drawer.

It doesn't matter that the lady next to us in church is barely hanging on by a thread because her sweet husband has a terminal illness. We cry as we empathize for a moment, and then we go home and worry that the new color we've chosen for our hair might not look just right.

It doesn't matter that the house down the street was just destroyed by fire and the family inside lost everything. We still find ourselves dissatisfied that the rug we just purchased is too small for our giant room, and we get depressed because we can't afford the bigger one.

It doesn't matter that the family with the six children is the family in need at church because their one van keeps breaking down and they can't afford a new one. We still sit at our desk and wonder how we can possibly afford that new KIA our 16-year old wants so bad for his birthday coming up…

OR DOES IT?

Of course those things matter to all of us. But our nature is to redirect after looking at pain, and go back to living in pleasure, and find ways to perpetuate that pleasure. **It's too hard to comprehend the hurt going on around us, so we wince for a moment but then opt for the good life.** We're prone to satisfy our immediate needs, because we're often selfish and me-oriented, so the needs of others are in the back of our minds, out of sight until later.

But sometimes…we stop in our tracks and we shake our heads and we say to ourselves,

Wait a minute.

Sexual trafficking is horrible. What can I do about that?

Thank you, God, that I have two strong legs.

How can I show up to lend a hand to my single friend?

Yes, God still heals terminally ill people. I'm going to trust him for that!

I have some extra cash I can give to my neighbor and a barely used sofa we don't need.

My son doesn't need a brand new car; he can drive a used one.

I haven't figured out how we call ourselves Christians and yet we are so self-centered. Or maybe I should only talk about myself, here. I can find the slightest thing to complain about, be dissatisfied with, get frustrated over, and sit down in a self-pity slump. And yet I cannot seem to change the way I feel. I sometimes want to shut out the world and its needs and get on an airplane and fly away to a part of the world that caters to my needs.

There's nothing wrong with enjoying our lives, our blessings, and our successes. In fact, we should enjoy them.

But this morning I'm realizing that when my enjoyment of those things is ruined by the slightest hiccup, when my week is destroyed because I can't find the right color comforter, or when I'm feeling slightly depressed because a friend didn't seem interested in what I had to say the other day –

Something's wrong with my heart.

We all have times like these, when we just don't want to see or be moved by anyone or anything else – except maybe to get up and eat that brownie over there on the counter that is calling our name.

I get that. We're all tired. The world is a weary place. And **sometimes the needs of others stir us to action, and other times they overwhelm us to retreat.**

And then there are those times when we're just plain selfish and don't want to see or listen or move.

I don't know what to say about the state of my heart sometimes, except it's not as full as I'd like it to be with contentment and joy. It's sometimes still wicked, even though I know it's been swept clean. And there are still parts of it that hurt when it's required to pump a little too hard.

The only antidote I know to the plight of my condition is a grateful heart.

Those I know with grateful hearts are full, loving, giving, and motivated to pray, give, and help.

I've got a ways to go at being grateful for what I've been given, instead of being hateful for what I still desire.

Lord, help us all to realize that it does matter how we react, or don't react, to the everyday sights and sounds of life on the streets, in our homes, and next to our neighbors. And may we be grateful for the breath we breathe…and then breathe that life on others.

Healthy Habits - "Rebounding" Toward Health – by Ashleigh O'Connor

What do rebounding, mini-trampolines, and detoxification all have in common?

I bet the first thing you think of when you hear the word "rebound" is Shaquille O'Neal going up and grabbing the basketball from the backboard during a basketball game. Well, I'm here to introduce you to a new definition of the word "rebound" and enlighten you to an incredible, simple exercise that nearly everyone can do. Rebounding is a form of physical activity that is done on a mini-trampoline or, what can also be called, a "rebounder." I'm sure you've seen those tiny trampolines in 80's exercise videos or off in the corner of your cardio step class, but rebounding is gaining new traction within the fitness communities as a practical way to tighten and tone your body, increase detoxification efforts, strengthen your bones, and provide a low (or moderate) impact cardio workout.

Here are a few, yet highly convincing, reasons you should be rebounding on a daily basis.

Quick & easy:
Rebounding for just a few minutes a day can improve your health, mood, and overall well-being. Many people are strapped for time, so any exercise that takes just 10-15 minutes a day should automatically grab your attention. Try splitting up your time on the rebounder: Upon waking (3 mins), pre-workout (4 mins), and before going to bed (3 mins). Just hop onto your rebounder, start bouncing at a pace & height that you're comfortable with (for no impact, don't bring your feet off the trampoline), and have some fun (I do jumping jacks and high-knees while on the rebounder)! The more you get used to rebounder, the longer you'll want to keep jumping. For optimal results and effectiveness, challenge yourself to increase time spent bouncing each week.

Detoxifying for lymphatic system:
Unlike your cardiovascular system, which has the heart to pump fluids throughout, your lymphatic system does not have a pump. With that being said, it's important to get your lymphatic fluids moving throughout your body to stimulate the movement of fluids and movement of white blood cells to support immune system health. Some research shows the less active you are, the more stagnant and toxic your lymphatic system can become, increasing your risk of sickness, bacterial infection, and an overall poor immune system. By rebounding on a daily basis, your body will be able to support the movement and stimulation of a fluid, healthy, and detoxifying lymphatic system! There have been many occasions when I have started to feel under the weather, and instead of heading straight for the couch to curl up, I instead head for my rebounder. By doing this, I'm waking up my sludgy, stagnant lymph fluids, and forcing my body to work to overcome whatever infection is trying to attack my immune system. I'll be the first one to tell you, 9 times out of 10, rebounding makes me feel much better than just laying around and staying flat on my back. Even when I feel a headache creeping up, allergies taking over, or a stuffy nose, I'll head into my workout room and get to rebounding! Give it a try!

Better than running?
Think rebounding is something silly 80's workout video instructors created? Think again! NASA scientists and astronauts are the original proponents of this exercise. In the "NASA Rebound Exercise Report", researchers found that rebounding was 68% more effective than running on a treadmill for the same amount of time. It's also been known to support bone density and help ease achy joints that can be caused by hard impact exercises like running or other highly intense cardio exercises. If you're older in age, or suffer from osteoporosis, arthritis, or muscle

pain, consider rebounding! Since rebounding stimulates every cell in your body simultaneously, it's a great alternative to pounding the pavement or spending an excessive amount of money on a treadmill.

Great for weight loss:
Who doesn't love to hear that a simple, fun exercise could help shed those stubborn pounds? Who doesn't love to hear that you don't have to lift 25lb dumbbells to tone up your body? Great news, everyone! Rebounding can be an effective way to do both! Rebounding on a consistent basis can increase weight loss and stimulate muscle toning. Remember when we discussed the detoxifying benefits at the beginning of this article? Well, the detoxification process is key to both weight loss and toning of your muscles. Losing weight can be impeded by an overly toxic body and rebounding can increase the efforts of your body ridding itself of things it doesn't need (aka, sweat carrying out toxins), in return, allowing your body to shed pounds. Rebounding is also great because it allows your heart rate to increase in a controllable manner, without over-exerting itself and "over working" to the point of burn out. When you rebound, you also take in a regulated dose of oxygen with each breath, allowing your muscles to become activated and oxygenated appropriately. All of these actions working together will allow your body to begin shedding weight and increasing muscle tightening and toning. Win-win!

If you're curious about rebounding, I'd encourage you to incorporate this exercise into your daily regimen. In my opinion, bungee-style rebounders create a better jumping experience (smoother, quieter, more push on the bounce up). You can find rebounders at most big-box stores like Academy, Wal-Mart, etc., or you can score one on Amazon (and read reviews by other users to get a good idea on brands, styles, etc.). A reliable, safe, and good quality rebounder can range from $40-$90. And, if you find yourself becoming a rebounding connoisseur, you may want to consider a high-quality, durable rebounder like the Bellicon (my dream rebounder!). When I first started getting interested in rebounding, I actually found one for sale in my neighborhood at a yard sale and picked up my first mini-trampoline for $10. I quickly out-worked that one and learned that a good quality one can make all the difference. Plus, it's much wiser to have good quality equipment to help prevent injuries or pain later down the road. I promise you, the $100 or less you'll spend on a rebounder will be worth the fun, incredible workouts you can have on your new toy. I believe you'll begin to see the benefits I've shared with you and even more.

And if you find yourself becoming more and more bounce happy, let me know…I'd love to hear your rebounding story!

Beauty for Ashes - A Series of Letting Go – by Pam Charro

I had a great boss about 15 years ago; he was a good friend and we often had deep and interesting talks about life. One of those talks was about parenting and the difficulties involved, since he was going through a phase where his son seemed to be detaching from him.

I remember him telling me, "From the time they're born, parenting your children is a series of letting them go."

He said it so matter-of-factly, as though it was common knowledge, but I was deeply touched. My own children were still small at the time, and I hadn't really thought much about letting them go.

I have since come to know just how true those words are. With two sons in college and miles away, and a third only a year and a half from graduating high school, my time with my children has become a precious commodity. I know now that childhood flies by in the blink of an eye, and each fall when school starts, I am flooded with bittersweet emotion and awareness that I keep on having to learn how to let them go.

If there is a more effective method of learning to let go than parenting, I am not sure what it could be. It doesn't matter how attached I am to anything or anyone, time marches on, they grow up, and life continues.

In truth, nothing on this planet is really mine. I can know it, but I am not any wiser until I KNOW it. **Letting go of the blessings that I so dearly love involves giving them to whom they really belong.** For me recently, it has been my children, but I will have to face other phases in my life where I will have to let go of other people and things. My parents will eventually die. My health will probably slowly fade away. I may lose money and security. And, eventually, I will lose my own life. All of this I will have to let go of. I have borrowed all of it and there will be a time I will have to release it. I would like to think that I will do it full of grace and peace, but I won't really know until the time comes for each of them.

The only way I can confidently and happily hand these things over is by knowing the One to whom they truly belong. He has been so good to lend them all to me, and he can be trusted to continue to be good to me when it's time to move on. That is true now when I am in my 50's, it will be true when I am in my 70's ... and it will be true when I pass on from this world.

When I know without a doubt that the best is still ahead for me, I can feel the sorrow but still have great joy.

Letting go has sadness to it, but losing what has passed is only the beginning of gaining what lies ahead.

With our God, that is always great news.

Created for Life - Adventurous Spirits – by Ginny Hurley

Recently, I enjoyed a night at the Imax watching the new *Mission Impossible* movie. Closing my eyes, while perching on the edge of my seat, was my main position throughout the entire show.

I realized that I was being drawn into the suspense with high emotions and a little fear/excitement about the characters and how they would pull off this adventure. Of course I had seen most of the previous, *Mission Impossible* movies, so I knew Tom Cruise would surely prevail, but I wasn't as sure about his friends and, of course, *the girl*. One of the reasons that I enjoy this particular wild pursuit is the break in extreme suspense joined with some comic relief. I can only be on edge for so long!

As I thought about the evening, my mind kept wandering back to the idea of man's need or desire for adventure. Almost everyone loves the thought of living dangerously when we know the outcome will be favorable and heroes will be applauded.

Why do we seek this adventure through watching someone else do the work?

Why do we feel a part of the adventure when we are only observing?

Some, on the other hand, actually crave extreme adventures. They try uncanny stunts where dying is a great possibility. After one adventure, they go on to something more extreme or terrifying.

Why?

So, I asked my Father, "What is in my heart that causes me to need to experience something wild and adventurous? Did you make me this way, or is it wrong? Should I seek more mundane quiet thoughts? Should I quell this desire for adventure?"

He always answers!

"Yes, I made you that way! I love it! I created you for adventure, joy, and LIFE! Every pursuit is to bring you to the knowledge of my great love for you, and the experience of my presence always brings adventure!"

"In My Presence is FULLNESS of JOY!
At My right hand are pleasures forevermore!"
Psalm 16:11

I felt like He was saying to me that when I go after him, and pursue his heart, the adventure never ends! There is suspense, joy, good fear, and even comic relief! He loves it when I pursue righteousness, peace, and joy! He loves it when I step out and risk something in faith! Trust is always an adventure! Faith is believing…before seeing!

And the BEST part is that I know the END!

It turns out for my good!
I win because He already did!
We are the Heroes of Faith every time we choose His adventure!

If we want a wild ride, let’s go!

MARRIAGE

Two for the Road – The Intersection – by Lynn Cherry

The latest movie by the Kendrick brothers, *War Room*, is a powerful film that centers on the power of prayer and a marriage in crisis.

Have you ever thought about the intersection of your marriage and your prayer life?

Maybe you pray diligently for your spouse. Maybe you read *The Power of a Praying Wife* and you know you should. Or maybe you are too mad to pray.

My husband and I went to see the movie together. That same week, I just happened upon a couple of passages about 500 pages apart in my Bible and I think it's possible God was trying to tell me something.

In the same way, you husbands must give honor to your wives. Treat your wife with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God's gift of new life. Treat her as you should so your prayers will not be hindered. I Peter 3:7 NLT

Wives like this passage because God is talking directly to our husbands. It's like an elbow in his ribs that doesn't involve our elbow. But as I read, I thought God would say the same goes for us girls. Treat **him** as you should so **your** prayers will not be hindered.

Can you imagine if Elizabeth, the main character in *War Room*, went to her prayer closet to fight on her knees for her husband but then treated him with disdain, disapproval and distance when she came out? There would be no happy ending in that screenplay and none of us would be sharing the link on Facebook and telling our friends to go see it.

We have dual assignments here:

1. Pray
2. Treat each other well

It reminds me of another passage. It's not enough to love with words or speech (or prayer.) We need to express that love with actions and in the truth of how we treat each other in every day interactions. (1 John 3:18)

We manage pretty well in the Cherry home as of late, pardon a few minor details.

If you're anything like me, my spouse is the first one to feel the effect of my bad days. He has been the victim of my tired, my PMS, and my I-just-feel-snarky, on more than one occasion. I've been on the receiving end, too. We are in such close proximity in this relationship so it happens, right?

I complain about the frustrations of life to my husband. Sometimes, what he hears is dissatisfaction with the life we share together.

Old Testament prophet Malachi was bringing correction to a group of worshippers. He said "*You fill the place of worship with your whining and sniveling because you don't get what you want from GOD." (Malachi 2:13 MSG)* Sounds like their prayers were being hindered. Malachi blamed broken marriage vows.

Our faithfulness in marriage affects affects our prayer lives; affects our relationship with God.

My husband and I have done the seemingly impossible, enormous work of marriage. God was there in the big. These days, he's reminding me he is also in the small.

GOD, not you, made marriage. His Spirit inhabits even the smallest details of marriage. Malachi 2:15 MSG

Date Night Fun – A Basket of Apples – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever gone to pick apples at an orchard? It's great fun, if you haven't. In fact, fall just makes our stomachs yearn for warm apple desserts, doesn't it? Even apple scented candles are sold for the fall season, so that your house can smell like that sweet goodness of a juicy, ripe, round red piece of fruit that's tasty, and good for us, too! So this month, our date nights include everything delightful about apples…

Apple Cider for Two – This date involves packing up some hot apple cider in a thermos, to take with you for the evening's end. Head out for dinner and purpose to eat something that starts with each letter in the word APPLE – an appetizer, pork chops, pickles, linguini, and eggs – as an example. See if you can find all of them on one menu! After dinner, take a walk in a park and find a bench, open your cider and enjoy, as you sip the hot drink and enjoy the night air as you munch on these apple cookies you baked the night before…

You're the Apple of My Eye – Everyone loves being the apple of someone's eye, and couples should most definitely feel that way about each other! Put the date night on the calendar, and then plan a surprise to show the other one how much you love him/her. Ideas might be: tickets to a show, tickets to a game, a gourmet meal at home, a drive in the country with a picnic supper, a shopping trip with a gift card, etc. Just before leaving, hand an envelope enclosing your treat, as you remind him how special he is to you. And throughout the evening, give him hints to find the hidden apples you've strategically placed in the car, on the porch, in his wallet, etc. with your own personal sayings written on them!

Caramel Apple Bar Double Date – Invite another couple over and set up a caramel apple bar like this one here – simple to do. Ask them to eat dinner beforehand, so that all you're providing is this yummy dessert experience, and then a fun movie to watch. Since apples are red, why not watch Red Eye, a movie from about 10 years ago – a mystery thriller starring Rachel McAdams? After the movie, enjoy coffee as you discuss the movie and clean up together and maybe play a game of Apples to Apples.

Apple Butter for Breakfast – This is a weekend idea for a morning date for two. This slow cooker recipe for apple butter can be assembled the night before, together of course, as you go to sleep anticipating the goodness you will share in the morning. You can then mix it into oatmeal or spread it onto toast. Why not download this difficult word search (one copy) and search together these healthy food words as you enjoy your spread? End the date by cuddling together outside as you enjoy the crisp cool morning.

Cobbler, Anyone? – How can we list date nights without one of them involving apple cobbler? And apple cobbler goes with ice cream. If you don't already have your own favorite recipe, here's a simple, tasty easy one. Plan your evening around a play on the word "cobbler." Make the night a shoe-shopping night, for both of you. Start by cleaning out your shoes and taking a bag of giveaways with you, dropping them off at your local thrift store. Head to your favorite shoe stores and shop together for new feet coverings. Come back home, make the cobbler together, and enjoy as you listen to these cute song about apples! See how many you know!

Date nights in the fall are so rich, aromatic, and tasty! Don't let the month of October go by without trying at least one of these ideas. Let your creative juices flow (pun intended) as you bite into your favorite apple of the season with your favorite person of all time…

After 30 Years - Rest Instead of Right – by Marcy Lytle

Early on in marriage, it seems there is this constant battle to be right. And that battle doesn't ever go away, but the determination to win it changes. Or maybe I should say, it needs to change if we want to enjoy our years with our spouses when the kids are gone. Battling over who is right and who is wrong no longer seems worth the effort, because rest is a much better choice.

How so?

Glad you asked.

We go out with other couples a lot. We enjoy their company and good conversation. And we find ourselves among our peers telling stories about life, our children, our own experiences and travels together, etc. It's a nice time in life to be able to have dinner with others and actually talk and converse, because there are no small children pulling on our sleeves and talking over us. However, now that we're talking more, and we've lived and experienced so many more events and much more of life, we sometimes remember things differently.

He recalls a trip and starts to relay the details to our friends, and I think he's getting part of the story wrong. I have a choice:

Choose rest, or correct him and make the story right.

I start talking about a place we went on a date and how they served a great dessert, and he thinks that's not the place at all – it was a different restaurant. He has a choice:

Choose rest, or correct me so that I get the facts right.

We've done a lot of the correcting and setting things straight, and it never turns out very well. I interject into his story the "true" facts and interrupt his conversation, and it is not only rude to him, but rude to our listeners as well – our friends. He corrects me and I feel slighted, scolded like a child, all because I got one part of the story incorrect. Why couldn't he have said nothing at all? The night is over, and we're both a little upset that the other one *got it wrong* and even more upset that we had to *set each other right.*

I think there comes a time in all marriages when we have to make all sorts of choices: big ones – like whether or not to forgive a huge wrong…and small ones – like whether or not to keep our mouth shut. The latter one sounds like a small choice and barely a sacrifice to make, but somehow we make it a giant obstacle to overcome. We just can't stand for him to miss a detail or state something that just isn't true because that's not the way we remember it happening. So we set out to make sure our friends hear everything correctly, according to the *way it really happened.*

The real truth is that there is no rest in constantly making the other one right, according to our standards.

It’s a fact that we’re going to remember details differently, because we’re two people who focused on different aspects of our experiences.

It rings true that when relaying a story, we might get a few stories mixed up and intertwined, when they were really separate incidences in different years.

But is it really worth making him get it right? Or is it a wiser decision to turn towards rest, and listen and smile, happy that he’s there to talk, experience, and live all that life has to offer – and then share the stories with friends?

Maybe it’s not stories that we correct. Perhaps there are other things we think it’s our job to make right because he doesn’t fold the towels correctly, or he puts that dish on the wrong shelf when unloading the dishwasher, or hangs our robe in the closet with our clothes instead of behind the bathroom door.

There will always be this conflict of he said/she said when it comes to our fallible memories, and there will always be a struggle of my way/his way when it comes to managing a marriage and a home.

And there will always be a choice we have to make when it comes to being right…

or being at rest.

And the latter one is the best one.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – Quiet Joy – by Rachel Critz

Have you ever had a moment when you cannot think straight or catch a breath in the middle of a crazy situation?

Where everything does not seem to fall into place or nothing makes sense?

As it has been said, “Nothing goes the way you plan.” I am here to tell you that, that statement is very true. Let me tell you a story, a personal one.

So imagine a volleyball player, really tall and very good at what she does on the court. She’s played competitively against teams across the region for a few years. During the school year, she continues her volleyball season on a school team. She assumes to get on the top team, varsity. (*Probably not the best idea to get her hopes up*).

When the head coach explained to her she will play on the same team she did the year before, she felt all her hopes vanish. Betrayal, disappointment, confusion, etc. set in. Don’t you think a player like her should be on the top team? I agree with you, too.

However, she found herself trapped in this box, feeling at a loss to show her full potential, as the coaches hardly used her on the court. She tried everything she could to become a starter on the team but nothing seemed to work. She finally then came to terms with her thoughts and feelings.

Philippians 4:6-7 says,

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

- We MUST find peace in every single tough situation God brings our way.
- We cannot let the worldly feelings such as anger and discouragement overcome us.
- We have to let it all go and give it to God.

Because guess what? God knows best. He knows our past, present, and future and everything in between. He knows us better than we know ourselves.

When you feel at a loss (just as that girl did), give it up to God, because you are not supposed to fight your battles on your own. You will not solve your problems on your own. Look on the brighter side of things. I can guarantee whining and complaining about something does not get rid of it. You fight, and you fight with God. Find your peace, and what brings you a quiet joy.

John 16:33 says,

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

When something confusing happens, know this…

It is not confusing in God’s mind.

Moving Forward - Worth the Effort – by Pam Charro

Have you ever given up on something because your work just didn't seem to be making any difference?

Confession time: I did that with my lawn over the past month and a half. With the constant 100 degree days and no trees in the backyard, I stopped watering it at all because it just looked so baked anyway. **I succumbed to the idea that there was nothing I could** do about my goldish-yellow grass; I felt helpless and I quit.

However, I was missing information and my wake-up call came in the form of an overweight and not very eloquent air conditioner repairman.

He took one look at my back yard and said, "What you need to DO is start watering this grass!"

I wondered what made him feel he had the authority to speak to me in that manner, and my first reaction was to be offended and ignore him.

But, eventually, I replied, "I gave up. It just hasn't seemed to matter what I do."

Then, I listened.

He explained that watering always made a difference even when I couldn't tell by looking, because what I wanted to do was not have a gorgeous and perfect-looking lawn, but just, at least temporarily, avoid total destruction until it could look better later. He also said I don't have to do the whole lawn every time, just add 15 minutes to my nightly routine and do a bit each time. He didn't promise that it wasn't too late, but he did say it was worth a try.

I still didn't care for his attitude, but, somehow, he got through and I got motivated. He had given me just enough information, even in that bossy tone of voice, to hear God speaking to me.

There was something I could do, and it might not be too late.

I started watering daily, usually twice. I prayed each time that God would honor my efforts and the lawn might come back to life. I knew there was more than one lesson here, and I was changed:

1. To be open to the Lord speaking in many different and unlikely ways.
2. To ask Him before I give up on something, because maybe I am just missing information.

I have wondered since and will keep praying about other areas I can apply those lessons in my life.

The outcome?

It's too early to tell, since it's only been 10 days, but I have seen some improvement in the grass.

More importantly, I have learned some things about God and life, and those lessons won't be wasted.

Bush Bean Blessings – Hope: Lifelong Friend by Tammy Morrison

Little did I realize just how deep and dark this aching place could be until I found myself lying in a heap, completely broken, unable to muster more than a moan. Words, tears, thrashing about had left me emotionally spent. The outlook was bleak, but there was nothing more I could do but lie in wait for something to change, for the circumstances to be different.

If you've experienced heart-wrenching pain of this magnitude, the cause of it is immaterial. It is the effect you will understand because you've been there and have tasted the heart-wrenching anguish of which I speak.

I convinced myself that I coulda-shoulda-woulda enacted some proactive measure to bring about a different outcome. Over and over, I toyed with different scenarios of what might be different if I could just roll back the hands of time.

God, in His infinite wisdom, knew exactly what He was doing when he designed the force of nature for healing of the body, mind, and spirit to occur, even when we think we're not quite ready for it to happen, and it sometimes begins when we least expect it. Tell-tale signs begin to occur that healing is taking place.

Healing takes place at different rates for wounded hearts just as it does for wounded bodies. When a wound occurs on or in the body, the natural cycle of healing begins instantly (even when we can't see it.) The same healing event occurs in a heart break: our wounded spirit begins its own self-preservation repair. It's a God-design. In our gut-wrenching brokenness, we often miss these inklings of curative touchpoints set in place by the Master Healer. Imagine that, without even asking our permission, our own hearts will begin the mending process of reconciling us into wholeness. The tragedy is that sometimes we resist this supernatural (and natural) transition to restoration.

Brokenness cannot last forever.

Because of our brokenness, we may never be the same, but we can ask this question:

Will my survival of brokenness make me bitter or better?

What quality of life will I purposefully employ?

I'm in no way minimizing this dungeon of pain, the heartache that is crippling and has brought you debilitating grief. But it helps to evaluate, using the emotional inventory list below, where that law of nature is at work again.

Heavy-hearted	Cheerfulness
Heartache	Contentment
Grief-stricken	Delight
Misery	Gladness
Desperation	Happiness
Affliction	Health
Mourning	Joy
Wretched	Comfort
Sorrow	Hopefulness
Agony	Relief

Bitterness Gratefulness

The steps to proactive healing will - in and of themselves - be painful. Think of it as emotional "physical therapy." Some moments you'll count as absolute bouts of victory and some will leave you exhausted, longing to collapse into a heap on that dungeon floor. DON'T LOSE HOPE! Hope is your friend right now! Sometimes, it's all you can do to get by second-by-second. And if that's what it takes, cling to the seconds until they become minutes, to the minutes until they become hours, to the hours until they become days, which will turn into weeks...you get my drift.

This next step will test your endurance and will require intense and purposeful activity:
...especially when you don't feel like it.
...even when you can think of a million reasons NOT to do it.
...even when you want to focus on the negative instead of the positive.
...even when you want to make excuses NOT to.
...even when you want to displace and defend your position.

You're saying, "Enough already! Just TELL me what that next step is!" Here it is:

BLESS IT.

Speak words of life to the pain something like this, "I bless this hurt. I bless the one who caused this hurt. I speak life to this grief. I am thankful for whatever good will come from this."

Every single time your heart throbs with hurt, do not lash out a lament, do not attend the bitterness battle, and do not engage the grief. With your mind intent to capture a ray of hope (remember...hope is your friend right now), speak life and blessings into your dungeon of pain (James 3:3-12).

There will be times you'll speak the blessings with tears pouring down your face and you will choke those words out with a sob through clenched teeth. You will have to exercise mindfulness to speak blessings when everything in you cries out to justify and defend all the reasons you should cling to your hurt and despair. Resist revisiting the pain.

Let your hopes shape your life, not your hurts. Don't borrow trouble. Pursue the hope that springs eternal. Allow God to set your spirit free. Be better, not bitter. Write your blessings in stone and your sorrows in sand.

At some point--and you may not even be aware of the precise moment--you'll realize you've had a breakthrough. The intensity of the pain will lessen. You'll find that you can more easily--even naturally--speak the word blessings, and it flow from your spirit like living water. Your heart won't be quite as heavy, and you'll find your step a little lighter.

Remember...hope is our life-long friend.

It is hope that will bring us out of that dark dungeon into God's marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

Saddle Up – Life Changes – by Melissa Critz

I just love the smell of horses!

On a hot summer day, and when I say hot, I mean inferno hot, I pulled out the bathing items in order to wash my horses. With the intense heat of the sun pressing down on them daily while they grazed, the sweat poured out and the salt stayed. Due to this their skin got rather dry, especially Elijah who had some skin issues.

After having tied them to the bar fencing and gathered the hose, I started to spray them down – legs first – of course. This process consisted of lots of water and suds which therefore turned the ground into a muddy mess and then further covered me in the mess as well! But I didn't care. I was with my horses and enjoyed it all.

Sometimes while messing with them, I just wrapped my arms around their necks and hugged them and breathed in their scent. The word embrace had been playing in my head and continued every time I wrapped my arms around them. *Embrace* was a bittersweet word for me though, especially this time of year, as it coincided with some life changes. Warmth and cuddling initially came to my head when I heard the word embrace. However, this word also came to mind during seasons of great change, and I didn't necessarily feel a great deal of warmth or softness about the changes.

Summer break had ended. Lazy days, spontaneous outings, and late nights of family movie watching had come to a close. School had begun. College-age students had packed up rooms and trucks and headed to their respective universities. Students of primary or secondary schools had geared up with gathering supplies, purchasing clothes, and heading to sports practices.

It has happened once again.

Life Changes.

My two oldest had already moved back to school since they had to be there early for either RA duties or Welcome Week duties. Their rooms were empty and the two in high school already had missed their presence around the house.

While I was bathing the horses and enjoying their smell while hugging them, I heard my Saddle Partner say the words, "Embrace these life changes," several times.

What?

Are you kidding me?

Welcome a time when the family gets split up again?

A time when we lose half the laughter in our home?

A time when there is a presence of emptiness due to a change in our family dynamic?

***Welcome** life changes?*

Oh, but our Father is so wise. Being a parent is a difficult job but can also be oh so rewarding. The Lord gives us blessings in our children that we raise and train up to follow and know Him. They aren't ours to hold on to forever. They are His. We just have the blessing of having them around for a time period. There comes a time when we as parents must release those reins even more, if not completely, and let them run. This is when life changes.

Wow.

Supporting and accepting this change of my children growing into adults with enthusiasm is a mindset of being *eager for this time.*

My flesh fights this. I love our family times together. I treasure them and I always will. But He wants me to ***welcome these life changes,*** as this is what we as parents have been working our children towards – being independent and thriving adults for His kingdom.

Romans 5:3
"…we also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope."

James 1:2-4
"Consider it all joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various trials, knowing that they testing of your faith produces endurance. But endurance must do its complete work, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing."

For myself, and I know for many other parents at this time of year, this is definitely a time of afflictions and trials. I realize this you are reading this article in October, after the fact that college has begun along with school for the rest of the children. Even so, welcome this time. He has brought you to such a time as this to not bemoan the fact that life change has happened once again, but that it's *good change*.

THIS is SUPPOSED to happen.

- Embrace with enthusiasm knowing that you are doing His biding by releasing those reins a bit more, and maybe completely.
- Allow Him to perfect His work in your children. After all, He is in control, not you.
- Welcome all opportunities to know and grow in Him. He loves you and loves your children more than you can comprehend.

If you need to know my Saddle Partner more fully, then drop me a note in this column. I would love to chat more with you. And He is waiting.

Real Stories - The Four Lovies – by Sarah Stennett

I'm living the daily reality of being the primary caregiver of my four kids (all girls) ages 0-8 while my husband works at a church. His job often requires him to be away in the evenings and a large chunk of the day on Sundays, so as much as he helps with the girls (And he does. Seriously, he's a stellar dad.), he simply can't always be in the trenches with me. At home, four kids can work nicely. They entertain one another and when they have fights and disagreements, they can simply go and play with one of their other sisters instead. I like to get out of the house and take my girls to do things just like any mother of one or two kids would do. But yes, it gets exponentially difficult, especially with at least half of them being dependent on me.

We've recently moved across the country with our four in tow (a very exhausting experience), so the transition times have stretched me in ways I didn't know before. While chatting with a friend about my new life, I came up with a list of my **top three activities not recommended to do solo with four small(ish) kids**. You may wonder why do them at all if they are so challenging, but in the hot summer months, when the husband is working, the kids deserve great memories and I am the type of person who needs to get out of the house. So, if you have fewer than four kids, you may stop reading right now, but I assure you, it could become your life one day too. And it's always good to prepare yourself, or at least hear me out, so you can offer a helping hand when you encounter one of us moms carting around our little *Lovies.*

1. **The swimming pool.** My eight year old, Julianna, is a strong swimmer and does great, but my six year old, Claire is still a novice. Although she can tread water, she still requires my close attention and often some assistance. So you can picture me holding the ten month old on my left hip while trying to hold Abby's hand (she's three and a half now and, yes she wears a Puddle Jumper but is still very dependent on me) and stay in arms reach of Claire. And then Julianna swims in circles saying she's bored because there's nobody to swim and play with her. *Sigh.* And that's just IN the water. There's also the work required to pack them and the swim stuff, carry it all into the pool area, pick it all up, and deal with four dripping wet kids in addition to myself. In Texas, mastering the swimming pool with four small kids is a necessity, and I just had to fight through my anxious moments and stressed out experiences to develop a better system and a more grace-filled approach to parenting through it.
2. **The fro-yo shop**. My girls LOVE frozen yogurt and when it's hot out, I want to bring them joy with an occasional reward trip to fro-yo. Although Julianna is old enough to competently fill her own cup and add her own toppings, I can't trust that she do that solo for fear that her cup will cost my $10 in mostly gummy sharks and dripping yogurt spilling over the edges. So, if she is the oldest and that's the case, multiply my efforts by four (thankfully the baby doesn't get her own, but I do try to get some for myself too), and picture the crowded shop full of tiny sample cups and exuberant children pulling on the hems of their parents' shirts. And it feels like a bad reality show timing me to go through this crazy obstacle course in a small amount of time because you gotta pay before it all melts and the kids are forced to drink brown soup with gummy sharks swimming about.
3. **Bedtime.** Okay, you can't really avoid this one, and it happens EVERY DAY, sorry. The good news is that I usually have an amazing super stud father-of-the-year contender husband who assists in this task, but WOW. We have routines to

get them in pajamas ("no dessert until after jammies") and natural progression of brushing teeth, reading stories, and saying prayers together before giving them vitamins and kisses and turning out the lights. But trying to do this alone with a very willful and wound up 3 year old and a baby who inevitably needs a poopy diaper changed and wants to be nursed at the precise time of bedtime stories. I'll admit, even WITH my husband, the whole process feels like our daily sanity test.

The logistics of meeting the needs of several people at the same time is complicated, no matter where you are with your kids. I often feel like a triage nurse being bombarded with multiple injured patients at once, needing to assess which needs are the most critical. As physically needy as my little two are, my older two have needs that are equally important. Their emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs are greater at their ages and I often wonder if they are getting enough of me when it's all said and done. I sometimes feel as though I give so much of myself that I have no energy or mental space left at the end of the day. I know this is true for most mothers of younger children.

So how do we manage to nourish our own souls in the midst of these stressful and stretching times?

1. **Take care of me**. My physical and mental needs are managed at the same time if I can get out and exercise without the kids underfoot. I have several friends who successfully manage to work out at home when the kids are peacefully playing or napping, but for me, being at home takes away the escape aspect of the workout. I need to escape. I need to walk away from the house that needs to be cleaned, the kids wanting my attention, and the pantry needing to be restocked, and just go focus on me. My formula for success is at the gym where the childcare is competent and free and there are others to workout alongside me, pushing me to try harder.
2. **Pray throughout the day**, when your kids are around. For strength. And patience. And grace (for yourself and your kids). Take your anxieties to God instead of the bag of chocolates in your pantry. If you have to scream into your pillow or put yourself in timeout on your front porch, do it and vent to God. He will be with you, even in the tough moments.
3. **Surround yourself with a great team.** Laugh about the challenges with your husband, commiserate with fellow moms, and seek wise counsel from mothers who've been through the trenches of the young children years with multiple children. Don't let yourself feel isolated or alone because community will pull you through.

I find peace in knowing God has BLESSED me with each of these girls and even when it's tough, I am what they need.

Great is the faithfulness of the Lord because His mercies are new every morning.

I know I need them every single morning.

And a good cup of coffee.

Sarah is a mom of four beautiful little girls, wife to the ever-fabulous blogger/author/director/video producer/pastor Rob Stennett, and new resident of Austin, Texas. She's also a French teacher, currently on hiatus. She's passionate about Jesus, her family, great food, and all things French.

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Before the Cellphone – by Marcy Lytle

I have this idea that before the cellphone, we all had a little more faith, and a little less fear. In fact, life demanded that we have faith when we sent our kids off to drive for the first time, or when our husbands ran late because of traffic and we wondered where he was. We had a choice to either panic, or trust. And now that we all have cellphones, we don't have to trust so much anymore…

So I started thinking of other things, and not good ones, that have occurred since cellphones are now connected to us like glue…

Here are 10 of them:

We have grown impatient. One text to a friend with no reply in 60 seconds, and we think they're ignoring us.

We have become withdrawn. Instead of hearing a voice and chatting "in person," we'd rather text so that we can say what we want to, and not have to listen to what they have to say.

We make less eye contact. Instead of chatting with our neighbor while waiting for our car's oil to be changed, we have our neck bent, our fingers tapping, and our eyes glued at a tiny screen.

We are missing action. I've ridden in the car with my husband while he notes the sunset, that pretty tree, or the new building going up over there – and I've missed it all because I was scrolling Facebook.

We pray less. When waking up in the night, or resting our heads for a few minutes, we used to think, ponder, pray and believe for others…but now we text or look at Pinterest.

We have become less creative. Who needs creativity, when it's all there on Pinterest and someone else can show us how, demonstrate with photos, and give us steps to follow?

We isolate from family. Why should we play a board game with our kids, when we can hand them our phone and let them solve puzzles, while we multi-task in "peace?"

We can't tolerate the unknown. If we have a question, we ask Siri, or we google the answer, and there it is within seconds…some sort of answer that satisfies our curiosity.

We expect success everywhere. We google only the four-star restaurants with all great reviews, and we eat there and expect the best. And those with bad reviews? They don't even get a glance…

We favor the phone over intimacy. We'd rather see what she wrote, follow her tweet, look at her photos in Instagram rather than sit close to him in silence and hear his heartbeat…

I have to stop here, because I feel I could go on and on with what life has become since the cellphone has moved in as a member of our family. Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm all for having a cellphone. There's a list of good things about the little rectangular device, as well. But I do

want to become more aware, less attached, and certainly more in tune with how I'm spending my time in regards to my surroundings.

I don't want to miss the sunset, the eyes of a person in need of a little conversation, the hand being held out for me to grasp, or the child who just wants me to read her a book.

Those are the things we all experienced just a little bit more…before the cellphone.

FRESH THYME - Cracks in My Wall by Marcy Lytle

Every summer they appear. I know when it's dry outside, because the dry hands of the season start making their marks on my wall with cracks that emerge where there once were none. It's like that awful graffiti that shows up overnight on the side of a bridge, or the wall of a business. The night falls and the walls are clean, and the morning light comes and the ugliness appears.

I don't like those cracks, because when they appear they change the entire landscape of my home. My eyes are drawn to those wiggly lines that appear instead of to the beauty of the room's décor. I start to feel embarrassed about the cracks, wishing it would rain, so they would disappear again. But there they are; and they grow longer and wider, until the rains come.

As I sit staring at the cracks in my walls, I realize that I don't want visitors to come over because they might see them, too. And they might wonder about them, ask about them, and point to them and gasp. And I'd have to explain how the ground under my house is dry, and this causes doors to become tight and hard to open, and this results in these ugly cracks appearing that are so annoying.

All of these cracks send me into a tizzy of unrest, not realizing that…

Every one of my friends is in the same drought I'm currently in, and they just might have cracks in their walls, as well.

Every year these silly cracks appear and disappear, so why get all worked up about it?

Every crack is only a crack and not an indicator of who I am, or where I live.

We women get so messed up over fine lines, don't we? They not only appear on our walls in our homes, but on our faces! They start appearing with age, they get deeper with stress, and they become permanent as the decades roll on. We try to fight them, we "must" erase them, and we want to hide so no one sees them.

Cracks and lines are going to appear on the walls of our homes, and on our faces, and we have a choice:

We can lock our doors and keep guests away until the cracks disappear.

We can moisturize and get injections and spend our money to look good.

Or…

We can invite our visitors in and point to the beauty in our homes. If the cracks are noticed, we can smile and say with confidence, "They're only here for a season, until the rains come…"

We can smile proudly and twinkle our eyes as we walk down the street, head held high because we've earned those lines from years of courage, strength, and dignity.

I don't like the cracks in my walls, and I suppose I never will. But the ground on which I live shifts and settles as the seasons come and go, and that shifting shows up in my home. I don't

care for the fine lines that show up on my once youthful countenance, but those lines don't define my beauty. The reflection of His image does, and I hope that His light casts a shadow over the lines and illuminates His love and kindness toward others.

Got cracks in your walls and lines on your face?

Invite others in to see the beauty beside the cracks, and the amazing love alongside the lines, and I bet they'll want to say a while and enjoy your company…again and again…***because*** of the cracks in your walls.

FRESH THYME – Perfection

If I could just have:

- Assurance that my family and children will live healthy, long lives without suffering
- Enough money in the bank to pay all bills, with extra for vacations as needed, and some to give away
- A home with all the amenities for fun – like an outdoor kitchen, a game room, and a beautifully landscaped yard for enjoyment
- A healthy, fit, trim body so that all of my clothes look good on me, and I feel comfortable in my own skin
- Children that obey, are successful, and do well in school
- A husband who loves and adores me, meets my needs, sweeps me away on romantic nights…

Have you thought any of the above, and more?

What a perfect life it would be if it was all about me!

Let's take each one of those and see what life would really be:

The first wish of assurance would require no faith on our part, and because we're human would result in reckless living because there would be no consequences of death or accident, since our lives would be untouched by suffering or pain…or even death. Therefore, when those who don't have a God like ours (who grants this selfish request) experience loss and suffering, we would have no compassion because we're wrapped up in living life to the excess that we can.

The money wish only breeds more greed for money, because there's never enough when we start acquiring "things." Pretty soon what we have begins to look old and not as nice as "theirs" and so we want more. We become pompous and self-righteous because we've got all we need, and we're giving to the poor, so we must be pretty awesome… And eventually, pride will be our downfall as we begin to look down on those without the luxuries that we experience.

That home with all the amenities will still be the home that our children grow up in and leave, and we'll be stuck with it all, alone and empty. And we will acquire some friends just because we have that home, and will become the envy of those around us. This will make us feel worthy of that envy, and puffed up, and quite satisfied with our surroundings, feeling no need for anything else but to sit, sip, and sneer at those "beneath" us.

The perfect body is what all of America is seeking, right? We are obsessed with finding that perfect balance between eating and exercising and looking good, so that we don't succumb to that awful part of life called aging and middle-age bulge. And if we have this perfect body we will draw others to lust after us, talk about us, and want to be us. What could make life better?

Our children reflect who we are as parents, so if they **are successful** and perfect little clones of us or our ideals, then others will praise us, and that will feel so good. We will feel as though

we have achieved something great – producing perfection out of our union with our spouses – and what else could be a finer testament to a life well lived?

And finally, if we have **husbands who dote** on us, bring us gifts, rub our feet, and plan romantic dates, then we will know that we are special, loved, beautiful, and valued by him. We will never be lonely, and when we're dissatisfied or restless, he will show up on his white horse with roses in hand, chocolates on the table, and oh – we'll be able to eat them without guilt – because our body is perfect.

Does all of that sound appealing?

Think about your own kids…in reality. Think about the children you know who've been handed everything they want and granted every desire they've wished for, and what do these children become? Brats! They start demanding even more, they become impatient and mean, and they end up hating their parents. In other words, there's absolutely nothing good about having everything perfect, as we see it, in this life.

At the end of Matthew 5 we are told this,

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

And that perfection is not anything like we call living a perfect life, described above.

All of Matthew 5 is about relationship and matters of the heart. And in verse 20 Jesus says that unless our righteousness surpasses that of the world, we will in no way enter into his kingdom.

The world seeks the perfect life.

We must seek the perfect One.

And that kind of life living results in being unaware and having no care for the list above, only the purpose to love as He has loved us…

Some Days by Marcy Lytle

There are some days I'd rather be saving for a vacation than plunking dollars in a plate for the poor.

There are some days I'd rather stay home and work in the garden than sit on a chair at church.

There are some days I'd rather complain about the small things instead of giving thanks for big things.

There are some days I'd rather cry because I feel frumpy than smile because I'm healthy.

There are some days I'd rather feel pitiful because I'm lonely instead of realizing I have friends.

There are some days I'd rather think no one cares than the truth that that's a lie.

There are some days I'd rather waste my time reading a magazine than reading a bible quote.

There are some days I'd rather look around at what I don't have instead of realize my worth.

There are some days I'd rather eat what I crave than eat what's the rave.

There are some days I'd rather whine about lack of funds than whistle about bills paid.

There are some days I'd rather fly to another planet than watch this one die.

There are some days I'd rather despise those who hurt me instead of anything else at all.

Those are a dozen thoughts that spilled out of me this Friday morning as I sit at my desk working, thinking, and feeling all sorts of emotions that have tangled up me this week. It's the same mess that happens when I throw several necklaces in a bag for travel, only to find they are a knotted mess when I arrive at my destination, and I don't wear any of them. Because they're knotted and it's too hard to unknot them… Oh, I know I should have used a straw or wrapped them in tissue before I packed, but I didn't.

There are some days we just don't have the energy, the fortitude, the strength, or the desire to feel and think what we think is "right" so we default into thinking that which is just there…in our minds.

I can write a list of scriptures to go with each one of the above statements, to counteract them, and shame us all into thinking better, lifting our thoughts, and feeling guilty for such nonsense…

But I'm not going to.

I'm going to leave it at that.

Because *some days* happen. They don't define us, they're not *all days*, and they're just part of living and getting tired and weary.

I know rest will happen. I know truth will trump the lies. I know my spirit will soar.

But for today, I'd just rather…

And He still loves me in all of my *rathering* …which makes me feel quite loved and okay.

FRESH THYME – Teamwork – by Marcy Lytle

I saw this photo of my nephew's and niece's kids and was inspired to write about just what my nephew's wife titled the photo – "Teamwork." I fell in love with the simplicity of one cousin on her hands and knees giving a boost to her smaller cousin so she could have a view over the railing of the bridge…with older cousin standing behind to keep the younger one steady.

I think I could probably just post this photo and write nothing, and we'd all learn something of use, but just in case we need more, here it is…

A friend calls and she can't see straight because she's been crying all night due to her sister's plight of family drama, abuse, and now physical sickness, as well. She's been crying constantly and is quite hysterical, unable to find a reason for this suffering and a purpose to the pain.

We get on our knees like Selah, pictured, and we stay there **in position** – in prayer – until our friend can see clearly and enjoy the view again.

We find ourselves in need again of the same encouragement and the same helping hand, because we've failed too many times. We've tried, we're tired, and we just want to sit down and look at the ground where we also want to lie down and go to sleep…forever.

But, wait! Over there, our friend is on her knees **in position** – in prayer – and it's our job to climb up on her faith and look out over what she's seen, where she's been, and what she's believing for – and allow her to be our strength for the moment.

She's finally seeing it. Our friend has hope, she's elevated her sights to see over her troubles, and she's smiling at the view and ready to move forward but her foot slips, her job is in jeopardy again, she is disappointed one more time and her head starts to turn away.

There we stand! Behind her we we've got her back. She won't fall because our hand is there to steady her and encourage her to keep looking forward. We're behind her **in position** – hands held firm – holding her up when her knees are weak.

We all find ourselves being the person on our knees, the one in need of a boost, the lady who can't see past her nose, or the steady one when others are crumbling – because we all go through changes as we walk across bridges, pass through waters, and run through the forests of life.

The coolest thing about this picture is that these three kids found a way to give the short one the vision they had, to be the base and rock so could she get up higher, and to be the steady hand

so she wouldn't fall backward. There wasn't a chance in the world that little girl was going down or moving away without seeing the beauty over the railing of that bridge!

I don't know where you are today – if you're the steady hand or the wobbly knees – but your Father is right there surrounding you with all you need. He has friends in your life that will be there with you before you fall. He himself intercedes to his Father for you while you sleep. And of course he sets before you the beauty of open waters for you to see if you climb up on his shoulders and look…

Teamwork is actively seeking and being the body of Christ to those in need, and actively receiving and enjoying the body of Christ when we find ourselves being the ones in need.

And it sure does make for a beautiful snapshot for the world to see…

FRESH THYME - Up and Running – by Marcy Lytle

My laptop kept shutting off whenever I was on it for more than an hour at a time. What an inconvenience it would be to have to take it into a shop and miss my work time! And I really didn't want to spend my money on a repair, if I didn't have to do so.

So I did what any hopeful, God-loving person might do.

I prayed.

Yes, I prayed that whatever was wrong with my laptop would fix itself without any inconvenience or expense to me.

The next morning it worked; it stayed on for a good while, and I was excited…until it shut off…again.

So I called a repair shop, asked about what might be occurring, and the guy had a quick answer, that I definitely needed to bring it in. I decided to ask about another issue while I had him on the phone – the screen I had was dropped and several light pixels were messed up – causing me frustration when I worked. He said he could fix both of these things.

But I had to take my laptop to his shop and leave it there…and wait…and pay.

Now I'm getting to the good part, the part where lessons are learned from just living and working and *computer-ing.*

Today I saw some ugly spots in my heart and attitudes. I wanted them to just go away, so I prayed, like I have a thousand times before when the same ugly attitudes arose. But nothing happened. I wanted to just feel different with God's merciful sweeping hand.

Instead, he spoke to me.

"You don't pray about some things – you just complain."

"You are being ungrateful."

This "fix" that I needed required more than just a sweep of God's magic wand (which he doesn't even own or use.) It required pausing, stopping, and getting on my knees to present my requests to God, and it necessitated that I pay some time adjusting my attitude back towards gratefulness.

I remember a sermon I heard a while back about how we all beg God at times saying, "But God, why aren't you helping me out here?" (While we line out our needs and desires)

And God points over there to where he IS at work, but not on what We think is the problem or issue.

Let's pretend here that God is the tech in this story. I had to call that guy, present my problem, and trust that he had expertise and tools that I didn't own. And then I had to drive to his shop,

leave my laptop there, wait until it was fixed, and pay my time and money. God has tools I don't have, and he sometimes has to peer inside to the tiny details of my heart and get to work. And that takes time and it requires a bit of sacrifice on my part.

I wanted a quick fix of my laptop shutting off, but in taking it in for repair, I got a thorough cleaning (dust and dirt were making it heat up and shut off), plus I got another screen for my laptop, and now everything is visibly clear! And…God provided the money to pay.

I'm sure God could have swiped the dirt out and erased the messed up pixels when I prayed, but that's not what he chose to do. **He had other things in mind, and chose to provide me the money to pay for a fix, instead of a fix without expense.**

Today, I realized that I had neglected to pray about one of the issues that was causing me grief, and I had become ungrateful in my heart for the great life I've been given. And both of those things made me heated up, shut down, and unable to see clearly.

If God isn't answering your prayer like you've petitioned him to do, maybe take time to sit and listen to what he might be telling you to do. And then obey – and see his provision come – in his own innovative way.

We don't want inconvenience, frustration, or expense.

But sometimes that's just what we need to be up and running and of good use again…

A BUNDLE OF

THYME

December 2015

TIPS

The Dressing – The Long Sweater – by Marcy Lytle

I have several long sweaters that I love for the fall season, and I see them everywhere in the stores. There are so many styles to choose from, and they are a great alternative to a bulky coat, if you enjoy the layered look. And there are lots of ways to wear them! They look cute cinched in at the waist, if you want the sweater to be part of your ensemble, or they can hang loose if the long cover-up is worn more as a means of staying warm. The long sweater is so versatile and is easy to remove, once you're indoors where the warmth is waiting…

Here are a few of my favorites I've found about town…

This first "duster" is one that I purchased for myself from Rue 21. Not only is the burnt orange color such a rich hue for fall, but this long sweater isn't too heavy. It can be worn over leggings and a shirt, or even just over a dress. The color of what you wear underneath it peeks through the crocheted knit and the pattern is awesome!

Check out this geometric pattern on the bottom of this open front cardigan. Then notice how a pretty hue of leggings and a simple plaid blouse complete the outfit! This long sweater is found at Old Navy and the dark gray color goes with just about anything underneath – from red, to purple, to navy– and more!

See this super long sweater? This length is my absolute favorite and looks stunning over skinny jeans and booties. And the front slit pockets make this sweater even more attractive. What a great piece for slipping on over your outfit for the movies, a day of shopping, or a night out. This one is from Target.

Sometimes a wrap that hangs loose is a great piece for the fall, because it's comfy, it's easy to throw on without the tightness of actual sleeves, and like pictured here – one solid color of a turtleneck and leggings – and you're good to go! The one in this photo is from Charming Charlie, and they have some awesome belts, as well, that can be used to pull in the waist!

Fringe is everywhere this season; as is plaid, and this next piece combines both for a casual look over your favorite graphic tee. Check out the back of this sweater – it's shorter than the front – and it's oh so cute! Tilly's sells this piece, and we love it over jeans. Oh, and the sleeves can roll up too, for an even more sporty look!

Okay, this next piece is not super long, but we had to include it because it's so cool! The two color combo and the elbow patches give this sweater a thumbs-up for winter layering with style! This piece comes in lots of colors from JC Penney. The drape-y front looks so pretty, and what a great sweater for this fall season!

Did you know there is such a thing called a coatigan? Well, there is! It's at New York & Company, and it's so nice and dresses up any outfit! This winter berry color looks great cinched at the waist with a belt, and the nice collar with the fringe looks amazing from the back. What a great piece to be worn casual…or dressy…for date night out!

It’s hard to stop sharing all of the great long sweaters out there, but I will share a few tips I’ve found in wearing them. Check the washing instructions, and hang-dry the ones that say to do so. Long sweaters look best over jean or pants without back pockets and flaps, so that they lay flat and smooth. Pick your favorite and leave it by the front door on a hook, so you can grab it as you leave. And finally, be creative and bold – try mixing patterns in your shirt underneath with those in your sweater.

Enjoy comfort and warmth this month with a long sweater, as we approach the holiday season…

Seven for You – Simply Show It – by Marcy Lytle

The holiday season is upon us, but we've got Thanksgiving Day coming up first. It's the day of preparing what seems like a million dishes, all to be eaten in matter of minutes. And giving thanks? Well, that's just something we do quickly, before we pass the turkey. However, many families opt to slow down, make time, and figure out ways to purposefully give thanks on Thanksgiving. Of course, we should be thankful all year long, but we're not. And we should voice our thanksgiving to others daily, but we don't.

Wouldn't it be fun to include fun ways of showing our thanks this month to our family and friends, in ways they might least expect it? Here are some ideas that won't cramp your style or cause you to add too much more to your already growing to-do list. And we're hoping that as you all give thanks when Turkey Day actually arrives, your hearts will be full before your stomachs yearn for that one more bite of mashed potatoes!

Thank Him…

1. *For the family*: Take a stack of sticky notepads and give one to each member of the family. Their task is to write notes daily and place them on pillows, bathroom mirrors, steering wheels, shoes, etc. of family members throughout the month – thanking them for something specific.
2. *For the food:* On one particular meal that you have together as a family this month, make the conversation turn towards thanking God for food. Discuss one way your family can give to a local food bank, volunteer at a soup kitchen, or just bake a loaf of bread for a friend. Brainstorm, and write it on the calendar, and make it happen.
3. *For covering:* Ask your family members to find three items from their closet to donate, placing a cardboard box or basket by the front door with a date on it – for their three items. The next time the family goes out together, take the box and let the kids drop it off at your local Goodwill or a place of your choosing. Before you drive off, give thanks for the clothes you wear and pray for those in need.
4. *For friends:* One Sunday, purpose as a family to text two friends and thank them for something about their character, something they've done for you, or just for being a good friend. Sit down over dessert that night and share the texts and responses, and then pray for your friends.
5. *For beauty:* Grab a blanket, a thermos of something hot, and some oatmeal cookies and get outside as a family for an hour of doing nothing – except giving thanks for the sky, the trees, the cool breezes, the fall colors, the pretty clouds, etc. – and then close your eyes and rest under the canopy of His love.
6. *For others:* One morning, before the family heads out, ask each one to offer verbal thanks to two people today – for something small. It might be thanking a teacher for her hard work, complimenting a co-worker for showing up on time, or hugging a friend for her awesome smile. Share over dinner the thanksgiving in your hearts.
7. *For health:* Gather together before bedtime, every family member, and kneel beside the sofa or mom/dad's bed. Out loud, thank God for a particular time you were sick and now

you're well. If one person is presently ill, begin to give thanks for God's healing and provision. Clap together as a family in thanksgiving to Him.

Now that wasn't so hard, was it? If you do all seven of these acts of thanksgiving this month, then the actual day of Thanksgiving will just be an extension of your happy hearts as you gather together, and finally fall into your chair to eat that wonderful food that's prepared.

Selah's Style – Hand-Me-Down Designs – by Selah Irwin

Dont you just love to get a bag of hand-me-downs? I sure do. I love to see how I can mix and match them with the things I already have in my very own wardrobe to make new trendy outfits.

My friend Lydia was so kind to give me her outgrown styles. She is 16, so the clothes are still a bit too big for me. But that didn't stop me from making fabulous fashion!

Don't you just adore this little black dress? Even though it is still a couple sizes too big, I made it work. She also gave me a long sleeve pink shirt. I layered that with my own leggings and amusing pink hat to bring out the glory in this outfit.

Check out this bedazzled sequin-y tank top! It is also....too big! I used the same black beauty from above as an undergarment and the tank on the top makes it look like a skirt. It is cold outside so I added a cute black crop jacket from the store Justice. This dress is very versatile!

On a cold winter day, it's nice to wrap up in a cozy outfit and get snuggled in. Like I said, everything is too big, but it does not matter when you use Naartjie fuzzy leggings to go under it.

Here is an interesting factoid. My mom gave Lydia this skirt as a gift when she was my age! Now it has traveled back to me. I borrowed my mom's vintage blue sweater to sass it up!

Look how much fun hand-me-downs can be!

One woman's trash is another woman's treasure!!!!! Thank you Lydia!

The Fearless Kitchen - There's a New Pie in Town – by Christina Vetter

Thanksgiving season is upon us! No matter what part of the meal you make, the pressure in the kitchen is on. If you're in charge of desserts this year, take a breath, because we are here to help. Traditional pumpkin pie, pecan pie, and apple pie recipes are a dime a dozen, and the brutal truth is that many of the store bought versions are just as good as homemade, without all the labor.

But you're better than store bought.
You're better than simply satisfactory.
You're better than a previously frozen $20.00 pie with a shamefully cracked crust.

However, these grab-and-go pies are awfully tempting. Why go through the hassle of making a traditional pumpkin pie when a store bought one tastes so similar? You don't.

Instead, you orchestrate a pie that makes the regular pie cower in embarrassment. *Wow* your guests this fall season with a Bourbon-Maple Pumpkin Pie, a Chocolate Caramel-Pecan Tart, or an oozing Apple Crisp. These pies will look beautiful on any Thanksgiving spread, but don't be afraid to pair them with your honey and two forks on a random Tuesday night, as well.

Happy Thanksgiving, everyone. I hope you have a very blessed beginning to a blessed holiday season.

Apple Crisp **Difficulty:**
Serves 6

Baked apples just scream "Fall!" and whether they're served in an elegant crisp or simply tossed with spices, I can't get enough of them. Serve this apple crisp by itself or topped with vanilla bean ice cream this fall season and you won't be dissapointed.

<u>Ingredients:</u>
Filling
5 granny smith apples, cored, peeled, and cut into 1" cubes
½ C sugar
2 tsp lemon juice
1 tsp vanilla extract
1 ½ tsp cinnamon
1 tsp nutmeg
¼ tsp salt

Topping
1 stick butter
1 C brown sugar
¼ tsp salt

1 C flour
1/3 C oats

Directions:
-Preheat oven to 350F.
-Combine apples, sugar, lemon juice, vanilla, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt together in a 8x8 baking dish. Mix well.
-In a small sauce pan, melt butter over medium heat. Add brown sugar and salt, and mix together. Add flour and oats and mix together until incorporated.
-Crumble mixture evenly over top of apples.
-Bake for 50-60 minutes, or until topping is golden brown and apples are bubbling.

Bourbon-Maple Pumpkin Pie **Difficulty:**

Serves 8
Recipe courtesy of *Bon Appetit*

This upgraded version of pumpkin pie is like riding first class on the desserts train. True, traditional pumpkin pie is wonderful, but with the addition of a flaky chocolate crust, and the undertones of bourbon, this pie is on a whole other level. You will need dried beans or pie weights for this recipe.

Ingredients:
Chocolate Pie Dough
¼ C plus 1 Tbsp unsweetened cocoa powder
3 ½ Tbsp sugar
1 tsp salt
1 ¼ C plus 1 Tbsp flour (plus more for dusting)
6 Tbsp cold unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
2 Tbsp cold vegetable shortening, cut into small pieces
1 large egg yolk
½ tsp apple cider vinegar

Filling:
Flour for dusting
4 large eggs
1 (15oz) can pumpkin puree
¼ C sour cream
2 Tbsp bourbon
1 tsp cinnamon
½ tsp salt
¼ tsp ground ginger
¼ tsp ground nutmeg
1/8 tsp ground allspice

¾ C pure maple syrup
1 tsp vanilla extract
1 C heavy cream

Directions:

Dough

-Pulse cocoa, sugar, salt and 1 ¼ C plus 1 Tbsp flour in a food processor to combine.
-Add butter and shortening and pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal with a few pea size pieces of butter remaining. Transfer to a large bowl.
-Whisk egg yolk, vinegar, and ¼ C ice water in a small bowl. Drizzle half of egg mixture over flour mixture and, using a fork, mix gently until just combined.
-Add reamining egg mixture and mix until dough just comes together (you will have some unincorporated pieces).
-Turn dough out onto a lightly floured surface, flatten slightly, and cut into quarters. Stack pieces on top of one another, placing unincorporated dry pieces of dough between the layers, and press down to combine.
-Repeat process twice, to incorportate all pieces. Form dough into a 1" thick disk, wrap in plastic wrap, and chill for at least an hour.
*- Dough can be made two days ahead, or three months ahead if frozen.

Filling and Assembly

-Roll out disk on a lightly floured surface into a 14" round.
-Transfer to a 9" pie dish. Lift up edge and allow dough to slump down into dish. Trim, leaving 1" overhang. Fold overhang and crimp edges.
-Chill in freezer for 15 minutes.
-Place rack in middle of oven and preheat to 350 F.
-Line pie with parchment paper or foil. Leaving 1 1/2" overhang. Fill with pie weights or dried beans.
-Bake until crust is dry around the edge, about 20 minutes.
-Remove paper and weights and bake until surface of crust looks dry, about 10-15 minutes.
-Brush bottom and sides of crust with 1 beaten egg, return to oven, and bake three minutes longer. (This will prevent a soggy crust)
-Whisk together pumpkin, sour cream, bourbon, cinnamon, salt, ginger, nutmeg, allspice, and remaining three eggs in a large bowl; set aside.
-Pour maple syrup into a small sauce pan, add vanilla extract, and bring to a boil.
-Reduce heat to a medium high and simmer, stirring occasionally, until mixture is thickenedand small puffs of steam start to release, about three minutes.
-Remove from heat and add cream in 3 additions, stirring after each addition until smooth.
-Gradually whisk hot maple cream into pumpkin mixture.
-Place pie dish on a rimmed baking sheet and pour in filling. Bake pie, rotating halfway through until set around the edge but center barely jiggles, 50-60 mintes.
-Transfer pie to a baking rack and let pie cool.
*- Pie can be made one day ahead. Cover and chill until use if needed.

Chocolate- Caramel Pecan Tart **Diificulty:**

Serves 12

Recipe courtesy of *Bon Appetit*

Bon Appetit Magazine calls this recipe a "candy bar of a tart," and that is the perfect description for it. Toasted pecans, chocolate, and caramel set to perfection under a sprinkling of flaked sea salt makes for a delicious dessert this Thanksgiving.

Ingredients:

Tart Dough:
1 Tbsp sugar
½ tsp salt
1 C flour, plus more for surface
6 Tbsp chilled butter, cut into small pieces
1 large egg, beaten to blend

Filling:
2 C pecans
1 ¼ C sugar
¼ C light corn syrup
¼ C heavy cream
2 Tbsp bourbon (optional)
1 oz bittersweet chocolate, coarsely chopped
2 Tbsp unsalted butter, cut into pieces
1 tsp salt
Flaky sea salt

Directions:

Dough:
-Whisk together sugar, salt, and 1 C flour in a medium bowl. Add butter and rub in with fingers until mixture resembles a coarse meal with a few pea-size pieces remaining.
-Drizzle egg over butter mixture and mix gently with a fork until dough just comes together.
-Turn out dough onto a lightly floured surface and knead until smooth.
-Form dough into a disk, wrap in plastic wrap, and chill until firm, about 2 hours.

Filling:
-Place rack in middle of oven and preheat to 350 F.
-Toast pecans on a rimmed baking sheet, tossing occasionally, until fragrant and darkened, 10-15 minutes (you want them well toasted). Let cool and coarsely chop.
-Let dough sit at room temperature for five minutes before rolling.
-Roll out dough on a lightly floured surface into a 13" round. Transfer to a 8x8 pan or 10" tart pan.

-Lift up edge and allow dough to slump down into pan; trim excess. Prick dough in a few places with a fork to prevent bubbles.
-Cover with parchment paper or foil, leaving overhang. Fill with dried beans or pie weights.
-Place pan on rimmed baking sheet and bake until crust is just golden and dry around the edges, about 10-15 minutes.
Remove pie weights and foil and bake until golden brown, about 10-15 minutes longer. Transfer pan to a wire rack and let crust cool.
-Meanwhile, cook sugar and corn syrup in a medium pot over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until dark amber, 8-10 minutes.
-Remove from heat and, whisking, gradually add cream and bourbon, if using.
-Add chocolate, butter, and salt, stirring until chocolate and butter are melted. Stir in pecans.
-Scrape filling into crust, and sprinkle with sea salt.
-Let sit at room temperature at least an hour before slicing.
*Tip: Tart can be baked 3 days ahead. Store tightly wrapped at room temperature.

Tried and True – 10 Options for Lunch – by Marcy Lytle

When my kids were home, lunch for years was limited to just a few options like turkey sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and maybe chicken salad and crackers. However, the kids are gone and I now make my husband's lunches, along with my own, and I don't want those same old three choices over and over again.

It's taken a while to think of them, try them, and make them, but I now have ways to use my groceries to create some interesting options of at least two weeks' worth of fun lunches, before I start them over again…or dream up another creation.

Pasta Salad: Use cold pasta top with roasted veggies, add a bit of squeezed lemon, include a fork and there you go! This is a great way to use up leftover pasta and/or vegetables you've eaten as a side dish at dinner.

Colorful wraps: Purchase flavored tortillas (spinach and sun-dried tomato) and layer veggies with your choice of meat (or not) along with other things you might have, like olives, roasted red peppers, onions – the sky's the limit! Try honey cream cheese or jam as a spread!

Hot Dog tacos: These are best if a microwave is available before you eat. Chop up franks and place in a skillet with Velveeta cheese and some salsa (keeping mixture thick). Place in a small flour tortilla and roll up – this is so tasty!

Spirals: Use the same colorful tortillas and this time use all flat ingredients that can easily be rolled – turkey, ham, cheeses, mustard or your favorite spread, and roll up – cut into rounds – and these are fun to eat because they're so cute!

Chicken biscuits: Take your leftover chicken, and either use store-bought biscuits or make from scratch on the weekend and use these during the week. Top the biscuit with the chicken, slices of pickle, and a bit of peppered mayo on the biscuit. Or why not send breakfast sausage and jelly for a breakfast for lunch?

That's one week's worth of ideas Monday – Friday. Now here's another…

Toast Toppers: Toast a couple slices of bread and bag them. Include a container of a couple of spreads. One delicious idea is sliced avocado with lemon juice, toasted pine nuts, a bit of pesto, freshly torn basil and Parmesan cheese. Include a small spreader for making.

PB dessert lunch: One of my favorite lunches is a big spoonful of peanut butter with a side of mini chocolate chips and pretzels. It's a great combo that hits every taste bud! Include fresh sliced strawberries as a side.

A "pear" of nuts: This doesn't sound like much but it's super filling! Sliced pear, a handful of mixed nuts, and cheddar cheese slices make the meal. Seriously, this is satisfying AND plenty.

Hot and ready: Now that fall is here, use that insulated soup mug that's hiding in your cabinet. Heat up any of your dinner leftovers or soups or even beans/rice, and toss them in the mug for a warm hearty surprise of a lunch.

Salad surprise: Take your leafy greens that you've got in your veggie drawer and pile everything you've not eaten from the week on top – chicken strips or steak, red onion slices, grated cheese, a few nuts or cranberries, raw veggies, etc. – clean out the fridge! Make your own dressing or just pour a store bought one into a small container, include a fork and a few Wheat Thins, and lunch is served.

I've found that I have little bits of all of our meals left over after a few days and when I stare at them long enough, an idea emerges of how to pack them in our lunch in a tasty new combo.

What have you tried?

Bonus for a weekend picnic:

Skewers: *These are so fun to create. Use your choice of about four items to make pretty skewers on long toothpicks or short wooden sticks. You can use leftover chicken nuggets, meatballs, cubes of cheese, cucumbers, olives…or even make fruit skewers with the fruit that's in season. Include your favorite dip! These can be made the night before and packed up the next morning.*

HOME

Practical Parenting – This Treasure called Thankfulness – by Mandy Major

Throughout the course of my life I have often struggled with discontentment. I had this deep inner drive, knowing I was created for more than this.

During our early years of motherhood, this feeling of discontentment is often prevalent.

- Maybe it's because when we have little ones, the days are so long.
- Maybe it's because we moms are often doing the same thing all day long and having nothing to show for it at the end of the day.
- Maybe it's because getting out of the house is so hard.
- Maybe it's because our first interaction with an adult is so often our husbands coming home after his long day.

Regardless of the reasons, my soul cried out deep and long during those days, and honestly, sometimes still.

And then I discovered something powerful enough to not just change my attitude but to change my entire outlook on life! Something powerful enough to transform a mundane day into something beautiful…amazing even! Colors were brighter, a raindrop became extraordinary, and light reflecting off the window was captivating!

What was this treasure I discovered, you wonder?

It was discovering how to cultivate a thankful heart. It came to me in the form of a book from a dear friend who had just finished a writing retreat and picked up this treasure from a fellow writer.

Have you ever experienced reading a book in perfect timing of the soul? This was one of those moments for me. And it came to me in the form of making a list, a numbered list of 1000 things I was thankful for. The book, now on the bestseller list, is Ann Voscamp's *One Thousand Gifts*.

For me, this was the key to unlock my dissatisfied soul and find freedom and thankfulness in the repetitive, messy, slow yet sweet, beautiful life of early motherhood.

Numbers on a blank page, becoming lists, becoming beautiful:

164. Sunlight streaming in…
179. Quiet moment with coffee…
468. Friends who speak truth....
570. Book club....

Flowers, joy, new shampoo, the beach, the water...

The list goes on and on... way past 1000 now!

And as I look back and examine my soul, I find am content to be.

- To embrace the struggle in my soul and not to fight it.
- To live where I am.
- To love those around me.
- To find freedom in thankfulness.

This month as Thanksgiving draws near, I challenge you. Start *your* list! See what beauty it can unlock in your own life of this season of motherhood.

Being thankful is more than a feeling. It is a muscle that requires some exercise. And when stretched, it changes the shape of our lives.

Life as We Know It - From Response to Responsible – by Erica Simmons

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

I Corinthians 13:11 NIV

This is the verse that quickened my spirit when God revealed the topic of this month's "Life as I know It" moment.

It happened a few months ago when I was heading out to the garage. The garbage caught my eye. Once again it needed to be taken out and I *know* Jerimiah noticed. I called him and he came and did what I asked. As he was doing it, I remarked,

"You know, it is time for you and your brother to be responsible and not just responsive when I tell you do what you know you are supposed to do."

This lesson is hitting home all the more for me as I look at my nephew struggling to bridge the gap between being 17 and being 18. He graduated from high school and has had a couple of jobs making hundreds of dollars a week. My dad was buying his car and my sister was paying his insurance and providing him a place to stay. Losing my dad was hard on him, emotionally, as Dad was the only father he knew. On top of that, he is now responsible for paying for his car, and my sister wants him to also pay for his insurance.

What's the problem with that?

No one has ever taught him to be responsible.

I recall a conversation I had with him about blowing his money and I will never forget his response,

"Aunt Erica, you think I don't know that I blow too much money? The world is a shiny place for an 18 year old."

A young man seeking identity and balance is struggling because he never made the transition from response (doing what he was told) to responsibility (knowing what to do and doing it.)

As with all aspects of parenting, knowing when and if you are being successful at guiding your child from responding to your request, to being responsible and doing what is expected, looks different for each family and each child. I wonder if I am doing enough to ensure my boys are making progress and at times the enemy whispers in my ear that it is not enough; they are not going to make it. Those are the times I go to war and hit my knees and pray protection around them.

There is one sure fire way to destroy any progress we are making with our children in any area and that is to let the enemy cause us to panic, and we then go overboard with our efforts.

Praising God for the Progress

I see the transition happening in my boys and when I do, I give God the praise. They now clean the family room a few times a week (oh, but the damage they can do between cleanings.) They take the initiative to get missing work in at school (but you know as parents, we want to know

why they have missing work in the first place.) I give praise to God that it is less, and not as many, subjects as in the past.

For me, I had to realize where my boys were and start to make a conscience choice to begin the transition. It was also important to acknowledge to them and myself the areas where they are responsible and are already making good choices.

In the light of my nephew's struggles, I am ever diligent in this endeavor, and it has renewed my sense of prayer over my sons in this area. I am asking God to reveal to me where and how I am to parent them to be responsible. He shows me areas and He gives me resources, one of which was a parenting class that I was able to attend at my church.

My biggest take away and one I offer to you is:

We can't compare our children or family to anyone else's children or family. We are where WE are. And the great thing is that our Heavenly Father is the Supreme Master of meeting us where WE are.

I surrender my children to Him and I pray over their lives in this area and look for teachable moments to open the conversation with them, and I trust and KNOW God's faithfulness is more than enough.

I Don't Do Teens – Junk or Juice? – by Marcy Lytle

I have two children, who are grown now. But when they were home, they were opposites when it came to eating food. I raised them the same, set the same food on the table, and one child was adventurous and tried it all. However, the other one sneered at most dishes, unless they included potatoes or meat. And I wondered and worried about the one who avoided all healthy food and only gravitated toward the dishes that were fried, covered with gravy, or ended with something chocolate with ice cream on top.

Healthy eating is all the rage, now. From the time toddlers get their full set of teeth we're feeding them carrots and celery sticks in a bag, offering them little tubs of yogurt, and keeping them from ever being introduced to fast food. *But what about our teens?* They're starting to hang with friends; they enjoy watching television and playing games, and both of those activities involve snacking on junk food. In fact, what's a good time with friends without pizza and donuts?

Yes, it's true that habits from our childhood tend to stick with us as we enter adulthood, so it is important to train our kids to eat well. But it's also true that once they're off to college, away from home, late night studying ensues, lots of fun at coffee shops and eateries takes place, and very little time and space for cooking is possible – they're going to eat junk food – most likely.

So what are some ways we can train our teens with healthy habits for eating that hopefully will stick with them even through the madness as they approach adulthood?

We can eat well, ourselves. Teens are still watching us, even when we think they never look our way. If we eat in moderation, drink lots of water, and fill our refrigerator with vegetable and fruit options, they'll have that picture stuck in their heads. If we skip breakfast, binge on a bag of cookies, and drink coffee in order to function, they will notice that too.

We can ease up on them. Forcing teens to drink the same green smoothie we're making for ourselves, punishing them when they make incorrect food choices, and constantly preaching about the hazards of fast food probably will make them want to run the other direction. Eating healthy is a lifestyle, but an occasional fun treat, and a bag of fries is not harmful. In fact, if we ease up on the finger pointing and still maintain our example in front of them, they'll see and notice.

We can curb our conversations as well as our own appetites. If our teens hear us constantly complain about our own bodies, see us striving to look "good" at all costs, they will either follow suit and develop an unhealthy body image…or run the other way and eat all they can. Food doesn't have to control or define us. It can be enjoyed in all of its aspects, in moderation, and we can learn to love ourselves so that our teens are well-balanced as well.

We can make a few changes. Instead of filling our refrigerators with soft drinks, how about providing water bottles? They're a lot cheaper and maybe our teens will grab them as they head out the door. Cut up fruit into bite-sized pieces and place in small to-go containers, with a toothpick. The cute packaging will make you all want to eat what's inside. Make time for meals

around the table, instead of in front of the television. Serve each plate proper portions, and converse over dinner.

We can educate ourselves as a family. Include your teens on grocery shopping trips and give them a list of items, encouraging them to look at serving sizes and calories and sodium content and fat percentages. This doesn't have to be a heavy burden, but let them share with you what they learn as they choose wisely. And by all means, send them to the produce department – or better yet – to your own herb garden or vegetable garden for picking all they want!

Teens will begin that separation process from us sooner than we want them to, but as long as they live at home, all the way through high school and sometimes college, we can be good examples, educators, and encouragers in the food department. And we can still be the parent and say "No" to taking food to the bedroom and eating in bed…all night long.

Everything Home - Menu for Two – by Mikaela Cain

“Mikaela, how did we spend $400 on food this month, *again*?”

My husband was shocked by how much we spent on food when we got married. When we both lived with roommates, we rarely cooked. We just popped frozen corn dogs in the microwave, made sandwiches or quesadillas. I spent $40 a week at the grocery store, on average. Then, we got married, and I started cooking. I was out of school for the first time in my life, working two very part-time jobs, and needed something to do! I filled my time with cooking and baking for my hard-working husband, and the grocery receipts piled up! We went from spending $250 a month collectively on food, to $400.

We needed to be more organized about food, but I detested the idea of meal planning. It’s not that I don’t like plans in general; I just didn’t like the idea of being restricted by a plan if my fancy led me to bake something differently. But, I also didn’t like the idea of these random spurts of “baking fancies” using up our fun and date money, either. So, I agreed to plan more.

We spent less when we had meals that yielded leftovers. So, I started planning out at least two “big” dishes a week. Our monthly budget started to decrease, but we weren’t in the black, yet. I planned two big meals that lasted us four days, and two simple ones. We often ate at friends another night; and if not, the last night was a “scrounge” meal.

I noticed that the more I planned, the less frequently I shopped,

and the less I shopped, the less we spent!

Random trips to the store depleted the budget quickly. Somehow, that “one stick of butter” I needed for a cookie recipe ended up costing me $20 with the other items that I noticed we needed in adjoining aisles. I would need to make sure I was only going to the store once a week to keep spending down. That meant planning out all of the snacks and desserts, too.

The planning helped the budget a lot, but I still felt a little stuck to the menu. I didn’t want to feel controlled by a little piece of paper.

One day, I decided to take the days-of-the-week off of the plan, and just have meal options. Each day, I could decide which of those options that I wanted to make. I wrote out the dinner options at the top of a notebook, and then created a grocery list.

That was a game-changer. I felt so much freedom for a day to happen fluidly, and the budget was still under control. This worked so well for me that I added breakfast, lunch, snack, and dessert options, too. I wanted to think of everything that we might need or want during the week. That way, we weren’t tempted to “run to the store” for anything mid-week and home with too much. But, we left room for change and options.

Within a few months, we adjusted to spending $300 a month on groceries for the two of us.

We have stuck to that general outline for meal planning. Now, three years later, our lifestyle is very different. I have some health issues that require better ingredients, so we increased the

food budget. I'm working three jobs that collectively give me full-time hours, making less time to spend planning and cooking. We work as pastors, and because of that, end up eating at the church or out with members of the congregation more frequently. But despite all of these changes, the same general **option-filled meal plan** has stuck.

I plan two big meals that last four days, and two small. We eat out or with friends once a week, and, if not, we scrounge the last day.

I'm not going to pretend that we don't still have months when we're borrowing money from other categories to cover some of the groceries—we really like food! But, we have a system that works for us. It's a meal plan filled with options. I plan for days when I don't feel like cooking, or something spontaneous comes up. **It's a plan full of space for life to be interrupted and change, without hurting our budget in the process.**

To me, that's the best kind of planning.

A Night to Remember – Note to Self – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever wished you could have a day to yourself? No one telling you what to do, no one telling you what time it is, everyone leaving you alone to eat what you want, do what you want and just be left to yourself? Sounds nice, doesn't it? We all need time to ourselves, but being totally selfish is a different thing. Selfishness means thinking of your own interest and happiness without regarding anyone else around you. So let's see how a day like that might look:

Preparation: *You will need characters to act out the parts below and help move around props. Have the following available for use: large cooking pot, bowl and spoon, television, pillows, a blow dryer, a tennis ball and soccer ball, a drawing or picture of a "trophy," a blanket, and some headphones.*

Assign a narrator and read the story below, while the actors act accordingly. Sam is the main character. You will need the characters of Anna (the younger sister), Sarah (the older sister) and Mom and Dad. Set up the entire scene in the living room, with one corner being Sam's room (place the tennis ball, soccer ball, headphones and trophy there.) Place the bowl and pot on the table and hand Sarah the blow dryer. Have all "actors" asleep in the den, around in different spots on the floor.

Sam got up early and was still angry from the day before. His mom had made him do chores ALL day, and today was going to be different. He was going to do just what **he wanted to do**…a day with no one telling him a thing. (*Sam yawns and stretches.)*

Sam bounced down the stairs and turned on the TV really loud. It didn't matter that his parents were asleep and had been up all night with his little sister, who was having bad dreams. He propped himself up with several pillows and smiled with satisfaction. *(Parents and sisters act asleep, while Sam turns on the TV.)*

Of course, Sam's parents woke up and so did his little sister. His big sister awoke as well. "*Turn that thing off!"* yelled Sarah, the older sister. "*Arrggghhh,*" muttered Sam. Sam's little sister came in the room and sat on Sam's feet. "*Get off! This is my space,*" Sam pushed his sister onto the floor. *(All family members are awake now, with Anna on the floor by the sofa.)*

"*Sam, what are you doing*?" asked Mom. "*I'm having a day to myself to* ***do what I want****,*" snapped Sam. Mom decided to say nothing and let Sam have this day and see how he felt when he went to bed. (*Mom walks away and sits down on a chair.)*

Sam got up and went to the kitchen and decided to have ice cream for breakfast…lots of it. He made a junkyard out of his bowl, with candy and cookies covering the top. He made a mess, too and left the bowl on the floor by the sofa. (*Sam pretends to eat and lays the bowl on the floor.)*

Sam's older sister was using the blow dryer (*Sarah plugs in the dryer and turns it on high).* And everyone was too loud and bothering him. He retreated to a corner of his room and sulked. "*Why can't everyone* ***leave me to myself*** *and let me have some peace,*" he thought. (*Sam turns off the TV and settles down in a corner.)*

Mom had made a nice early lunch, and the fragrance of chicken soup filled the air. The scent only made Sam's stomach hurt, because he was still full from his earlier mountain of junk that

he digested. Mom called the family to the table, but Sam replied that he didn't feel good and wasn't coming. *(The family goes to the table, while Sam sulks in the corner, holding his tummy.)*

Sam looked out his window and noticed it was a beautiful fall day, so he began kicking around his soccer ball and wrecked the freshly planted flowers up against the house. *Sam holds the soccer ball and frowns.)* He walked in the house, hot and tired and sat on the sofa as he left a trail of grass and mud behind him. The family was busy. (*The family scatters around the room, with Sarah talking loudly.) He* covered his ears and soon fell asleep. (*Sam falls back on the sofa and shuts his eyes.)* Two hours later, Sam awoke and stepped right in his bowl that he left there that morning. (*Sam steps on the bowl*.) He went to the kitchen to have some of the soup Mom made earlier. But the pot was empty. They had eaten it all! "How rude," snarled Sam as he grabbed a bag of chips. (*Sam retires to the corner pretending to crunch on chips*.)

Sam had always wanted a day to himself to do what He wanted to do, but it wasn't working out as he had planned. His stomach hurt, he felt gross and dirty and everyone else in the family seemed to be ignoring him. He got up and looked at himself in the mirror. **What a sight!** He had dirt on his cheek, his hair was sticking straight up in the back and his skin looked green. Sam ran to the bathroom, sick to his stomach and sick of himself. (*Sam crawls out of the room.)*

Sam slowly walked into the living room and noticed that his dirty bowl was now gone, the grass and mud had somehow disappeared and there was a steaming bowl of hot chicken soup sitting at the table. **He felt too ashamed** to even sit at the table the way he looked, so he politely asked his mom to keep the soup hot for him while he took a quick shower. (*Sam disappears and comes back, looking refreshed).*

As Sam sat sipping his soup, his stomach began to feel warm and good. (*Sam sits and "eats").* He heard Dad compliment Mom on her flowers and he saw that the light was out in his little sister's room. Sarah was out with her friends. She had asked Sam to join her, but he had opted to stay home and indulge himself in his own selfishness.

Sam had it <u>his</u> way all day. He thought he would enjoy himself with nothing to do, no one telling him what to do and no responsibilities. His family even came along behind him and cleaned up his messes and left him alone just like he had wanted. When Sam went to his room, he noticed it was clean and the bed was turned down, inviting him to rest.

As Sam placed his head on his pillow, a tear rolled down his cheek. Instead of feeling good about his day, he felt ashamed. (*Sam covers up with his blanket and looks sad*.) Sam asked God to forgive him for thinking only of himself. **He gave thanks** for the people who loved him. When Sam awoke the next day, he was somehow different…**somehow changed**….forever.

Have you ever been selfish? What happened? What was wrong with Sam's attitude? Why do you think Sam's mom let him do what he wanted? How did Sam react to his family's kindness?

Read I Corinthians 13:4-7, Philippians 2:3,4 and James 3:13-18. Pray together for pure love to be evident in your hearts and lives, leaving no room for "selfish ambition."

The Family Practice - 'Tis the Season to Be…Overwhelmed – by Rachel Toalson

Every year, right around this time, we are more than ready for a break. We are tired of school and fundraisers and extra evening engagements, and we are tired of weekends crammed full of activities, and we are tired of doing, doing, doing. We are just tired.

And then here comes the holiday season, adding more to our plates.

It's not only our over-full plates, either. It's also that their daddy and I are still trying to grope our way into a more stable financial situation after I lost my job in January, and it's been nearly 10 months of struggle and penny-pinching and wondering whether this month is the month we'll have to sell our house. And now we're coming up on the holidays and I have lost my ability to be grateful for anything.

Because just after Thanksgiving is Christmas, and we have emptied our savings that's usually ready and intact for that Black Friday shopping day. After all, what do the holidays expect of us if not giving?

What about in this awful place?

It's not easy to find our thanks in these rocky times.

It feels much easier to find worry and fear and should-haves, and when my mind slips into this dark, it slips into a place that holds anger for the people who ended my job one week after we welcomed our sixth son into the world, a place that holds frustration for all the years I wasted at a place that would end so badly, a place that holds regret for letting a dream waste away while I settled for second best.

And there goes my heart into a pit of despair.

But thanksgiving, this season that embraces gratitude and family and hope, begs me to turn my mind and heart toward thanks-living.

Thanks-living means we look at every one of those moments—hard, easy, awful, wonderful, insecure, stable—and we give thanks. *For them all.*

Thanks-living means we fully feel our overwhelm for the questionable tomorrows or the holiday expectations or the never-ending demands of child-raising, and we turn it into overwhelming gratitude that we are here, today, raising six boys to love Jesus and art and all of creation, even if it doesn't always look like we'd expect.

Thanks-living means dwelling on today, this moment, instead of tomorrow and its question marks.

Thanks-living looks like nipping a negative thought in its root and ripping it right out of the soil of our heart, so the days that hold the same old lunch we just don't feel like preparing, again, and the kids who are driving us crazy and the fear-filled wonder whether we will have enough food to fill their bellies today transform into this:

Thank you for the privilege of preparing such a healthy, wholesome lunch for my family, because it means that we have food enough to eat for today.

Thank you for the kids who are coming in every other second to ask if it's almost time to eat, because it means I have a full house of children who are scraping away my rough edges and shaping me into who I was meant to be.

Thank you for the not knowing what we'll be spending at the grocery store tomorrow, because itmeans I am learning greater faith in a God who will feed the sparrows and clothe the lilies.

Gratitude pulls us back into the moment we have right now,
instead of letting us dwell on the future that feels so shaky.

It opens our eyes to the children who, this moment, are playing so well with the Hot Wheels cars on a track they built together, and isn't it just beautiful to see them play like they're the best of friends? It shows us the gift of a moment.

And so we gather, every night, around our table to name our thankfuls, letting others know what we appreciate about them, flipping negatives into positives, expressing gratitude for even the smallest of things—like one more clean sponge left in the cabinet after the 3-year-old used the other one to dip in the dirty toilet when he couldn't find the plunger he's not allowed to use.

This is where thanksgiving becomes thanks-living.

Some ways to incorporate gratitude into family life:

1. **Have a thank-you note night**. Everyone sits around the table and writes a quick thank you note to someone for something they did or just because. Have the children decorate their cards for a little added fun.

2. **Practice gratitude around the table.** Ask kids about the hard parts of the day and look for ways to turn them around into a thankful. Sometimes the hardest parts of our days are the parts that can teach us the most about ourselves, each other and the world.

3. **Make a thanks-living tree.** Find a dead branch somewhere in your yard or after a nature walk in some "woods." Set it up in a pot. Cut up some scrap paper in all the fall colors and every day have each member of the family write one thankful on it. Use clothespins to pin the thanksfuls on the tree every day, and watch the dead branch come back to life.

YOU

Strengthening Your Core - No Clichés, Please – Marcy Lytle

If I've heard it once, I've heard it a dozen times from friends in crisis, "I don't want to hear clichés."

If a friend loses a baby due to miscarriage, we sometimes say, "God has a plan."

If another friend loses a loved one way too early, we might offer a condolence of, "He's in a better place."

If she loses her job and is destitute and fearful about her future, we might comment as God and say, "Well that wasn't the best for you."

If his cancer has returned and we pat him on the back and say, "Just claim your healing," he might feel like turning around to hit us.

Whatever the cliché, it seems most people in their deepest moment of grief or loss do not want to hear it. They don't want a pat answer, something that's been said to a million people or even our commentary on what we think the Bible says about such circumstances. Clichés, it seems, come across as impersonal and something that's an opinion or thought that's not original or heartfelt. After all, that's what a cliché is – an overused, unoriginal, phrase.

When we need to be strengthened in the deepest part of our soul because we are so weak we can barely stand, what is that we want, then? What do we want our friends to say or do when we're standing (or lying flat of our back) in need? What are others supposed to do to help us?

Everyone's different, and I can only speak for myself, but after thinking of my times of need I've realized the things that meant the most, and here they are:

When I lost my home and walked away, in debt to my ears, a friend once told me that even Abraham, that super friend of God, flubbed up and made huge mistakes and that did not negate God's promises being fulfilled in his life. That comment **gave me hope**, and didn't judge me or try to figure out a solution.

When my mind was getting the best of me because I had trouble figuring out the next move, the step I was supposed to take, how to manage my future – my sister simply said that because I belonged to HIM my steps would be directed and I just needed to rest in that truth – not strive to get it "right." That comment **spoke to my storm and stilled it.**

When I was wallowing in self-pity and sadness when my kids left home and I thought my purpose as a mom was over, my husband said nothing but looked as me as if he too understood. He was right there with me in the pain, because he too was feeling it. That **empathy was real because he knew me.**

When I shared with a friend how hard it was to visit my husband's mom who no longer knew our name or could recognize our faces, she simply said, "I cannot imagine. I know that must be hard." She hadn't experienced it so she didn't try to say that she had, or that she understood. That **honesty and acceptance of my feelings relieved me.**

When I was hurt and disillusioned at a family member's actions toward me and I expressed that hurt and misunderstanding and deep pain to my brother, all he said was "I'm sorry." That **acknowledgement of my pain made me feel understood.**

When I'm thinking thoughts that I know are lies and do nothing but drag me down into the pit of despair, the Holy Spirit comes alongside me and whispers things like, "God is good," "His mercies are new every morning," "His love endures forever," and I realize I have a choice to change my thoughts . Those **whispers from Him are life-giving.**

Think about the times when you were in need the most and what was said, how it was said, and even when it was offered. Or think about when that friend just sat beside you and held your hand, saying nothing at all.

Then remember those actions, those thoughts, those prayers, and those offers and choose wisely when a friend is crying out for help…before saying the cliché that's in the bottom of your bag for emergencies. Instead, put away your bag of tricks and listen to what she's saying and come up with a reaction of love from your heart instead.

It's easier to say what's been said a dozen times than it is to hurt with her pain, but it's much more effective in healing her heart when we do the hard thing and pause…before the clichés roll our tongues.

Under the Influence – Can You Smell It? – by Marcy Lytle

Don't you love the scents of the season? When I enter a store where any candles of the pumpkin spice aroma are burning, I breathe in and smile. I have a few of these in my home as well, and when they are burning, even the business of cleaning the house becomes a pleasure. I'm influenced strongly by scents, especially this time of year. Cinnamon, vanilla, pumpkin for fall – and then we have the piney and berry scents for winter coming up – what's not to love?

But isn't it equally distressing how fast those scents dissipate when a foul odor enters the room? Or isn't is so disappointing to pay for an expensive candle with a label that causes you to salivate thinking of the scent that's stamped, only to come home and find out that beautiful aroma doesn't fill the room at all? That's maddening!

My daughter-in-law used to say that she could smell our clothes detergent when she walked in our house, and that she liked it. It was a fresh smell, and a nice one. I've entered other houses where the only smell was cat urine – and that's not cool. What about musty smells? When windows, blinds, and doors have been closed for too long, it's so interesting how the darkness and the dampness emit an unpleasant odor to our noses. And what about fish that we've cooked? That smell can really take over and linger for days!

But then we find our lighter, we lift the lid off the glass jar, we strike the wick, and the pleasant scents (in a matter of a few moments) take over. The good smells push away the bad smells, and our house is pleasant once again.

If you're like me, and burning candles is one of your favorite fall activities, let's think about eliminating other kinds of odors with unpleasant "scents" as well:

Did you know that rejection puts off a scent that sends others scurrying? It's true. If we are constantly feeling rejected and like we don't fit in, we actually act and say things that make others not even want to invite us near them. So instead, we can light the candle of **ACCEPTANCE.** It just requires trading the lie for the truth. We are not rejected. We are accepted. And that's the truth!

Did you know that pride is a strong scent, much like that tuna mentioned above, and it is offensive, and especially stinky when it puffs up in crowds and we boast about ourselves a little too much? We aren't supposed to brag about ourselves, we're only to boast in the fact that we are loved by Him. Pride that cuts through all other odors at the expense of every other scent in the room has to be snuffed out. And instead of that offensive smell, we can place the jar of **PRAISE**. When praise for Him fills the air, others are drawn in…not pushed away.

Did you know that jealousy is akin to walking in a house and telling right away that some animal has left its mark on the carpet and it's not been cleaned up? This scent will kill a friendship, ruin a perfectly good outing, and actually make others turn around and walk the opposite way. It just plain stinks. And the only way to get rid of it is to light a candle of **CONTENTMENT.** Don't have that one on your shelf? Just ask Him and he'll bring one to your door, as you start giving thanks for all of His blessings in your life.

Did you know that self-pity is similar to that musty smell of a house closed up without any rays of light coming in the windows? Self-pity is a dark place, a damp and dingy room, where we sit wrapped up in a tight towel that hasn't fully dried and has now begun to grow mold. There is no other cure for the stinch of self-pity than the flickering flame of **HOPE, FAITH AND LOVE** – a three wick candle – that burns away all self-centeredness. Those three are what you need. In fact, they're all you need to keep your house full of inviting smells and beautiful aromas.

As you burn your candles this season and breathe in your favorite scents, think about your favorites and take note of the offensive smells in your home. As you do that practically, sit and look around at the other scents you put off by your own attitudes, and go "shopping" for some new scents. They're all available for your choosing – all you have to do is pick up the flame starter and light them.

Healthy Habits – A Floral Freshener by Ashleigh O'Connor

Say hello to Rose… Water, that is!

Roses are always a delightful addition to any room, beautiful creations for centerpieces, and a perfect bush to add to your garden, but did you know rosewater is a highly effective addition to your skin regimen? But, before you go pouring your leftover vase water into a bottle and using it on your face, read below for further insight and information, plus a quick recipe you can easily make at home that may just replace that expensive bottle of makeup remover/toner you're harboring under your sink.

Valued for centuries in the East as a natural remedy for various ailments, rosewater is no stranger to an all-natural skin regimen. Rosewater is made from distilled water of rose petals and is known for its anti-inflammatory, hydrating, brightening, and soothing properties.

This simple ingredient can make for the perfect base in your go-to facial care products and beyond. Suffering from redness or blotchiness? Add a few drops of rosewater to a cotton pad and apply to your face or targeted areas. The natural healing properties in rosewater will dissipate the irritation on your skin. Suffering from dark circles in the morning after a rough night's sleep? Try soaking a couple of cotton balls in a few drops of rosewater, chill in the refrigerator for a few minutes, apply under eyes, and you've got yourself a quick under-eye pick-me-up. Plus, the lingering, luxurious aroma isn't too bad of a benefit, either!

Rosewater can leave your face feeling soft, smooth, and clean, without the dried-out tightness, like so many other products wind up leaving behind. And, the news gets better – it's practically beneficial for all skin types – dry, oily, combination, red/irritated, acne-prone. Nearly all skin types will be able to receive multiple uses and countless benefits from this simple addition. One of the most important keys to the success of utilizing rosewater is purchasing an all-natural, pure product. Too many brands out there can have added preservatives, chemicals, or unnecessary fragrance additions. I found my bottle of **Al Wadi** rose water at my local grocery store (HEB) in the Ethnic Foods aisle. I purchased this brand because it is food grade and safe for human consumption, hence it being safe to put on my skin. Also, the bottle was around $3, so I scored a great deal shopping at my local store. You can also find the same brand on Amazon, or at a local Indian/Persian grocery store.

If you're intrigued by rosewater and the potential benefits your skin could obtain from this touted natural go-to, I'd encourage you to test out the recipe I'm sharing below. It's quick, simple, and very cheap…and so far my skin is happy and smooth! Plus, if you're too busy to stop and smell the roses, wear the roses on your face. You won't be disappointed!

Homemade Rosewater Toner/Makeup Remover
-small glass bottle (screw top bottle or spray bottle)
-3-4 oz of rosewater (base)
-1 oz of filtered water (for slight dilution, but not necessary)
-2-3 drops of tea tree essential oil (great for treating acne/breakouts and oily skin)
-1 tsp of coconut oil (may also use apricot, avocado, jojoba, or olive oil, all of which are extremely moisturizing for skin and aide in makeup removal)

-2-3 drops of essential oils for fragrance (optional, as the rosewater has a natural aroma of its own)

Mix ingredients in small glass bottle, shake well, apply to cotton swabs or cotton pads and apply to face, neck, and even other skin areas (elbows, hands, legs post-shave). Store in a cool, dry place. For extra refreshment, place bottle in refrigerator.

Beauty for Ashes - I'm Doing Just Fine – by Pam Charro

I have at least one area in my life that has really driven me nuts. And I don't mean just for a little while, but pretty much my entire life.

I've often wondered what was wrong with me and/or my perspective because I still don't have what I want in that department. I've struggled with believing over the years that I would ever have success. Harsh words from others didn't help much, and shame crept in.

What is the problem?

Why do others have what I want when I have worked so hard for it?

Am I really inferior to other people?

Does God like them better, and is he against me?

How can I think about this differently or attack it from a different direction? Or am I obsessing about something that God doesn't want me concerned with? If so, what am I to do about it? I can't live pretending I don't care about it.

Like I said ... it's driven me nuts.

I have often asked God for help and to bless my efforts, but it didn't seem to make much difference. But recently, on an especially bold and frustrating day, I asked him why he wouldn't help me. I am happy to say that he told me **three important things:**

- I AM for you, I am NOT against you. Don't you ever believe that I am against you.
- While you are waiting for what is better, I want you to celebrate this imperfect thing that you currently have. It is already beautiful the way it is.
- I need you to persevere.

What a relief!

So long, condemnation!

It's okay that I still don't have what I want, it doesn't mean anything's wrong with me! *I'm doing just fine.* I do believe that I will have what I really want, even if it means that he changes my desires so that I no longer want what my eyes are currently so focused on. He knows what is best for me.

But, in the meantime, I embrace the freedom in those three truths.

If God is for me, who can be against me?

Created for Life - Captivated By Hope – by Ginny Hurley

Recently, I had an encounter with the God of Hope that increased my understanding of His goodness, His heart for me, and His value for HOPE.

I've always been a very optimistic person, usually looking for and seizing the good in every circumstance. A lifetime of living from this perspective has obviously gained my ability to wait for promises and literally search for what could possibly be good about certain situations. However, I don't think anyone who knows me would say that *patience* is my best virtue…

My husband and I heard David and Deborah Crone's testimony while we were in California and were surely looking forward to them coming to our church here at home. Part of their testimony of Hope was about losing their 31 year-old daughter suddenly and wondering how to even go forward with their other two children in tow.

Experiencing loss is indescribable, and only those who have been through it, truly know its dive into the depths of darkness. John and I experienced great opposition with all three of our children's births. It was like the stories you hear on television - the worst nightmares! At the time, we kept Hope close, but didn't really see immediate good. All we could think of was the enemy's scheme from the beginning to steal, kill, and destroy; the curse being enmity between the woman and the enemy.

In the years following; however, we have seen beautiful restoration blossom in deserts, dreams resurrected, and fullness of joy abound. We have embraced the truth, that **God holds our destiny and pours out hope and courage every day.**

We did not expect the loss of our first grandbaby, before he was born. We did not want our own children to have to experience some of the losses that we experienced, and were not hoping for that at all. As we prayed with them and saw some of the dreams of their hearts die too soon, it was really difficult to understand.

"God, we've seen such good things come from loss."

"We know your goodness and your great love for us. Why would our children have to go through this?"

"What possible purpose could this experience bring?"

These were some of the thoughts we all think or pray when loss happens.

Clearly, God spoke!

"Ginny, you have a choice. Choose Hope, choose Life. You know who I am. Remember my promises. Nothing has changed! For death has no sting, no victory. You, yourself have seen visions of the children dancing with me in heaven. Remember the testimony!"

When David Crone was speaking at church he paused and said aloud, very distinctly, my daughter-in-law's name! He had heard from heaven, too! He then handed me his new book, *Prisoner of Hope; Captivated by the Expectation of Good!*

He played a song over us called, "Choosing Hope!"

I was ecstatic!

Words cannot convey my joy!

God hears our cries!

He is so personal, loving, and kind!

He confirms His Word and promises to a thousand generations! He is an anchor in the storm, a stronghold in the time of trouble! No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly! He is faithful when we aren't!

Wow!

Zachariah 9:12 says,
"Return to the stronghold, you prisoners of HOPE,
even today I declare that I will restore double to you."

I will live in an atmosphere of HOPE, and an expectation of Good!

I choose LIFE!

I am thankful for a personal God who loves me and my loved ones unconditionally, and always has my best in mind!

MARRIAGE

In This Together – This Life We've Created – by Sarah Stennett

In 2003, as newlyweds, Rob and I did everything together. Grocery shopping, cooking, exercising, shopping, reading in coffee shops, and spending all day on Sunday watching football…we were inseparable, like coffee and donuts. Not only did we love one another, but we also liked each other. A lot.

Somewhere around 2006, shortly after the arrival of our first child, Julianna, things began to change. The first few weeks of her life, Rob would wake up to help change the diapers and adjust my pillows so that I could nurse the baby during the night feedings, but we both knew he needed to get good sleep for work and didn't have the ability to nurse. Soon enough, I let him stay asleep and was on my own. And that's how the marriage shifted so dramatically: we unknowingly entered the lonely and trying Divide and Conquer period.

Yes, you moms know precisely what I'm talking about: Divide and Conquer is the motto of the multitudes when there are not only your own selves to care for, but for tiny humans as well. It starts with dividing baby duties and household duties, and then if the Lord wills it, more babies come along and the dad gets to entertain the toddler while the mom tends to the new baby. It is the best route to survival, the only way to manage the needs of a family life.

And yet, it's isolating. No longer is it a "together" life, but it's a "you cook dinner while I take the kids to the park" life. My husband runs one child to a birthday party on Saturday afternoon while I stay at home with a napping baby and pay bills online. I get groceries by myself while he takes them swimming. We give one another breaks in the busyness of the little ones so that we can accomplish daily life tasks or tend to our own psychological or emotional needs. This is what makes co-parenting and daily life functioning.

Except, marriage is more than co-parenting, isn't it? [Or is that what is has become? *Gulp!*

Where is all of the togetherness we once lived as freely as the oxygen we breathed?

How can we break through the fog of Divide and Conquer to realize that we are in this parenting thing together? We are in this marriage together. We are building this healthy family together.

Although our efforts at efficiency seem the pathway to success in keeping the wheels turning at our house with four small kids, we see how it's inhibiting our ability to share the joys and sometimes sorrows of raising our children together. Rob and I have decided to be intentional about togetherness. Really, that means we've had to be purposeful in the small things and creative in the big things. I make dinner while Rob sets the table and the kids get their TV time (because they've already finished homework and chores right after school) so that the two of us can catch up on one another's day while it's still fresh on our minds. We stress and value family dinnertime together every night, to some extent or another, even with church events and kids' activities most weeknights. It's the touch point that gels our family as a unit. Sometimes we take all four to the grocery store together and Rob and I use the big girls as our helpers to get stuff while one pushes the cart and the other teams up with the three year old. Admittedly, the six of us take up a lot of space and make some noise in the grocery aisles, causing some unintended dirty looks or inconveniencing of others, but I never said this life we're creating isn't a messy one.

I know the most obvious solution to staying connected is a weekly date night, but having just moved to a new city without family support and with limited funds, that isn't practical for us right

now. I'm not sure that it's really a "fix" anyway seeing as how the divided nature of our family life is what isolates us. We need to find creative ways to be in this together. Instead of one person washing dishes while the other preps kids for bed, we sometimes do both tasks together then crash on the couch and watch a TV show together.

It's not glamorous, but love is more than romance and adventure for us.
It's being present.

For me, the eye contact and hand holding in the midst of family busyness ground me and fill my heart. They remind me that I'm not alone, but that we are in this crazy, messy, totally beautiful and blessed family life together.

Date Night Fun – Daytime Romance – by Marcy Lytle

I just recently saw the movie *The Intern*, and in one scene Robert De Niro invites Rene Russo out for a date. They settle on the time of noon – the lunch hour. Her response was, "I love daytime dates." So this month, with the daylight hours dwindling and nightfall coming before we even arrive home from work, we decided to offer you some daytime ideas for romancing him/her instead of just nights out on the town. After all, movies are cheaper, the lunch menus are also less expensive than the dinner ones, and you can enjoy the outdoors if it's not too chilly in the middle of the day…

Surprise Lunch for Two – If one of you can get away while the kids are at school and meet the other one for lunch, do it. Pick up your spouse and arrive at a predetermined lunch spot and find a corner table near a window. Since time is probably limited, you can even order ahead, so that the food is ready and conversation can fill the hour. Do nothing but eat, visit, and people watch. And maybe arrive with a surprise gift, a bacon bouquet, in your hand.

Pumpkin Pie in the Afternoon – Plan your date after lunch, maybe while the little ones are napping and your sitter can come over, and find a place that serves delicious pumpkin pie and coffee. Snag a table in the back and pull out blank journals, one for each of you. Each one then starts a story with two lines. Switch journals and add two more lines. Do this 10 times until you've got two complete stories you wrote together. Finally, work on your Christmas lists for the kids, for yourselves, and for your families, so your list is made and you're ready to shop.

Trail Mix and Trails – Make your own trail mix brownies (I saw these on the Rachel Ray Show). What a simple and genius idea! Pack them up, along with a thermos of hot tea, and hit the trails. It's hopefully cooler outside now, so scan your area park maps and pick one that has a trail with picnic tables, and some pretty big trees. Drive there, take a long hike together, and enjoy your sweets as you observe the colors of the season outdoors.

A Thankful Trek – It's November, after all, the month we stop to give thanks. Ahead of time, plan out at least four stops during the day, with something to give thanks for at each stop. You can plan your lunch somewhere along the journey. Maybe stop at the first place you had coffee together and give thanks for your spouse. Perhaps, settle in at a matinee and give thanks for the action of holding hands, as you sit close to snuggle and enjoy the show. Give thanks for a place in town that causes you to stop and wonder…like a sculpture garden or a park with a pretty view. And finally, say "Thank You" to someone you both appreciate, who has been instrumental in making your life fuller, by stopping by or writing a note together and slipping it in the mail.

Get Out of the City – Nothing is more romantic and refreshing than a drive outside of your city, either on the country roads, or in another city different than your own. Just get out the map and choose a spot, not too far away, but one with a cute diner, or something unusual to see. Take your phones or cameras and capture the beauty of the middle of the fall season in the outskirts of town, and determine to find treasures where you never knew any existed. Some examples of "treasure" might be a large tree in the middle of a one-lane road, an abandoned house where

you can wonder what used to be, or a fun root beer float at a pharmacy food counter in a little town.

Whatever you're doing this month, take some time in the middle of a day to say to him or her, "Let's go on a date!" And choose one of the above, or make up your own adventure, and head out while sun is bright, darkness is still hours away and there's an open road in front of you…

After 30 Years - Get up Off of that Chair – by Marcy Lytle

I get busy in the mornings, working on my laptop, before my husband ever wakes…and I get deeply engrossed in what I'm working on…so much that when he kisses me good-bye it feels like an irritation…

Lately, I've been trying to focus more on what matters, not on what's in front of my nose at the moment. And that includes my husband. Multiple times a week it requires me getting up off of my chair, and that ends up being the most beneficial exercise I do!

So here's a list of some of the best exercises I've found that make a healthy marriage:

- When he's trying to kiss you good-bye and you're busy getting ready, folding laundry, or making lunches, turn around and *lift your arms and* place them around his neck and linger there on your toes for one minute, before he leaves.
- When he crawls into bed at night (after you do) and snuggles up behind you while you're facing the other way because you've now found your comfortable spot – roll over, *lean up on your arm* and kiss him and hold him tight – face to face.
- When you're cleaning like a mad woman and you think you're exercising because you're vacuuming, and he walks by – turn the appliance off for a second. Turn around, *take a few steps, and grab him from behind*, squeezing your arm muscles really tight, telling him how much you love him and how cute he looks in his sandals and jeans.
- When you've found your parking space, you've exited the car, and you're walking that long hike to the front door, reach out with your arm and *wiggle your fingers until they fit right together with his* – clasp and don't let go. Do this several times throughout the evening.
- When you're stuck in traffic on the way to that ball game, your mother's house, or that long drive across town to anywhere, lift your left arm from the shoulder and place it on his shoulder while you *pat him lovingly* – as your children look on from the back seat and smile.
- When you're next to him waiting in a line to pay, or to catch a ride, or to see a movie, step a few steps closer to him and use your arm again to reach around behind his waist and *pull him closer.* Yes, I know it's a PDA but it's okay, you're married.
- When he's working on a project in the garage and he's kneeling and using tools, and concentrating so much he breaks a sweat, arrive on the scene with cold water in hand, *squat down and hand him his treat and stand back up.* Do this several times and you'll feel it…
- When you're sitting down because your day has been long, and your feet ache and you hear that front doorknob turn and you see his face appear in the doorway – *get up off of that chair and run to him with a fast sprint.* Welcome him with open arms…

Maybe…if we extend our arms, bend our legs, and wiggle our fingers a bit more to show him how special he is, we won't have to hit the gym as often because our bodies will respond to showing affection in the best of ways!

And if you just read the above list and thought, “Well, he doesn’t do that for me,” that’s all the more reason to get up off of your chair and be the first one to demonstrate unconditional love and respect for the gift that he is to you.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Soldiers with Lipstick – Unashamed – by Rachel Critz

Oh the years of middle school and high school…

Those are the years where we will find drama and just a hint of what becoming an adult is like.

Don't be scared of those years though. Those also can be the most joyful times of our young lives. And you know what else we will find ourselves facing?

Those lovely boy crushes.

If I am honest, I have dealt with a share of crushes myself. Everyone does develop a long-lasting or short-term crush. I am just going to tell you right now as you begin to grow into those crushes, do not change who you are for that one special boy. I remind myself of that every day, and not just with boys, either.

When I am hanging out with my friends, **I have to remind myself to be myself**. Not only do I have to be my true self around my friends and family, but I have to be unashamed around those people.

1 Peter 4:4 says,

"Of course, your former friends are surprised when you no longer plunge into the flood of wild and destructive things they do. So they slander you."

Be unashamed of Jesus, as if He is your very best friend.

Around that special crush of yours, be unashamed of Jesus.

Around that group of friends you always hang around – you guessed it – be unashamed of Jesus.

Stand up for him in the situations where someone bad mouths him. Be bold in yourself to speak up for Christ. Along with all the "Be Yourself" talk, do not compare yourself to another.

I am sure I have brought this up before. Comparing yourself to others only brings your true self down. **You just being you,** God will put the right people in your life.

Galatians 1:10 says,

"Am I saying this now to win approval of people or God? Am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be Christ's servant."

I can assure you right now, we are all utterly flawless in God's eyes. And what he knows about us is all that matters. We can stay unashamed of Jesus and stay strong in the fact that **we are beautiful.**

Do not let what boys say or want about you determine who you should be.

And just one more reminder…

Ephesians 5:8 says,

“For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.”

Saddle Up – The Protective Mask – by Melissa Critz

Routines.

We all have them, for the most part. Mine always begins with animals as soon as my feet hit the floor. The dog is let out and fed, the cats are fed, and the horses are let out in the front pasture, much to their delight. Elijah, the alpha one of the two, waits at the gate with his head over the latched area – he knows exactly where it opens. I open it and he is out and grazing immediately. Domingo, a bit more cautious, meanders out slyly trying to avoid me (well, it appears that he is). I unhook his 'gas' mask from the gate as I call him to halt with the sound 'whoa'. He begrudgingly, but obediently, stops and allows me to Velcro the full-face mask onto his head.

Why, you might wonder?

Well, Domingo has beautiful blue eyes, pink skin, and white fur, which is not as thick typically around the face. It may make him look 'one-of-a-kind' but it's terribly hard on him as he lives in a pasture where the sun 'lives' as well. Therefore, he is susceptible to cancerous tumors developing on his eyelids. Horse vets deal with this constantly so it's not abnormal, but the horse owner needs to learn and use what's available to deter these hideous, unwelcome skin tags. I recently purchased a mask that is better at blocking more sun than a typical flymask that most people use. This mask is very well made and seems to be doing just what it says it does – provide good protection. It is rather ugly – thus the name of 'gas' mask that it earned – but it is serving its purpose.

Protection.

Protection from something that really is a good thing – the sun.

We need it, don't we?

We all wouldn't be here without our nearest star, the sun. And we all certainly need protection from the effects of the sun by using sunscreen on our skin. However, there can be too much of a good thing, right? And it can be too much at a different point for some, as compared to others.

I heard my Saddle Partner tickle my ear with this. I really wrestled with this thought as all the scriptures that I pulled up were about protecting us from the enemy, and THANKFULLY our Lord does do this.

But this protective mask was protection from something *good*…

So I prayed and thought and waited.

What is something that is good that we need some sort of protection from?

Okay, (now bear with me here), but chocolate chip cookies immediately came to my mind. Boy, do I have a weakness for warm, freshly baked, homemade chocolate chip cookies, especially my brother-in-law's recipe. (*Nope – not sharing that one.)*

Why is protection needed from these? Well, it seems to me that over indulgence plays into this situation. What about sleep? Kids never understand this, do they? Once we reach adulthood, sleep, rest, and relaxation are so desired. However, too much can lead to laziness and irresponsibility. Exercise is good for us, right?! We definitely need to take care of our physical bodies, so do we need protection from even this? Can this be a good thing that can hurt us? What if it takes over our days and we put all our worth in our appearance? Food, Sleep, Exercise – all good things – but even these and so many more we need protection from via what He says in the Bible. These are so directly related to our flesh.

John 6:63 says,
"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."

So many things in our lives which are meant for good can be abused by us as we live in a fallen world so we therefore need protection – even from the good things.

Just like Domingo needs protection from our wonderful warmth giving sun, we need protection from our fleshly desires that go beyond the line of what is meant for good.

Galatians 5:16-21:
"So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law."

Delving into His word is a protection for you.

Knowing Him, allowing Him to be your Lord and King is protection for you.

Inviting Him to be your Father protects you.

I just love this verse:

Romans 12:1-2
"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by the testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Know that He loves you so much that He gave you His Word to protect you and keep you safe. Seek Him and Know Him. He is waiting for you. He is here.

Moving Forward - God Laughs – by Pam Charro

I don't know what was going on in September, but I did not feel well during most of it. I think it started out a virus and then just wouldn't go away. It wasn't enough to make me violently ill, just enough to keep me from getting out of the house.

Maybe it was a touch of autumn lethargy. I am not 100% sure what all was keeping me so down, but it seemed to last forever!

Until one day...

I was in front of the television, bored to tears. I'm not really big on watching television, but I just did not know what else to do. I found a show that really cracked me up, and I laughed hard. I kept thinking about it throughout the day and laughing some more. Before I knew it, I was feeling much better.

I am convinced that laughing helped me start to get well.

So, I started meditating on exactly why that would be. If laughter is good for us, it must be from God! He gave us laughter, not only as a gift for our enjoyment, but also for us to more clearly see who he is.

I wonder why it is most people don't think of God as someone who laughs.

All we have to do is consider the sounds our bodies make and it should be obvious that God has a sense of humor. Or watch animals or babies playing. Not only is it cute and creative, but often just funny.

I think I have missed out on this side of God for way too long.

I want to see him as the God who gives funny to the world.

And laugh along with him much more.

Bush Bean Blessings - Attitude of Gratitude by Tammy Morrison

How about your heart?

What about your mind?

The direct correlation of these two vital components definitely affects our manner and attitude. Approximately 18 inches apart, sometimes the two seem to be in constant conflict. My dad has always said, "Think yourself happy." Now...if you're in a state, or a tizzy, or having a rough day, or facing a distressing situation, it might not set to well to read those words. In fact, it might just get you a little bunched up. But hear me out, please. Our tendency is to allow our circumstances to dictate our behavior and, quite frankly, sometimes that manifestation *ain't pretty*. If we aren't up to par, then surely everyone around us will just have to suffer the consequences.

I'm not about minimizing your struggle, but I ***am*** about suggesting some coping mechanisms to ease your suffering. I certainly can't fix your problems, but what I can do is direct you to the ultimate problem-solver. His name is Jesus. He promises us peace--even in the midst of our stormy situations.

Do you want some of that?

Does your heart and mind crave tranquility?

This month--more than any other--humanity will relentlessly pursue an attitude of gratefulness. On a daily basis, people will post their "thankful thoughts" for the entire month; millions will pin gratitude quotes on Pinterest; countless others will find ways to help those less fortunate experience some semblance of completeness. As incredible as it is to intentionally celebrate and observe a month of Thanksgiving, consider the value of exercising the attitude of gratitude--not just ***this*** month, but as a lifestyle.

If you begin to live in such a way that you begin to appreciate living, you will begin to experience a sense of completeness and wholeness you might not otherwise fully realize.

So what can we do to genuinely manifest an attitude of gratitude? Undoubtedly, it ***is*** important to practice happiness!

Begin with this:

Count your many blessings, and like the old song says, “Name them one by one…” if that's what it takes.

Remember this:

There is always, always, always something for which you can be thankful. God desires to fill us with unspeakable joy. He longs to meet our needs. He wants us to be glad, not sad. He promises that He is faithful. He loves us. Wow...HE LOVES US! That alone is enough to set our souls on fire, but every now and then we lose sight because we're blindsided by life.

Just imagine:

The ability to experience unspeakable joy in having our needs met, with the option of feeling glad, not sad, remembering that He is faithful, and basking in the fact that He truly loves us! Really...what more could we want? How can we let ourselves get to the point where we forget about His great love?

There are 30 days in November: this special month specifically focuses on Thanksgiving. I decided the best way to blend the heart and mind into an attitude of gratitude is to feast on a scripture each day, to purposefully give thanks with a grateful heart. If you accept my challenge, I'm confident that your mindset will transition from "Woe is me..." to "Too blessed to be stressed..." Are you ready?

Day 1 - 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
Day 2 - James 1:17
Day 3 - Psalm 30:12
Day 4 - Colossians 3:15-17
Day 5 - Psalm 100:4
Day 6 - Psalm 107:1
Day 7 - Psalm 106:1
Day 8 - Ephesians 5:20
Day 9 - Philippians 4:4-8
Day 10 - Psalm 105:1
Day 11 - Psalm 118:1-18
Day 12 - Psalm 30:12
Day 13 - 2 Corinthians 9:15
Day 14 - Colossians 4:2
Day 15 - Psalm 138
Day 16 - Psalm 33:2
Day 17 - Psalm 28:7
Day 18 - Isaiah 12:4-5
Day 19 - 1 Chronicles 16:8
Day 20 - Psalm 136:4-9
Day 21 - Psalm 103:1-2
Day 22 - Psalm 92:1
Day 23 - Hebrews 13:15-16
Day 24 - 1 Chronicles 29:13
Day 25 - Isaiah 57:19
Day 26 - Ephesians 5:4
Day 27 - Psalm 68:26
Day 28 - Psalm 115:18
Day 29 - Psalm 145:21
Day 30 - 1 Peter 1:3

I lay myself before You, humbled at Your feet...
Surrounded by Your majesty, in You I am complete.

Real Stories – All the Way Through – by Jeanette D'Anna

It's been almost one year since my diagnosis, and let me say unequivocally,

I hate cancer…

It was late July, 2014, when I noticed, almost overnight, a big change in my right breast. It just didn't look right at all. As I searched the internet, I realized that I needed to get a breast exam immediately and see what was actually going on. I made an appointment for a mammogram for August 25, 2014.

A phone call then rocked my world to the core.

"Mrs. D'Anna, you will need to come in and see the doctor over our mammography area because she sees a fairly large tumor on your mammogram, and there are several lymph nodes that are enlarged also."

There it was… the big "C" word.

I was actually speechless, as the nurse asked me, "Mrs. D'Anna, are you still there?"

As I hung up, thoughts flew everywhere, and I didn't sleep much at all that night.

The very next day I went for an ultrasound and later a biopsy. It was confirmed that the tumor and the lymph nodes were malignant.

A lot can happen in only a week...

It wasn't easy for us to tell my family; after all, I had always been so strong all of my life. I faced life like a bulldozer. I dreaded for them to see me in such a battle, but I also knew it was inevitable. The truth was I was going to need my family's love and support if I was going to make it through this. They would undoubtedly see me at my worst and hopefully love me anyway. I had to believe and claim that!

When given a serious diagnosis like malignant cancer, priorities change very quickly. What was important before, no longer is, now. I've heard the expression all my life that during a crisis, "Your life passes before your eyes in a few seconds..." and I now know what that means.

It was obvious; a weapon had been formed against me. This was going to be not only a physical battle, but a spiritual battle like I'd never faced before. I had been totally blindsided, but I also knew that God hadn't been. I was going to have to put on the entire armor of God that I've studied about over the years. Not just one piece, but every single piece. This is the same armor I have told countless people about. Now I was going to have to put on that armor and stand, and keep on standing. And when I could stand no longer, keep standing more!

More to the story:

I knew what cancer was, and I knew all the fear that comes pouring in with a diagnosis like that. Cancer not only affects the person diagnosed, but the entire family. You see my husband, Joe, had been diagnosed with stage 4 cancer in 2010, and he was given the prognosis of only six months to live. So I knew cancer firsthand. His story has a wonderful ending, because about

six months in to his journey, God miraculously healed him. Praise God, he was completely healed and is doing God's work at our church with a vengeance. *Thank you, Father God!*

Both my husband and I had prayed with many people over the years that had faced cancer; some lived and some died. I knew we would continue to pray, but I have to admit, it became clear to me that cancer took on another meaning because I was the one facing the giant this time. Early on in this process, I was awake one night with my mind going in all directions. I am confident I heard from my Heavenly Father speaking to very simply,

"Jeanette, I've got this..."

I didn't know at the time, but those few words gently spoken to me by my Father-God would be a medicine no doctor could have prescribed.

The Fear Battle…

I would like to say that I never once wavered in my faith, but I'm afraid that would be a lie. The enemy often reminded me that cancer means terminal. Thoughts swirled.

"You have lived faithfully for the Lord all these years, and yet here you are."

"How could God allow both you *and* your husband to battle this?"

"Has it spread throughout your entire body?"

Philippians 4:8 became one of my battle cries.

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

All I knew to do was trust God. I knew that God had not changed over the years, but I was sure God was going to change me before this battle was over. I had told people all my life, "When you're facing a giant, your faith in Jesus will get you through." Easy to say to someone else; now, I had to believe it. In the days, weeks and months to come, I would not only learn more about myself, but I would learn more about my Heavenly Father than I had ever known before.

Where did "me" go?

On October 20, 2014, (one day after my birthday) I started my chemo *cocktail* that was specifically created for me. I was scheduled for seven chemo visits once a week and had to come in every week for seven weeks, on a different day, for other medicine to be pumped into me. I was also prescribed anti-nausea medicine, a thermometer, and medicine for diarrhea. And I started losing my hair after the second or third chemo drip…

During the third week of chemo, I met with my hairdresser friend, who also sold me a great looking wig. Even though I wasn't seeing what she was doing, I could hear the clippers buzzing away and feel them next to my scalp. I could feel the strands of hair as they fell to the ground. I must admit, I cried the entire time. I had always thought my hair was my best feature, and now it was all gone, lying on the floor.

Who was this creature looking back at me in the mirror? I don't even know her anymore.

About two weeks after I had lost all my hair, I asked MaKenzie (my granddaughter) if she was ready to see me without my hat or my wig. She stared at me for what seemed like an eternity. Then she got the biggest smile on her face and said, "Nana, I'll call you fuzzy head from now on." That broke the ice and I was okay with being my true, hairless self, in my own home.

Little battles won...

As I walked in each week for my chemo treatment, I looked around the lab, full of people going through the exact treatment, and I thought…

Do these people have Jesus to lean on?

Do they have any hope?

What a wonderful breeding ground for the love of Jesus! Joe & I were able to share Jesus' love with many as the weeks went on. I remember very vividly one night as I lay in my bed, not able to sleep, the 23rd psalm came pouring into my spirit.

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil for You are with me...

And in my spirit, I knew first-hand what that meant.

The operative word for me in that scripture was *through*. God was going to bring me *through* that dark valley; I wasn't going to die there. That comforted my soul and I began to weep in thanks before God. God promised He was going to bring me through.

Lessons Learned:

- Life goes on even when things are in disarray and out of place.
- Family, friends, and the body of Christ will sustain when I'm too weak to stand.
- We don't always know the "whys," but we can always know God is God, and we are not!
- Do I still believe God can heal cancer? Yes I do! It's okay to ask God for the faith I need.
- When we worry we fabricate scenarios and disasters that are sometimes far from reality.
- We are to walk by faith, not by sight.
- Strong believers and prayer warriors will confess God's promises for me and with me.
- Going through my journey, I am now more compassionate for others in a faith-challenge.
- Everyone faces trials. Mine isn't unique.
- God is always with me, He never leaves or forsakes me, praise His Holy Name!

I no longer fear dying like I used to, but, Lord, help me always to fear life without You!

Jeanette was born in Tulare, California in 1945 and married Joe D"Anna in San Jose, California in 1964. They moved from California to Magnolia, Texas in 2003. Joe and Jeanette have one son, Joseph, and one daughter, Trisha, and four grandchildren – Aimee, Aaron, Anthony & Jordan. And they have one great grandchild – MaKenzie. ***Jeanette also just had her first PET Scan last month and full blood work in September and thanks be to God – all is clean!***

FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Manhattan on a Budget – by Marcy Lytle

We wanted to go, we had been before, so I knew it was expensive. Traveling to NYC costs a lot of money, there's no denying it. But about six months ago, we decided to go and figure out a way to make it work within our budget, yet enjoy all we wanted to take in, while there. This trip was just for the two of us, and we figured with a little planning ahead, scouring the Internet, and choosing wisely, we could do it!

The thought first entered my head when I saw a website that said "40 free things to do in Manhattan." I read them and realized we had done very few, so I knew this list would be our outline. I also knew about Airfare Watchdog and signed up for low fares to be sent to my email. And lastly, I started putting away our "leftover" cash at the end of each week – several months out.

I had in my mind that I wasn't going to go unless I could get airline tickets for around $200 each. I kept looking on different days of the week, watching my emails, asking a travel agent, and one day – there it was – the $200 ticket. We snatched up two of them.

Leftover money each week isn't always present, but since I knew we were going, I opted out of extras and enjoyed stashing away cash and watching it add up, over the weeks. Pretty soon we had about $1,000 cash for spending while there…for five days.

Another pricey expense in Manhattan is a hotel stay. A friend had stayed in the new hotel there called Pod 39 – affordable tiny rooms for travelers who are out all day and only need a place to sleep. That was us! The Pod 39 is not far from Grand Central Station (subways) and Times Square, and Central Park. And the rooms are almost half the price of other hotels in the area. We called the hotel direct and got a good rate.

About a month or two before our actual trip, the hotel and airlines were paid for, and our spending money was growing.

I knew expenses would be: food (expensive), entertainment (crazy costly) and incidentals (tipping, unexpected charges), subway or taxi fare, and tipping (these things always add up!)

At the end of the trip, we spent almost exactly what we had saved, and here's how:

We stopped by a corner store and opted for fruit and nut bars and waters to have in our room for breakfast. We shared meals. We looked ahead of time at menus of restaurants in the areas where we would be, and only chose ones within our budget. Believe it or not, there are quite a few and they are tasty, too!

We were given a tip by a friend who lives in NY of waiting until the day of, and then going to the ticket kiosk for Broadway shows about two hours before show time, and grabbing a half price fare – which worked! We weren't too picky about which show, so that helped. But even if you have a specific show in mind, you can go earlier in the day and hopefully snag a ticket at a big discount.

We bought a Metrocard to use for multiple subway trips – a good deal and it saved us money. We only rode the taxi a few times, as we opted to walk and plan our itinerary by subway stations or within walking distance of our hotel.

We chose many "free" tours we found on line that we could print out, read ourselves, without a paid tour guide. And we visited many sites that were recommended that were free to see and enjoy: touring Rockefeller Plaza, touring downtown NYC and its history, touring Greenwich Village (best one!), touring the NYC Library, etc. And walking through Central Park is also free – and so enjoyable! The new High-Line, a trail above NYC, is delightfully beautiful and again – free! (See link of free things above).

We stayed away from and said "No" to the pushy vendors on the street, and we steered clear of making purchases of junk we didn't need. And shopping? We looked ahead and found some cool stores on SOHO and even on Bleecker Street that were within our budget, and shopped there.

The only "splurge" was a train ride up north of the city to see the fall leaves, but even that was $75 for two round trip tickets for an all-day excursion – not too bad!

I think this was the best trip we've taken as far as spending goes, and planning ahead helped so much. We enjoyed visiting the bookstore (where we bought a handy plastic map of Manhattan that we used every day!), perusing websites of attractions to find out all of the fees and hours of operation, and planning our itinerary for each day we were out and about. It was also the least stressful trip, because there were really no surprises moneywise that came up.

If you're planning a big trip, start early, set aside money, plan in detail (there's so much fun in the planning!), look for coupons and deals on line, and ask around to see who's gone there before – to glean from their knowledge.

And finally, enjoy yourself. There's nothing worse than packing up for a good time of rest and relaxation and arriving at your destination frustrated and frazzled. Vacations are great and necessary and such fun…even on a budget!

FRESH THYME - My Personal Challenge – by Marcy Lytle

This is a story of a personal little challenge I just gave myself and how I fared. It's not a spiritual challenge of going through some personal discipline to improve my heart, and it's not a food challenge for healthy impact. It's a challenge of fashion and comfort…and packing!

I love fashion and am very particular when it comes to putting together outfits. And I hardly even own a pair of sweatpants. I just don't like them! I also love shoes and bags, and I love travel. All of those things – fashion, shoes, bags, packing, travel – are some of my favorite things. Maybe, I'll call them my hobby. I love tinkering with all of them!

Recently, we took a trip to NYC. It wasn't our first trip there, so this time we wanted to go on several walking tours and see things that weren't on the top 10 list. This meant being outdoors every day, and walking miles and miles. For you who love fashion and all things coordinated, you know that sweating and walking for miles do not mix and match for fashionable wear. At least, they don't for my liking. And on most of our trips, I pack more than enough clothes so that I can put together outfits to match my mood for the day, having plenty to choose from.

So here was my personal goal:

I wanted to pack all of my clothes in a carry-on (so we didn't have to check in baggage), I wanted clothes that matched and looked nice but were comfy (without succumbing to sweatpants and sweatshirts), and I wanted my feet to enjoy the journey without screaming, "Help me! Somebody, help me!"

Here's how it all went down…and what I learned about myself, traveling in style, and walking in comfort…in the Big Apple.

I decided on a color palette: black, gray, pale pink, and deep red. I realized that I had lots of pieces in these four colors that could be mixed and matched. I opted for three pair of black pants of the legging/exercise type, and seven tops that could be worn with either. I chose layered tops in comfy knits, and all of these items were then rolled tightly to fill in the carryon bag I had purchased a while back for a grand total of $19.99 at Marshalls! (We have carried these on several trips now, and they've held up nicely!). All of my clothes fit nicely, and my sleep shirts and lingerie were rolled as well, laid out in a cool zipper pouch by Eagle Creek (my favorite traveling accessory!) Now my bag was completely full and I hadn't needed a suitcase at all.

For toiletries, jewelry, our itinerary in a folder, a journal, a large wallet, and a crossbody purse, I used a backpack which I got on clearance at Target. Everything fit neatly inside, all makeup and liquids in quart size zip bags, according to airline standards. I even had a pocket for my phone and the purse c-harger (which was great to have!), as well as my glasses and sunglasses. The crossbody bag was deep red leather, just a simple zipper pouch type, and it ended up being perfect for taking out of the pack and carrying each day with only the essentials inside (which included Kleenex, a bottle of water, my wallet and phone, and of course the Metrocard we used for subway riding when we weren't walking!)

There was NO room for an extra pair of shoes, so I purchased a comfy and cute pair of lace up tennis shoes that looked fine with all of the pants I packed. I had walked in them here, to verify their comfort, and knew if I just had this one pair, I'd have no choice but to wear them daily. I also had tried on each outfit, making sure they **c**overed in all the right places, were **c**omfortable, and were **c**ute (the three C's!)

So where's the challenge, you might be thinking?

I don't dress normally in leggings and exercise pants, I only wear tennis shoes for playing tennis or walks on trails, and I always pack extra outfits in a large suitcase. This actually was hard for me to scale down, accept that heels wouldn't work for skirting around Manhattan, and choose to wear a pair of pants more than one day – yikes! However, I felt so accomplished by the time we were all ready to go.

And here's how the challenge went:

It was hard being in a city of fashion (which is what I love about NYC!) and not wearing my "normal" outfits, but at the same time I felt a bit liberated to be comfortable and yet enjoy something out of my comfort zone. Everything coordinated, so that helped with the fashion end of things…

Only having a carry-on was a divine experience! No waiting for baggage. Nothing heavy to lug around. And satisfaction in knowing I could do it! This was a win-win!

Next time, I'll include insoles or an extra pair of shoes. I'd heard that feet don't like the same pair of shoes day after day, and that's no lie. My feet screamed. I had no idea how much walking we were really going to do! And honestly, the shoes bugged me more than anything, because I felt dressed everywhere else except down there. So I've got a ways to go to accept tennis shoes as part of an ensemble.

I smiled often, as I realized I'd actually fit a week's worth of outfits in a small bag (yes, I did include a couple extra options!) My husband did, too! And I think that was the biggest accomplishment of all, in my little hobby world of fashion, shoes, packing, and traveling.

And that little pack of Kleenex in my purse? It came in awfully handy in the many public restrooms we had to use while about and about on the streets of Manhattan…

FRESH THYME - The Equalizer – by Marcy Lytle

I remember attending college football games with my brother when it rained. I took my umbrella with me because it was fun to watch the drops roll down the top of the umbrella and drip off the edges onto the seat in front of me, during the boring sections of the game. But I also remember my brother telling me that rain is an equalizer. In other words, even if one team is favored to win, when the rain starts pouring, the players' hands become slippery and they fall in the mud, it then becomes anyone's game.

As I've gotten older, I've also noticed that aging is an equalizer. Young girls often are consumed with looking their best, and that best often includes looking better than their friends, to the point of striving to have the latest fashion, the smoothest skin, and the most awesome hair, and it goes on from there. The comparisons among young women are really damaging to friendships. Then age happens. The gray hair, the loss of 20/20 vision, the emergence of menopause, and many more physical maladies that no one enjoys appear on all women, everywhere. And it's a jolt to learn that the "winner" we thought we were is now an old woman just like the rest of our friends, equalized on this playing field called life.

Here's another kicker for you. Having kids does a number on our balance scale, too, doesn't it? We're young and happily married, getting our lives together with our husbands, a beautiful home, traveling and working at a prestigious career and then…the babies come. Babies wreak havoc on our bodies, they spit up on our nicely pressed blouses, and they pull out huge clumps of hair, wake up in the night screaming, and destroy any semblance of order in our homes. **And there we sit, equalized out again by the humility of being a mom among a sea of moms, all wondering how we fell from beauty queen to pancake turner in a matter of months.**

I've often wondered why it is that we have this allotted time on earth from childhood to adulthood to elderly-hood, where we again go back to many aspects of childhood. There's this amazing cycle of being born, learning to walk and talk, achieving goals and good grades, and then on to accolades and high esteem in the work place, to meaningful purpose in life by creating new life together and starting a family, to suffering and loss and experiencing the entire spectrum of life, to losing parents, losing hearing, and losing footing…until that final step on the earth's dirt.

There's something to be said and noticed about this equalizing effect that takes place in life. When we tip the scale in our favor through any sort of human accomplishment, whether it be scoring a goal on a team, or ringing the bell at work because we sold more than all of the other employees, something happens to our souls. They become prideful and we suddenly become aware that others are looking at us, admiring us, and wanting to be like us. In fact, they are intimated by us, feel less accomplished around us, and sometimes become hopeless because they can't achieve what we have done.

Pride that tips a scale sideways and throws off what's on the other side of the scale is not a good thing. In fact, if we are a follower of Christ, I'm pretty sure when that happens, we can expect some of that equalizing rain to fall on our playing field. And when we catch the ball and start running away from the pack and towards the goal line, we might find ourselves slipping in

the same mud that the blocker in front of us is now sliding in, as well. And before long, we'll all end up in a heap on top of one another, a muddy mess, hair dripping wet, the ball buried beneath a pile of bodies, not knowing whose advantage it is in the game.

We then have a choice, when the game is on the playing field of life.

We can try to gain our composure, pretend it's not raining, try to figure out a way to remain dry and hold onto the ball apart from the others standing in the rain…or we can call the game until the rain ends…

That's what happens when a storm occurs in a ballgame. The officials call the players off the field until the rain and lightning subside, and the players then have time to sit and think and ponder their own skills and abilities on the field, and to pause and take a look at the opposing team.

We are all players, women with or without children, ladies who dress to kill or could care less about the outfit, and we're all really headed towards the same goal – an eternity with Him. And we're actually all playing on the same team – yes with different skill sets and abilities – but none of those bring "weight" to our value or worth on the team.

We are all precious in his sight, we are loved "equally" by our Father, and we are all going to encounter the same rain, the same aging process, and experience the same stains on our clothes.

We can either keep sliding around in anger, trying to gain our foothold, growling at the other players on the field, or…

We can sit down and look up and enjoy that amazing rain that's falling from the sky, soaking the ground, causing puddles and rivers to appear beneath our feet, wetting our hair and our faces, and bringing a break to the competition for a while.

And when the rain stops, the sun shines again, and everyone says it's time to play and the whistle blows, hopefully instead of playing like we did before – to win at the expense of those around us – we can play the game of life with a new realization.

I'm different, she has skills I don't have, she might succeed in this game and I'll lose, I might have to sit this one out due to an injury, or I might get a pass and score a goal, but that doesn't change the fact of what happens to all of us…

We're all equalized when the rain comes down and the water pours…and that's a good thing…because rain makes hard surfaces soft and causes green things to grow.

FRESH THYME - The Feast – by Marcy Lytle

You're invited. And you don't have to set the table, prepare the food, plan the menu ahead of time, or stand on your feet all day while you create massive amounts of food for the guests who will arrive, just about the time you need a nap.

The Thanksgiving Feast is a lot of fun, especially for those who just show up and pull up a chair and eat. Especially for those who only linger at the table and visit, instead of getting up to clean all of the dishes that took hours to prepare. Especially for the children, who laugh with glee because their favorite mashed potatoes are waiting on their plates, topped with melted butter…

But what about the ones who prepare? If I've heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times, and a few of those times out of my own mouth.

"Why do we prepare a feast that takes 24 hours to prep and make, and then we sit down and enjoy it in 30 minutes, and it's over?"

Just recently, I sat and listened (and cried) to the song "At the Table" from Chris Tomlin's CD *Love Ran Red*. And I realized something. All of my weariness in the holiday season that comes from serving, all of the anxiety I feel over getting the dishes "just right" and so that there is "more than enough," and all of my wondering if everyone will be pleased and full when the celebrations are over, are really not part of a joyous occasion at all.

In fact, I'm invited to another table where everything is already set, already provided for, and already includes a seat just for me – to pull up and recline – and feast.

It's the table He has prepared for me in the presence of my enemies of performance, weariness, anxiety, and time. All of those things that we place on ourselves from November through the end of December, those things that weigh us down and prohibit us from experiencing the joy of the season, are not part of the experience at His table. (Psalm 23:5)

By now, you're asking, "That sounds great, but I still have to prepare the feast for my family."

In Psalm 78, the people God lead out of slavery were now in the middle of a wilderness and they were hungry and tired. They even questioned God and asked, "Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?" And indeed he did. He made water gush forth from a rock, and had bread and meat rain down from heaven. So yeah, it's possible to simply look up and be blessed with all that we need from His hand.

Proverbs 9 personifies Wisdom and we see that she is preparing her food, mixing her wine, and setting her table. But there is no mention of stress or performance…only rest. Is it because Wisdom is only serving and doing what she can do, and not fretting over what cannot possibly be done?

In Matthew, we read of a woman who came to the table where Jesus reclined and she only spilled out her most expensive perfume on his head as an offering of love and adoration. She realized the blessing that comes from worship before serving, and praise before performance.

Luke 7 tells us of Jesus entering the house of a Pharisee to feast with this man who didn't even get who Jesus was, understand His love, or receive Him as Lord and Savior. In fact, this guy probably quizzed Jesus, talked of his own exploits of piety, and served for show. But Jesus wanted to dine with him. Somehow in the breaking of bread together comes the realization of just who the Bread really is…

And finally, later on in the book of Luke (chapter 24), we see a picture of Jesus, after reclining at the table with those he loved, taking the bread and blessing it, breaking it, and giving it to be enjoyed by all.

What can be learned from these verses above that will enable us to pull up a seat at our own Thanksgiving table and enable us to recline at peace and enjoy the feast?

- He enables us to enjoy our table even in the middle of the chaos; in fact, he speaks peace to us.
- He hears our cries for help in the middle of the wilderness and will provide all we need.
- He grants wisdom to us so that we do what we can, and let go of what we cannot do.
- He invites us to come near Him in his reclining position, to worship and adore
- He encourages us to receive and dine with those who don't even know Him
- He reminds us that it is He who is the bread, the blessing, and the giver.

Listen to "At the Table" while you're making your preparations this Thanksgiving and breathe deeply, listening to his voice, as he invites you in your weariness, your anxiety, and your stress to come to the table he has set before you.

And when you do, you might get a glimpse of what a family table really looks like – and you might rise up and serve like you've never served before – from a position of rest and assurance that He's right beside you, preparing with you, with joy, at the prospect of giving thanks for all good things together with those He loves (including you.)

A BUNDLE OF

THYME

December 2015

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 kids 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 **Difficulty:**

Makes 100 caramels
Recipe courtesy of *Bon Appetit*

*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 **Difficulty:**
Serves 4

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 **Difficulty:**
Makes 1 ½ dozen truffles

*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 neccesity in our house. If raspberry isn't your favorite, feel free to subsitute 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 is 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 or 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 hey 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" (I 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:

<u>My way isn't perfect or the "right" way.</u> 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..."